

Hurricane Katrina, the Politics of Pity, and the News Media

by

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to account for how and why particular interpretations of Katrina achieved dominance or were undermined, and how the ethical crisis after the Convention Center was resolved without upsetting the balance of power, by examining the ‘politics of pity’ as it unfolded by and through the news media. As the crisis unfolded in New Orleans, the media’s presence on the ground produced what Frank Durham has described as a ‘decentered media,’ in which media interpretations diverged from those of mostly distant government officials.¹ As the news media’s narrative became dominant, it provided an answer to what Luc Boltanski refers to as *existential* uncertainties, *evaluative* uncertainties and uncertainties over the *motivations* of the actors involved—all of which are products of communication over distance.² I show how the ‘politics of pity’ eventually led to a recentering and a reconciling of media and official interpretations; repairing, as it were, this ideological breach. The recentering was set in motion by efforts from various quarters to contest the parts of the media’s narrative that threatened existing power relationships by *reestablishing* key uncertainties. The analysis situates the politics of pity within a framework of mass media as a site of hegemonic struggle by examining shifts in dominant frames as they signal evolving notions of what type of commitment to the victims of Katrina is just and who should bear ultimate responsibility.

¹ See Frank Durham, “Media Ritual in Catastrophic Time: The Populist Turn in Television Coverage of Hurricane Katrina,” *Journalism*, 9 (2008): 95-116.

² Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 151.

Chapter I

Introduction

Nearly six years after Katrina, the dominant narrative established in late August and early September of 2005 endures. Hurricane Katrina was a ‘natural’ disaster that over the course of a week was revealed by and through the news media to be a ‘manmade’ disaster. While the view that someone should bear responsibility for the suffering in New Orleans is mostly undisputed, how the blame should be distributed remains a political question. In the days after the storm, live reporting relayed the spectacle of suffering to the world—the thousands dead throughout the region and the tens of thousands left stranded in New Orleans when the levees breached. Due to the immediate reports of looting and violence in the city, reporters initially criticized the victims who had seemingly defied evacuation orders as criminals and opportunists. As the suffering intensified day after day in New Orleans, a consensus emerged within the media that federal government failed to recognize the magnitude of the disaster and likewise failed to immediately respond to a crisis that had clearly overwhelmed local and state authorities. While public officials remained committed to a zero-tolerance policy on looting, in time, reporters on the ground came to tolerate property crime considered necessary for survival.

During the first week of reporting, the news media determined that it was the poor, many of whom were also black, that had been most deeply impacted by the storm and by federal inaction. As the news media made sense of the spectacle of suffering, critical questions were raised concerning the persistence of racism, the relationships between race and poverty, and the problem of government’s indifference to the poor—questions that rarely so thoroughly capture the media agenda in this country. Throughout these discussions the Bush Administration firmly maintained that the storm ‘didn’t

discriminate and neither would the response.’ Two weeks would pass after the Convention Center before President Bush officially affirmed the need to address that poverty that “has roots in a history of racial discrimination, which cut off generations from the opportunity of America” while at the same time, suggesting a range of ‘free market’ proposals aimed at expediting the recovery.¹

For scholars of journalism, the reporting of Katrina defied conventional wisdom on how the central news media operate; specifically, that they maintain a position of ‘objectivity’ with regard to political questions and that they defer to the statements of government officials during an emergency. Frank Durham rightly suggests that as an example of crisis reporting in the U.S., Katrina was an anomaly. Drawing on Nick Couldry’s work, Durham argues that a ‘decentered media’ emerged in the wake of Katrina whereby presence on the ground coupled with a lack of immediately available official interpretations imbued the news media with the authority to speak.² In the early days of the crisis, the interpretations of reporters broadcasting live on the ground dramatically diverged from the assessments of mostly distant officials. Indeed, immediately after the storm, state and federal officials relied heavily on the mainstream news media for information about what was happening in New Orleans and throughout the region. As Durham argues, since “the traditional press-government media ritual was undermined, broadcast journalists... were forced to vary from their routines of objectivity, producing instead a more populist form of coverage that resonated powerfully with their audience’s cultural experience of the storm.”³

For Couldry, a ‘decentered media’ problematizes the “myth of the mediated centre: the belief, or assumption, that there is a centre to the social world and that, in some sense, the media speaks ‘for’ that centre.”⁴ Rather than rejecting “the centrality of

¹ George W. Bush, “Address to the Nation on Hurricane Katrina Recovery from New Orleans, Louisiana,” Thursday, September 15, 2005.

² Frank Durham, “Media Ritual in Catastrophic Time: The Populist Turn in Television Coverage of Hurricane Katrina,” *Journalism*, 9 (2008): 95-116.

³ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁴ Nick Couldry, *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 2; Cited in Frank Durham, “Media Ritual in Catastrophic Time;” 99.

the media in the construction of social reality,”⁵ and thus, central media’s role in reproducing the ideology of the center, the example of a ‘decentered media’ after Katrina should direct scholarly attention to analysis of the interpretive space created by this temporary indeterminacy of the center, as well as the complementary process of recentering—of reconciling official and media interpretation through strategic adjustments within dominant discourses that sustain existing formations of power. In other words, an analysis of the anomaly of ‘decentered’ media after Katrina must account for what is enabled—what interpretations can legitimately be accommodated—as well as what is revealed as the limits of the center’s flexibility. During Katrina, this interpretive space at the nexus of central media (encompassing a range of competing and contradictory voices), government, and the critical public via the ‘new media,’ emerged as the contested terrain in which the politics of pity unfolded.

The aim of this thesis is to better understand what the reporting of Katrina can teach us about the role of central news media in making sense of an unfolding humanitarian crisis and in negotiating the politics of pity in the present. Why did particular interpretations of the causes of the suffering acquire dominance? From what quarters and by what strategies were these frames effectively contested? What role did time and distance play in legitimating or undermining particular interpretations? And critically, how was the ethical crisis produced by the spectacle of suffering managed without upsetting the governing logics that sustain the interests of power. Through an analysis of how the story of Katrina unfolded as a function of time, this thesis seeks to situate the politics of pity within a framework of mass media as a site of hegemonic struggle.

The Spectacle of Distant Suffering and the Politics of Pity

Recurring news coverage of global humanitarian crises (Rwanda, Srebrenica, Darfur, the 2004 Indonesian Tsunami, the 2008 Haitian earthquake, the 2011 Japanese earthquake and Tsunami, the myriad abuses of state power during the 2011 ‘Arab

⁵ Frank Durham, “Media Ritual in Catastrophic Time;” 99.

Spring⁶) has renewed scholarly interest in the politics of deciding on action to alleviate the suffering of distant Others and of determining the form action should take. A useful approach to understanding how power shapes struggles to define a humanitarian crisis and to determine a course of action is an analysis of what Hannah Arendt describes as a ‘politics of pity.’⁷ Following Arendt, Luc Boltanski defines a politics of pity against a ‘metaphysics of justice’ in which equal parties before the law are judged by the merit of their case according to a legal standard and an outcome is determined favoring one party that is considered just.⁸ A politics of pity, by contrast, is less occupied with the question of whether or not suffering is just; rather its focus is on action in response to a spectacle of suffering. As a paradigm, a politics of pity distinguishes an unfortunate who suffers from a fortunate spectator who does not suffer. Through contact with the sufferer, the fortunate spectator is morally implicated and compelled to act in some way. As Boltanski argues, from the perspective of a politics of pity, “it is only in a world from which suffering has been banished that justice could enforce its rights.”⁹ A politics of pity, as a politics, is an outcome of ideological struggle and is waged in the context of specific historical formations and relations of power. While the relationship between fortunate and unfortunate is inherently unequal, as Boltanski suggests, the capacity of the spectacle of suffering to inspire pity is itself a form of power.¹⁰ As Marjorie Garber has observed, pity “wavers politically between two forms of inequality: the benevolence of those who have (the power of the rich) and the entitlement of those who need (the power of the poor).”¹¹

⁶ I do not mean to suggest that these crises are comparable in magnitude or that they received comparable media attention, but merely to illustrate the point that they number among those that have recently received global attention and raised questions in the media and among scholars concerning an ethical commitment to intervene.

⁷ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990), 59-114. Cited in Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3.

⁸ Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*; 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹¹ Marjorie Garber, “Compassion,” In *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*, edited by Lauren Berlant, (London: Routledge, 2004), 26.

Following Arendt, Boltanski defines a politics of pity against individual acts of compassion. Unlike compassion, where the observer directly confronts a particular suffering Other, a politics of pity incorporates distance, and as a politics, seeks to generalize from the particular case. Whereas compassion is local, face-to-face, and content with what Arendt describes as a ‘curious muteness,’ Boltanski writes, “Quite the opposite is the case with pity which generalizes in order to deal with distance, and in order to generalize becomes eloquent, recognizing and discovering itself as emotion and feeling.”¹² While it aims to generalize, in order to inspire pity, it must remain concerned with the spectacle of particular suffering bodies. In the wake of Katrina, the news media inspired pity by presenting spectacles of individuals suffering; cases that could be generalized to capture the plight of those whose suffering defied witnessing. Through the images of New Orleans residents stranded on rooftops, audiences were invited to imagine the untold number who remained trapped and suffocating in their attics. The famous image of a woman’s body parked in a wheelchair outside the Convention Center partially covered with a sheet made flesh the thousands of elderly and infirm either deceased or continuing to suffer from exposure, dehydration, and a lack of medical care.

Finally, a politics of pity is defined by an indeterminacy or lack of a formal prior commitment binding together the fortunate spectator and the suffering unfortunate. Among the interests at stake in struggles to justify action or restraint, but by no means foremost among them, is the politics of valuing the life of the suffering. As scholars have shown, this politics of identifying with the suffering Other and committing to action oscillates between two poles—an abstract universalism on the one hand; and on the other hand, a narrow communitarianism marked by racial, ethnic, national, or other forms of particularism. As Boltanski puts it, “it is often in terms of this opposition that promoters and opponents of humanitarian action confront each other, the first siding with global solidarity against national [or other] particularisms and preferences, while the second unmasks the hypocrisy or, at best, naïve...idealism which ignores the primacy of interests and ties forged by history.”¹³ Thus, the biopolitical choice of action (or not) is

¹² Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*; 6.

complicated by questions of identification (an informal, ethical responsibility to act) and, as in the case of Katrina, uncertainty over who, if anyone, bears a formal commitment to act. Illustrating the complexities of this politics in another context, Etienne Balibar has argued that the European Union's failure to take responsibility for intervening in the Bosnian conflict in the mid-90's raised critical questions about the indeterminate nature of borders and belonging in Europe.¹⁴ Also, since prolonged inaction in the face of suffering constitutes complicity, the question of commitment becomes all the more critical as a function of time.

Given the delay in the official response and the widespread perception of multiple failures of federal, state and local government, live reporting and analysis in the wake of Katrina posed the question of who should be responsible to act upon the spectacle of suffering. A wide range of opinion was expressed in the news media, reflecting competing conceptions of the proper role of the individual, the state, the market, and civil society in preparing for and managing a humanitarian crisis. Some argued for personal responsibility on the part of the victims. Some insisted that the 'refugees' displaced by Katrina were rightly American citizens entitled to aid and protection by the federal government. Some argued that Katrina was a local crisis and that city and state officials should take the lead with the federal government in a supporting role. Some, particularly those who accused the federal government of abandoning its own citizens, saw Katrina as a global humanitarian crisis and demanded that political pressure be exerted on the Bush administration by the international community. Some urged 'neighbors' to look out for their 'neighbors,' calling upon the 'Armies of Compassion' to descend on the Gulf Coast. Some vilified government, arguing that the private sector could respond more flexibly and efficiently. All of these views achieved varying degrees of legitimacy at different moments in the crisis. As the above suggests, the politics of determining what suffering to bring into focus, assigning responsibility for suffering, deciding who among the suffering is worthy of commitment, what the nature of the commitment should be, and

¹³ Ibid., *xiii*.

¹⁴ Etienne Balibar, *We the People of Europe?: Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 2-3.

who should be responsible for seeing it through, positions the mass media at the center of struggles over social justice.

Drawing on the possibilities for expressing commitment through action set forth in Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Boltanski outlines three potential forms or 'topics' that a response to the spectacle of suffering might take; the 'topic of denunciation,' the 'topic of sentiment,' and the 'aesthetic topic.'¹⁵ The 'topic of denunciation' is an expression of pity in which the spectator responds with indignation and directs anger at a persecutor imagined to be responsible for the unfortunate's condition. In this case, the unfortunate is revealed as a victim and action takes the form of criticism intended to mobilize collective sentiment against the perpetrator. As Boltanski observes, indignation may "compromise with justice and consequently pose the question of justification—but it always does so in order to give a negative answer; the question remains rhetorical and is not tested."¹⁶ While an expression of indignation satisfies the ethical requirement to take a side, it is vulnerable to the criticism that it is not a genuine commitment, that it is merely words, and a substitute for action.¹⁷ Another possibility is that in responding to the unfortunate's suffering by blaming a third party "the spectator actually does no more than quench his own desire to persecute in revenge."¹⁸

The politics of pity in the wake of Katrina very often took the form of indignation. In addition to the criticisms already mentioned concerning federal, state, and local governments' mismanaging of the humanitarian crisis, a wide spectrum of voices criticized all levels of government for failing to act prior to the storm to lessen its impact (in terms of restricting coastal development, protecting wetlands, strengthening levee infrastructure and preparing evacuation procedures for the region's most vulnerable). These criticisms of government were in turn criticized by the Bush administration's defenders as 'Monday morning quarterbacking,' as efforts to politically profit from the spectacle of misery, and as a distraction from the urgent need for action. Likewise, during

¹⁵ Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*; xv.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 115.

the first week of reporting, voices in the media from the left blamed the victims' suffering on the legacy and persistence of racism and poverty. These criticisms were in turned criticized by public officials and right-minded commentators in the media as politicizing the response and creating divisions at a time when unity was urgently needed. A special House sub-committee subsequently investigated the response of all levels of government in order to learn the lessons of Katrina for emergency management. But the only people formally charged with a crime, aside from the hundreds of victims charged with looting who had lost everything and had been left to die of dehydration and exposure, were the owners of St. Rita's Nursing Home in St. Bernard Parish who were eventually acquitted two years later of 35 counts of negligent homicide. Thus, consistent with the paradigm of a politics of pity, of the cacophony of voices in the media expressing indignation and indentifying persecutors responsible for the spectacle of suffering, nearly all remained untested political statements.

In the second possibility, the 'topic of sentiment,' the spectator "sympathizes with the unfortunate's gratitude inspired by the intervention of a benefactor."¹⁹ The expression of pity assumes the form of 'tender-heartedness' and is aimed at mobilizing others to assist.²⁰ As Boltanski puts it, "the spectator does not let his indignation speak but expresses the concern aroused in any sensitive being who considers the suffering endured by an unfortunate. In the account he gives, he must therefore finely blend the representation of the person suffering and the representation of a third person who recognizes, shares and responds to that suffering."²¹ Whereas denunciation takes the form of constructing statements of equivalence and a causal chain of evidence, the 'topic of sentiment' is expressed through an insistence on the urgency of alleviating suffering and a revealing of the interiority and depth of feeling of the unfortunate and the benefactor. Like denunciation, the expression of sentiment is vulnerable to specific criticisms hinging on the uncertainty of the authenticity of the spectator's commitment. Specifically, tender-heartedness is vulnerable to criticism that it masks what is properly the spectator's own

¹⁹ Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*; 77.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

self-indulgence or that it is a merely a performance concealing negative sentiments or ulterior motives.²²

In the days after the levees breached, live reporting mixed expressions of indignation over the scenes of looting and reports of violence (i.e., blaming victims) with expressions of sentiment at the plight of the deserving among the poor—the families, children, elderly and infirm whose quiet suffering risked being overshadowed by dramatic footage and reports of ‘the criminal element.’ By Thursday, September 1, the emphasis of live reporting and analysis decidedly shifted to denunciation and the complex politics of identifying victims and blaming a succession of persecutors. Pity expressed as sentiment, of course, pervaded official and media rhetoric aimed at mobilizing the so-called “Armies of Compassion” in the wake of Katrina.²³ But the topic of sentiment finds its fullest expression in the human interest genre. Human interest stories are particularly suited to an analysis of interiority and emotional depth because they focus on the experience of particular individuals. Furthermore, they imply generalization in so much that particular experiences of suffering and particular benefactors’ expressions of interiority and sentiment are exemplary. After Katrina, most human interest stories conformed to a template that included a detailed analysis of a particular individual’s suffering, their expressions of gratitude at the intervention of a benefactor, and a thorough exploration of the motivations and sentiments of the benefactor as further testament to the authenticity of their commitment.

²² Ibid., 96-113.

²³ The language of an ‘Army of Compassion’ comes from official rhetoric of the Bush administration and the project of ‘compassionate’ conservatism. But it owes a lineage to the privatization and outsourcing of welfare programs to faith-based, local service providers under the Clinton Administration via the Charitable Choice provision of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). In 2001, the Bush administration established the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (FBCI) and gradually developed other offices housed under various federal agencies. Like Charitable Choice, the aim of FBCI is to remove barriers so that faith-based institutions can compete on equal terms with other private organizations in the market for federal funds to provide social services. FBCI has been described in official language as a call to “rally the Armies of Compassion,” as well as “a quiet revolution in the way government addresses human need.” It promises to remove “the systems designed to address social ills with large, impersonal machinery” and replace it with “solutions centered on the local, personal touch of neighbor serving neighbor.” See *The Quiet Revolution: The President's Faith-Based and Community Initiative: A Seven Year Progress Report*, February 2008, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/government/fbc/The-Quiet-Revolution.pdf>.

Finally, Boltanski identifies a third way between denunciation and sentiment that he terms the ‘aesthetic topic.’ In this response, the spectator considers the unfortunate’s suffering “as neither unjust (so as to become indignant about it) nor as touching (so as to be moved to tears by it), but as sublime.”²⁴ Thus, rather than focus on a persecutor as an object of indignation or a benefactor as an object of tender-heartedness, the spectator confronts the sufferer through an exhibitor who mediates suffering; who confronts its truth and reveals its nobility and dignity. The aesthetic topic therefore suggests the possibility of “a radical rejection of pity.”²⁵ As Boltanski puts it,

It is inasmuch as he is given up to naked suffering, imputable to no-one and with no hope of remission, that he sympathizes with the unfortunate. His primary quality is courage: he dares to cast his eyes on the unfortunate and look evil in the face without immediately turning away towards imaginary benefactors or persecutors. He allows himself to be taken over by the horrific.²⁶

In confronting the horror of the image of suffering as it is, without recourse to transferring emotion onto a third-party, the spectator is forced to confront “the horror residing within him and which defines his condition.”²⁷ The agent in this topic is the exhibitor who mediates and presents the spectacle and the spectator identifies with the exhibitor’s horror.

The aesthetic topic is less prevalent in the everyday reporting of Katrina—particularly since, given the context of the developing narrative, there are few stories and images that neither inspire sentiment nor avoid reading as either criticisms of the victims themselves or later, as an “enlightened” indictment of government’s neglect. There are however examples where the aesthetic topic is deployed to great effect. Boltanski describes the exhibitor as ‘a painter,’ suggesting the aesthetic topic’s natural affinity for

²⁴ Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*; 115.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 116.

still, photographic representation. The aesthetic topic is deployed in the public relations images of the President after the storm portraying him as a tragic hero saddened and burdened by the suffering that he is powerless to immediately remedy. One widely circulated photo, taken at the suggestion of Karl Rove, shows the President gazing out the window of Air Force One at the destruction on the ground. Other images and stories more clearly invoke neither tender-heartedness at the intervention of a benefactor nor indignation directed at a persecutor, but capture heroic suffering—the benefactor who also suffers, the tireless nurses and doctors at Charity Hospital and the police officers, themselves victims, who risked their lives and continued to care for others days after the levee breaches.

Boltanski concludes by analyzing four uncertainties that inevitably arise from the mediating of suffering over distance and that have contributed to a contemporary ‘crisis of pity.’²⁸ Of the four, three are particularly useful for understanding shifting news frames in the reporting of Katrina.²⁹ The first deals with uncertainty arising from conflicts in evaluative beliefs; specifically, suspicion of partiality in selecting from the universe of suffering Others those unfortunates that matter.³⁰ As Boltanski shows, evaluative beliefs can be linked to political ideologies. While claiming universality and openness to all forms of suffering, the response of both the Left and the Right leads to exclusions and thus a basis by which they are frequently criticized. In terms of the topic of denunciation (which belongs to the Left), the Left accuses accusers in order to exonerate an innocent, but in so doing, reveals a partiality for unfortunates who protest. In terms of the topic of sentiment (which belongs to the Right), the Right does not accuse but sides with a benefactor and in so doing reveals a partiality for unfortunates who do not protest, but respond with gratitude. Whereas the Left is accused of misidentifying innocents as persecutors, the Right is accused of “covering exploiters with the benefactor’s mask.”³¹

²⁸ Ibid., xvi. Boltanski derives these four uncertainties from Bijoy Boruah’s *Fiction and Emotion*. See Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*; 151.

²⁹ The last uncertainty deals with the possibility of effective action. See Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*; 172-177.

³⁰ Ibid., 154-159.

The second uncertainty is existential and stems from the ability of different candidates to occupy the positions of sufferer, persecutor, and benefactor. The third deals with uncertainty over the motivations of those who accuse and those who express kind-heartedness. The interplay of all three can be seen in a memorable video segment of President Bush on a tour of the Gulf Coast on Friday, September 2. As the humanitarian crisis continued in New Orleans, the President was shown comforting two distraught sisters as they sifted through the rubble of their Biloxi neighborhood. The ambiguity of the segment arises from uncertainty over who should properly fit the roles of unfortunates, perpetrators, and benefactors. As viewers, should we identify with the sisters' gratitude at a caring President's expression of commitment? Should we question the commitment and read it as an unpopular President attempting to manage his image by exploiting the sisters' misery? Should we question the President's choice of unfortunates in choosing to not pay a visit to the angry residents still stranded at the Convention Center in New Orleans? By choosing unfortunates with black skin, is he attempting to derail charges that the federal government's inaction betrayed an indifference to black suffering? Is the choice of unfortunates instead an accident and evidence of the President's purported colorblindness? The work of making sense of Katrina in many ways hinges on these uncertainties—on the legitimacy of claims as to who matters and who doesn't, as well as the politics of uncovering motivations and deciding who should rightfully occupy the positions of sufferer, benefactor and persecutor.

Extending Boltanski's work, Lilie Chouliaraki has examined television's role in the politics of pity, specifically examining how television "uses image and language so as to render the spectacle of suffering not only comprehensible, but also ethically acceptable for the spectator."³² Her analysis focuses on the means by which the news succeeds or fails to bridge the spatial and temporal distance that separates the audience from the spectacle of suffering; that is, the degree to which the text and technologies of mediation combine to favor identification and pity, or not, and whether expressions of pity as sentiment or indignation are favored. Thus, her analysis reveals the power of the news

³¹ Ibid., 156.

³² Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering*. (London: Sage, 2006), 3.

media (in terms of formal, technological and narrative aspects, framing, and mode of address) to favor some identifications, ethical positions, and possibilities for action, while closing off others.³³

This thesis extends on this work by critically examining the particular case of Katrina reporting and the shifting trajectory of the politics of pity as it unfolds as a function of time. Out of the cacophony of diverse interpretations given voice in the media, there emerged critical moments in which a dominant interpretation cohered and a dominant ethics crystallized, and equally critical moments in which they were legitimately challenged. In order to capture the shifting interpretations of the meaning and causes of the disaster, the politics of identifying with the suffering, and thus, the shifting politics of pity, it is critical to trace the lifecycle of new frames as they solidify and as oppositional voices emerge to contest them and gradually acquire their own legitimacy. By examining this politics of blaming as it unfolded in central news media, we can better understand how and why particular interpretations achieved dominance or were undermined, and ultimately, how the ethical crisis in the wake of Katrina was resolved without disrupting the balance of power.

New Media of the Center and the Politics of Pity

It is critical to define what is meant by designating the ‘national news media’ as an object of study, particularly given the increasingly segmented and fragmented audience, the multiplicity of channels, the ubiquity of blogs, social media, and non-traditional news sources, and the potentials these create for the formation of solidarities beyond the “imagined community” of the nation. Daniel Dayan has proposed a conception of the present media environment that distinguishes a traditional, stable, or ‘solid,’ *central* media in relation to new media, described as a more ‘liquid’ media of the *periphery*.³⁴ As Dayan suggests, we no longer can speak of one without recognizing the mutual interdependencies and interactions between the two.

³³ Ibid., 64-6.

³⁴ See Daniel Dayan, “Sharing and Showing: Television as Monstration,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 625 (2009): 219- 235, for a discussion of “media of the center.”

While monstrations provided by the new media are different in status, they cannot be understood without an explicit reference to the monstrations offered by central television. The new media either anticipate the monstrations of central television or respond to them. A curious division of labor has emerged that takes the form of a competitive partnership.³⁵

While central media increasingly incorporate and even rely on new media for content, they legitimate and differentiate themselves and thereby maintain their centrality through institutional forms of enclosure (i.e. central media's privileged relationship to government and private financing, norms of professionalization). Dayan's notion of a 'partnership' suggests as well an ideological relationship that is evident in the reporting of Katrina. Specifically, it suggests the potential of new media to legitimately expose the ideological center defined by central media as political and to initiate a reactionary re-centering. In other words, it underscores the power of new media to shape dominant news frames as well as to initiate public discussion and criticism of journalistic performance.

Thus, an analysis of central media must recognize central media's oscillations and moments of interaction with the often critical discourse originating from the new outlets of reporting, analysis, and commentary afforded by the Internet.³⁶ The case of Katrina is instructive. For example, the charges of the subtle racism of central news media began with public controversy over a Yahoo! News juxtaposition of an AP photograph showing black residents described in the caption as 'looting' with an Agence France Presse (AFP)

As Dayan observes in his discussion of "geographies of attention," new media has problematized the possibility of clear distinction between centers and peripheries.

³⁵ Ibid., 26.

³⁶ Kent Ono and John Sloop advocate a critical rhetoric approach to an analysis of news—one that actively deconstructs the assumptions of dominant discourses, that "illustrates the complicities of dominant vernacular discourses," that underscores and promotes oppositional discourses, and that is attuned to interactions and struggles between strategic and tactical rhetorics. See Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop, *Shifting Borders: Rhetoric, Immigration, and California's Proposition 187*, (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002), 19. While this thesis is restricted to news media of the center, and thus is limited to only a serious consideration of what Ono and Sloop regard as dominant civic discourses, nevertheless the evidence of oppositional discourses is visible in the imprint they leave on dominant news frames. At different moments, the overlapping of dominant and oppositional rhetorics is indicative of a momentary instability and contingency of dominant interpretations. For example, during the first week of reporting, the dominant explanation of the humanitarian crisis shifted from personal responsibility and victim-blaming to recognition of the racial and class dimensions of the crisis and blaming of the federal government.

photo of white residents purportedly ‘finding food’ that went viral. President Bush’s claim on ABC’s *Good Morning America* that no one had anticipated a breach of the levees was challenged by voices outside and within the news media of the center.³⁷ The *Washington Post*, among others, recalled a 2004 FEMA funded simulation known as ‘Hurricane Pam’ that predicted levee breaches and widespread flooding via the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet (MR-GO) from a Category 3 storm.³⁸ MediaMatters.org, a web-based media watchdog, criticized the *New York Times* for printing the President’s false statement, noting that among the many who did in fact anticipate a breach of the levees was the *Times* itself in an August 11, 2002 article by Adam Cohen.³⁹ Non-traditional media outlets helped bring national attention to an extensive 2002 five-part series of investigative reporting in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* examining the vulnerability of the city and in particular the possible danger of a levee breach.

As scholars of journalism have duly observed, the news is not unfiltered reality but a construction taking the form of image, sound, and narrative, that bears the imprint of power through decisions about framing, selection, and emphasis that privilege some values and worldviews over others. Scholars have identified a range of ideological continuities,⁴⁰ to which must be included a complicity in reproducing the invisibility and

³⁷ President George W. Bush, *ABC Good Morning America*, Thursday, September 1, 2005.

³⁸ Michael Grunwald, “Canal May Have Worsened City’s Flooding; Disputed Project was a ‘Funnel’ for Surge, Some Say,” *The Washington Post*, Wednesday, September 14, 2005, A21.

³⁹ “NY Times Reprinted Without Contradiction Bush’s False Claim that Nobody ‘Anticipated the Breach of the Levees,’” MediaMatters.org, <http://mediamatters.org/research/200509030001>

⁴⁰ Herbert Gans has identified a set of ‘enduring news values’ akin to those of the Progressive movement of the early 20th century; neither consistently Right nor Left, but reformist; characterized by a distrust of both big business and big government, a solid belief in individualism and ‘responsible capitalism,’ an “uneasiness about collective solutions other than at the grassroots level,” and a pronounced “opposition to socialism.” See Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What’s News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004), 68-9. Scholars of journalism’s political economy have argued that the concentrated patterns of ownership that increasingly define the global media landscape contribute to a news that tends to support dominant ideologies and formations of power. See for example, Robert McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*, (New York: The New Press, 2000). Michael Schudson has argued that conceptions of the audience shape the concerns and politics of the news, as does the imperative to maintain an image of professionalism and credibility. See Michael Schudson, *The Power of News*, 5. Other areas of research emphasize alternatively the impact of journalistic norms and practices of news gathering, the impact of editors and other gatekeepers on story selection, the requirements of news as a form and genre, as

universality (and thus the power) of whiteness and a tendency to conceive citizenship in terms of a market exchange of equivalents rather than as a mark of status.⁴¹ However, within these limits, central media accommodates a cacophonous multiplicity of contradictory and competing political voices in different moments and contexts.⁴² A critical cultural approach to an analysis of news insists that the messiness of ideological struggle matters. Indeed, social change—even if it is only a minor concession within the limits of hegemony—is only possible through struggles to remake the commonsense of the present. Major catastrophic disasters like Katrina are particularly fruitful sites of rupture in that the everyday, invisible interworkings of power and its consequences are potentially brought into sharp relief.

While popular criticism often emphasizes the political biases of journalists, the ideal of objective reporting retains currency among journalists.⁴³ As Michael Schudson

well as the personal and political biases of journalists themselves, most of whom remain upper-middle class, white, college-educated, professionals. A rich body of scholarly literature has consistently uncovered evidence of implicit racism embedded in news texts. See for example Leo R. Chavez, *Covering Immigration: Popular Images and the Politics of the Nation*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); John Fiske, *Media Matters: Race and Gender in U.S. Politics*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop, *Shifting Borders: Rhetoric, Immigration, and California's Proposition 187*, (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002).

⁴¹ For a discussion of the difference between a contractual citizenship regime under market fundamentalism and a non-contractual democratic inclusive regime, see Margaret R. Somers, *Genealogies of Citizenship: Markets, Statelessness, and the Right to Have Rights*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 89-92.

⁴² See for example, Robert M. Entman, *Democracy without Citizens: Media and the Decay of American Politics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁴³ Studies of journalists in the U.S. have found that many identify as 'liberal,' but of these, many are left-leaning on only some issues. See Michael Schudson, *The Power of News* and Robert M. Entman, *Democracy without Citizens: Media and the Decay of American Politics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). It should be noted that these assessments refer to journalists rather than political pundits and commentators, the boundaries of which are increasingly blurred in the era of the Internet and 24-hour cable news programs. It is regularly observed that the Fox News Network reflects a largely conservative viewpoint while MSNBC, once last in the ratings, has earned market share by differentiating itself as a regular source for left-leaning news commentary. Of course, any discussion of political orientations must also be qualified by recognition that there has been a general shift of the entire political spectrum to the right since the 1970s. See for example David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. For a parallel account of the British case, see Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, (London: Verso, 1988). My focus in this thesis is on traditional news programs that portend to present a summary of the days newsworthy events and to interpret them according to journalistic standards of objectivity. Despite the various reputations of the networks, I was unable to perceive any significant or

argues, national journalists “are not highly political or politicized; [they] see themselves as professionals rather than partisans.”⁴⁴ But clearly professionalism and an ‘objective’ positioning does not mean to suggest that the news is value-free. As Victor Navasky has put it, “mainstream institutions like the *New York Times*, the television networks, the news weeklies, are no less ideological [than the major journals of political opinion]. They have the ideology of the center and it is part of the ideology of the center to deny that it has an ideology.”⁴⁵ In order to better understand political struggles over Katrina, I argue, it is critical to examine the role of central media in reproducing the ideology of the center. Thus, a more useful question perhaps than whether or not the central news media as a whole are politically biased is whether or not they are legitimately criticized at particular moments or in choosing to report on particular issues as deviating from the center, for it is precisely in these moments when the ideology of the center is criticized as political (and thus, rendered visible as an ideology), that crucial adjustments are made. During Katrina, there were critical moments in which controversy erupted over the news coverage—as either lacking sufficient pity (i.e. the racist coverage of the looting, blaming the victims for their own misfortune) or exhibiting excessive or misguided expressions of pity (i.e. race-baiting politicians, attributing what was considered by some to be too much responsibility for the crisis to federal government). In these moments, dominant news frames were adjusted, modified or completely abandoned in order to accommodate a competing and emergent ethos. As I will show, the effect of these adjustments was to ideologically re-center the central media at the very moments in which it was revealed as political.

Interactions between traditional and new media to stake out and redefine ‘the center’ direct our focus to the lifecycle of news frames; specifically, the precariousness and instability of emergent frames as a story develops, how frames are constructed,

consistent ideological difference distinguishing the reporting of *Fox Report’s* Shepherd Smith from that of NBC’s Brian Williams.

⁴⁴ Michael Schudson, *The Power of News*; 7; See also Herbert Gans’s preface to the 2004 edition of *Deciding What’s News* (xviii).

⁴⁵ Victor Navasky, “Foreword,” In *Journalism After September 11*, edited by Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan, (London: Routledge, 2002), xv.

tested, contested, modified, and/or exhausted as a function of time.⁴⁶ These struggles over news frames in the wake of Katrina were a critical means by which the politics of pity was waged. As Todd Gitlin has put it, news frames are “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual.”⁴⁷ Gitlin’s work on Students for a Democratic Society’s (SDS) evolving relationship with the mainstream media is particularly useful in thinking about the life of news frames. His analysis of frames underscores the interdependencies between the news and SDS; both how news gathering practices and the formal requirements of news shaped SDS, as well as how the organization managed itself in relation to the norms and routines of news gathering and reporting. These interactions, while they contributed to the visibility of SDS and its political objectives over time, led to profound changes within the organization and ultimately undermined the political legitimacy of the movement.

During Katrina, news frames profoundly impacted how the disaster was made to mean and how subjects and spaces were managed in particular moments by those responsible. What should properly be the length and depth of the nation’s commitment to the victims of Katrina? What should be the proper role of various levels and agencies of government, individuals, markets, and civil society? What incentives and governing logics produce the most efficient and just outcomes? The answers to these questions were contested, evolving as a function of time and in relation to developments on the ground. This thesis seeks to develop an understanding of how the news media functions in the politics of pity by examining shifts in dominant frames as they signal evolving notions of what type of commitment to the victims of Katrina is just and who should bear ultimate responsibility.

Method and Sample

⁴⁶ I am indebted to Paddy Scannell for insisting on an analysis of how the narrative developed as a function of time, and to Susan Douglas, for encouraging me to think in terms of the life and death of a news frame.

⁴⁷ Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 7.

My approach to Katrina news is indebted to the work of media scholars who have analyzed the news as an unfolding process of interpreting reality that is shaped by history and by existing structures and relationships of power, but that is inevitably a contested outcome of the present. It recognizes narrative as the primary means through which we construct our realities—how we conceive of ourselves, the world around us, and our relationships to others.⁴⁸ In this thesis, I analyze news texts with a view to tracing the emergence and dissolution of news frames and rhetorics in time, with a particular focus on how they intersect with larger discourses, and the extent to which they reinforce or undermine dominant logics and relationships of power. I argue that shifting news frames can be linked to shifting moments and emphases in the managing of the aftermath of Katrina. In other words, these interactions between the news media, government, and the critical public that create “the news” were precisely the means by which a course of action was decided and a sense of justice and an understanding of our relationships and commitments to the victims of Katrina was conceived.

A model for my approach to Katrina reporting is *Policing the Crisis*, a foundational work of British cultural studies examining the news media’s role in creating a ‘moral panic’ through an ongoing narrative of an epidemic of ‘muggings’ in Britain in the 1970s.⁴⁹ Hall and colleagues contend that news texts can only be understood in relation to the organizational and institutional norms governing news gathering practices, which are themselves embedded within a context of competing discourses, institutions, and existing relationships of power. In their analysis, they describe how a single robbery came to be framed and interpreted as one of what would emerge as a rash of ‘muggings.’ They clearly show how ‘mugging’ as an interpretive framework fulfilled the requirements for newsworthiness, how news gathering practices led to the privileging of a state perspective, how new policing practices, everyday racism, and the editorial marshalling of public opinion led to pre-emptive policing which in turn contributed to an

⁴⁸ S. Elizabeth Bird and Robert W. Dardenne, “Myth, Chronicle and Story: Exploring the Narrative Qualities of News,” In *Media, Myths and Narratives: Television and the Press*, Sage Annual Reviews of Communication Research, Volume 15, edited by James W. Carey, (London: Sage, 1988), 67-86

⁴⁹ Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, Brian Robert, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1978).

over-reporting of muggings, and how the politics of labeling a crime ‘a mugging’ and the reporting of official statistics shaped the trajectory of the epidemic. This approach illuminates how the news shapes reality, and how the specific picture of reality that is privileged tends to be one that suits the needs of the news as a cultural form and as a practice. Likewise, other work has made central an analysis of time—specifically examining how time is structured in news stories and how practices of news gathering and the news’ formal requirements impact the development of a story.⁵⁰

My archive of Katrina news draws on what I take as, following Dayan, ‘news media of the center,’ and includes the major daily newspapers, the national evening news programs on the major broadcast networks, and programming from the leading 24-hour cable news stations. The national newspapers I analyzed were the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *USA Today*. All are among the highest circulated newspapers in the U.S. and address a national audience.⁵¹ The *Times* and the *Post*, commonly referred to as ‘papers of record,’ maintain large Washington bureaus devoted to covering the interworkings of federal government. Their feature writers, editorial staff, and contributors are frequent guests on the major cable news programs and on nationally-

⁵⁰ Schudson analyzes the continuous present tense that is adopted to narrate an unfolding story, pointing specifically to how news values (i.e. the investigative impulse to “get the story behind the story”), and the nature of the news itself (i.e. the imperative that news “be new”), shape the life and content of a story as it develops and is additively elaborated over time. See Michael Schudson, “What Time Means in a News Story,” Gannett Center for Media Studies, Occasional Paper, no. 4, (New York: Columbia University, 1986). Scannell has examined the power of the live broadcasting to align public time with time as it is experienced by those suffering in the present. See Paddy Scannell, “What Reality Has Misfortune?” *Media, Culture and Society*, 26, (2004): 573-84.

⁵¹ *USA Today* is a national newspaper based in McLean, VA. It does not provide regular news for a specific locality. According to the Audit Bureau of Circulation’s 2005 statistics of paid subscriptions, the top five in the U.S. were *USA Today* (2,281,831 daily), *The Wall Street Journal* (2,070,498 daily), *The New York Times* (1,121,623 daily, 1,680,582 Sunday), *The Los Angeles Times*, (907,997 daily) and *The Washington Post* (740,947 daily, 1,000,565 Sunday). BurrellesLuce, “Top 100 Daily Newspapers in the U.S. by Circulation,” http://www.burrellesluce.com/top100/2005_Top_100List.pdf. Paid subscriptions significantly underestimate the total number of readers who share papers (at libraries, coffee houses), as well as those who encounter the same or similar content through syndication in their local dailies or via an online edition. According to a Nielsen/NetRatings Press release, during the month of October 2005 (the month following Katrina), *The New York Times* online edition had the most hits of online newspapers in the U.S. with 11.4 million unique visitors. The online versions of *USA Today* and *The Washington Post* finished second and third, with 10.3 and 8 million unique visitors respectively. See Nielsen NetRatings, “Online Newspapers Enjoy Double-Digit Year-Over-Year Growth, Reaching One Out of Four Internet Users,” November 15, 2005, http://www.nielsen-online.com/pr/pr_051115.pdf

syndicated television and radio broadcast programs, and thus, their interpretations often shape subsequent analysis, talk and deliberation. My archive also includes the major evening national news programs from ABC (*Nightline*, *ABC World News Tonight*), NBC (*NBC Nightly News*), CNN (*CNN NewsNight*) and Fox News (*Fox Report*).⁵²

In addition, my primary sources included newspapers serving major metropolitan areas in and around the affected Gulf region. These included the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and the *Houston Chronicle*.⁵³ After Katrina, the *Times-Picayune* and its website NOLA.com served as a critical channel of information for displaced residents, particularly as the national spotlight shifted elsewhere.⁵⁴ Likewise, after Katrina, Houston and Atlanta became critical centers in the unfolding politics of provision.⁵⁵ I analyzed all front section newspaper articles and

⁵² Videotapes of the programs were purchased from the Vanderbilt Television News Archive by the Communication Studies Department at the University of Michigan. The archive also contained transcripts of the broadcasts gathered from LexisNexis. News segments were included if Hurricane Katrina was the subject matter.

⁵³ The 2005 circulation figures are as follows: *Houston Chronicle* (527,744 daily, 720,711 Sunday, ranked 9th in the U.S.); *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (396,888 daily, 610,338 Sunday, ranked 16th) and the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* (261, 573 daily, 288,706 Sunday, ranked 34th). BurrellesLuce, "Top 100 Daily Newspapers in the U.S. by Circulation," http://www.burrellesluce.com/top100/2005_Top_100List.pdf. The last print edition of the *Times-Picayune* was dated Tuesday, August 30 and printing resumed Friday, September 2 from the press of the *Houma Courier*. Throughout the week, the *Times-Picayune* continued to publish a full web edition of the paper on its NOLA.com site. The reporters and staff of the *Times-Picayune* were forced to evacuate their offices due to flooding Tuesday morning. One group relocated to Houma, Louisiana—a small community one hour southwest of New Orleans and began printing the *Times-Picayune* on the *Houma Courier's* press. The rest of the staff relocated to LSU's campus in Baton Rouge and continued reporting and producing web editions of the paper from the facilities at the Manship School of Mass Communications. See Douglas Brinkley, *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 292-294.

⁵⁴ According to James O'Byrne, director of content for NOLA.com, site traffic in the wake of Katrina saw a 40 fold increase—"Prior to Katrina...NOLA.com received between 600,000 and 700,000 page views per day. In the storm's immediate aftermath, it averaged 30 million page views per day...[and] now [October 2009] averages 1.1 million to 1.2 million daily page views." Furthermore, according to O'Byrne, while he believes most visitors are locals, "I know from my interactions with readers on the site that there are a significant number of displaced residents of the metropolitan area who still go to NOLA.com as part of their daily routine." See Mallery Jean Tenore, "NOLA.com Grows Audience, Continues to Attract Expats Post-Katrina," *Poynter Online*, <http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=101&aid=172490>.

⁵⁵ While I had hoped to extend Chapter 2 to examine the localized citizenship work of the news media in New Orleans, Biloxi, and Gulfport (both prior to and after Katrina) and in the urban centers where evacuees found themselves (Baton Rouge, Houston, Atlanta, San Antonio, Memphis), such a focus is presently beyond the scope of this thesis.

broadcast news stories containing any reference to Katrina appearing between Friday, August 26, 2005—the day Katrina left Florida and entered the Gulf of Mexico—and Friday, September 23, 2005—marking the approach of Hurricane Rita and a significant decline in Katrina coverage in the national news media.⁵⁶ Finally, I analyzed all articles referencing Katrina appearing in the *National Review* and the *Nation*. The *National Review* is the highest circulating opinion journal of the Right in the U.S. Its counterpart on the Left is the *Nation*.⁵⁷ Like the national dailies, contributors to *The National Review* and *The Nation* are featured guests on television news programs and some produce nationally-syndicated editorial columns. Together, these journals roughly define the borders of the present space of legitimate popular political discussion.

Starting with only my memory of the Katrina drama as it unfolded in 2005, I began with, in Stuart Hall’s language, a “long preliminary soak,” in the data that included a job for my department doing quantitative coding of randomly selected dates of articles during the summer of 2006.⁵⁸ Once I decided on Katrina reporting as the topic for a

⁵⁶ All articles were collected through a LexisNexis keyword search for ‘Katrina.’ Restricting the sample to the front sections of newspapers made the project manageable, but it likely limits some discussions. The front section typically consists of hard breaking news, national and foreign affairs coverage, some longer thematic or investigative features, letters to the editor, and featured editorials. Thus, it is ideal for following new developments in a major story, determining what stories or parts of stories are considered important, distinguishing between central and peripheral frames and meanings as they are attributed to events, and capturing what is at stake politically and how this develops over time. The decision to focus on front sections likely limited the pool of human interest narratives for Chapter 3. Furthermore, it constrains my analysis of the politics of provision and deservedness as it unfolded locally in the state, local, and business sections of the *Houston Chronicle* and the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

⁵⁷ The *National Review* and the *National Review Online* (NRO) are “the benchmark vehicles for reaching those Republicans/conservatives who shape opinion on the important issues, and both reach an affluent, educated and highly responsive audience of corporate and government leaders, the financial elite, educators, journalists, community and association leaders, as well as engaged activists all across America.” Indeed, as President George W. Bush confirmed, the *National Review* “has a lot of readers here in the West Wing.” See National Review Media Kit, 2010, <http://online.qmags.com/NRMK/Default.aspx#pg3>. In 2005, the *National Review*’s circulation was 160,896. Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, “State of the News Media, 2007,” <http://www.journalism.org/>. While *The Nation* is commonly regarded as left-leaning, its mission statement rejects any political affiliation and roots the journal in a tradition of critical inquiry and objectivity: “The Nation will not be the organ of any party, sect or body. It will, on the contrary, make an earnest effort to bring to the discussion of political and social questions a really critical spirit, and to wage war on the vices of violence, exaggeration and misrepresentation by which so much of the political writing of the day is marred.” See <http://www.thenation.com>. In 2005, the *Nation*’s circulation was 184,181. See the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, “State of the News Media, 2007,” <http://www.journalism.org/>

thesis, I returned to the data again in 2008 to write my proposal and then devoted the entire first half of 2009 to an exhaustive analysis of every newspaper article and all available news broadcasts from the archive. I analyzed both broadcast and print news for dominant and emergent frames. My focus was story selection and emphasis, the structuring of the time and the space of the disaster, the use of photographs, maps, and live video footage, and my own sense of the dominant meanings favored by the texts. Throughout this process, I located significant turning points marked by shifting arguments, justifications, attributions of responsibility, and struggles over representation. I analyzed the myriad moral lessons and ethical dilemmas given voice in the news, particularly in human interest narratives. I produced a timeline chronicling the significant events and developments that would make up the larger narrative of Katrina over the course of the month. In doing so, I found that time was structured heterogeneously and flowed unevenly—that is, in different moments, time advanced at a pace of minute-by-minute, hour-by-hour, or day-by-day, while at other moments, it was possible to describe an entire week of reporting. Thus, my analysis came to center on moments of transition—not only shifts in dominant news frames, but also the ethical and political adjustments underlying these shifts—as a means of mapping out the politics of pity over time.

Chapter Outlines

In Chapter II, I examine the process by which a ritual and routine news story—the reporting of a hurricane—was recognized, in the case of Katrina, as non-routine and exceptional. While the magnitude of Katrina’s devastation was widely anticipated—it was expected to be a once in a lifetime storm—it would take nearly 24 hours afterwards for journalists to confirm that the levees had breached in New Orleans, that the city was slowly filling up like a bowl, and that thousands of residents remained trapped in the city. I show how an initial series of blind-spots and barriers to witnessing, some an artifact of ingrained practices of news gathering and presentation, led journalists on the ground to announce the end of the crisis, just as it was in fact beginning. I then analyze the efforts

⁵⁸ Stuart Hall “Introduction,” in *Paper Voices: The Popular Press and Social Change, 1935-1965*, by A.C.H. Smith with Elizabeth Immirzi and Trevor Blackwell (London: Chatto and Windus, 1975), 15; cited in Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching*; 303.

of the news media to bear witness to the disaster, to spatially and temporally determine centers and peripheries, and to mediate the reach, magnitude, and depth of the suffering for a distant audience.

In Chapter III, I show how the fragile and emergent consensus that the victims should be rightly seen as victims, and that all levels of government were complicit in their suffering, legitimated an exception to the norm of colorblindness that characterizes much of mainstream news discourse and that remained the perspective of the Bush administration weeks afterward. By the end of the first week of the disaster, both central news media and the federal government had been accused by disparate voices of racism and of failing to extend to those who were rightly victims a proper measure of compassion. The central news media responded by taking seriously the charges of a racist government and by examining the possibility that race and poverty unjustly structured outcomes after Katrina. In following weeks, the central news media constructed an alibi of anti-racism on the one hand, by actively rooting out alleged overt acts of racism perpetrated by government officials, and on the other hand, by responding to criticisms that their use of language (i.e. 'looting,' 'refugees') and their manner of representing victims was implicitly racist. However, despite this re-centering of the center on matters of race, colorblindness and arguments advocating unregulated markets and trickle-down provision managed to persist in the news because they are not properly seen as racisms. Thus my analysis suggests how a popular anti-racism, what I describe as an 'anti-racism of the center,' both in terms of its articulations and silences, worked in the managing of racial anxieties and ultimately enabled the racist logics of neoliberal capitalism to largely evade scrutiny after Katrina.

In Chapter IV, I analyze human interest news to show how the crisis led to a reimagining of our commitments to one another and the norms that govern self-conduct; that is, both how the disaster refigured what was expected of those who are fortunate as well as what was to be tolerated of those who were not only unfortunate, but also in the end victims. The charges of a racist and indifferent government established a colorblind, compassionate nation as its complementary other. Thus, despite (or perhaps, because of) the visibility of these debates over the government's racism and classism, part of what

would be celebrated of private displays of compassion was a supposed anti-racist will to overlook difference. Human interest narratives after Katrina purport to explain why people behave the way they do by examining their beliefs, attitudes and motivations. Despite efforts to see past race and class in these narratives about people, the logics of race are silently reinvested through reference to the ‘best’ and the ‘worst’ as it is expressed in the face of crisis. The limits of colorblindness are revealed by the persistence of an implicitly racist logic of contractual reciprocity vs. unilateral charity.⁵⁹ While a new anti-racism of the center was being staked out by the news media that included recognition that most victims were poor and black and that the indifference of all levels of government to poor, black people was, in part, to blame, human interest stories continued to be structured by an obsessive, ostensibly colorblind accounting of those who produce, create, contribute, and sacrifice vs. those who are costly, burdensome, who demand, and who consume.

As the story of Katrina developed over time, it became a paradigmatic case of government’s bureaucratic and discriminating brand of care, as it threatened the lives of victims and undermined a more authentic, flexible, and creative outpouring of compassion from the private sector and from average Americans. In Chapter V, I argue that while it created a space for disparate critiques of the neoliberal state, the federal government’s failure to respond also led to celebration of the alternative of markets, social entrepreneurialism, and private expressions of compassion. The news media played a critical role in determining when government intervention was needed (and was lacking) and when it had become excessive. Indeed, federal intervention was revealed by the news media as oppressive almost as soon as it arrived. Furthermore, I show how a course of action and the precise nature of the nation’s commitment were decided through interactions between the central news media, government officials, and the critical public. Specifically I detail the politics of deciding when selflessness and self-interest should be the dominant ethos for managing the crisis. Together, these chapters reveal the

⁵⁹ Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, “Contract versus Charity: Why Is There No Social Citizenship in the United States?” in *The Citizenship Debates: A Reader*, edited by Gershon Shafir, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 113-130.

complexities of the politics of pity as it is negotiated by and through the news media by powerful interests vying for legitimacy.

Chapter II

Managing Space and Time in Katrina Reporting

Since the introduction of pity into politics, a critical function of the news media has been to publicize suffering and to effectively communicate its immediacy and relevancy to distant viewers. While the project of human rights has benefited from the ability of the news media in theory to be everywhere and to report on natural and unnatural disasters as they happen; the requirement that distant spectacles of suffering be mediated creates uncertainties that problematize effective communication and thus, the ethical obligation to express commitment.¹ As Boltanski argues, technological and other developments over the last 30 years have intensified these uncertainties, contributing to a contemporary ‘crisis of pity.’ For example, new media have broadened the spectrum of visible suffering, increasingly exposing the central news media’s partiality in selecting from the sea of suffering those unfortunates that matter. A wider variety of news outlets and the further blurring of news and political commentary have led to additional uncertainties over how one should properly assign the roles of victim, persecutor, and benefactor. Political developments over the last 30 years—the rise of ‘compassionate capitalism’ and the Right’s success in attacking ‘political correctness’ and the ‘false culture of victimization’ thought to remain as a legacy of identity politics—have deepened suspicions over the authenticity of desires from all quarters to see an end to suffering by suggesting that all expressions of pity mask a will to power. The accumulation of these uncertainties has further contributed to uncertainty over the possibility of effective action.

¹ Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

For Boltanski, without troubling the paradigm of a politics of pity in place since the rise of the bourgeoisie, this crisis of confidence can only be managed by maintaining a focus on *present* suffering.¹ Unlike a politics concerned with imagined past or future unfortunates, only the reality of present suffering can be directly witnessed, confirmed, and confronted. A ‘politics of the present’ then is “always on the side of those being bombed and not of those sending the bombs.”² It is “opposed to forms of denunciation which, on the basis of a theory of history, treat groups as persons whose future intentions can be probed by taking account of their past actions.”³ A politics of the present therefore stays “at the bedside of the minorities, but without illusions, since the minorities may themselves become oppressive.”⁴ A focus on the present then is a means of wading through the sea of claims of suffering in order to find that which can be acted upon and alleviated. It is not to deny the usefulness of theories of power in assigning the roles; rather, it is to warn against uncritically treating theories as orthodoxy. In so doing, a politics of the present must underscore how the legacy of history contributes to present suffering while maintaining an awareness of the potential future victims of our present actions.

In their role as witnesses to a humanitarian crisis, the news media affirm the reality of present suffering for the benefit of an absent audience. As Paddy Scannell has suggested, one reason news organizations go to such great lengths and cost to be on the spot is so that distant viewers might “‘own’ the experience and thereby be entitled to have and to speak their opinions on the matter.”⁵ “Presence on the ground is the only guarantee of effectiveness and even of truth.”⁶ But as the live reporting of Katrina

¹ Ibid., 192.

² Bernard Kouchner, *Charite Business*, (Paris: Le Pre aux Clercs, 1986), 13, cited in Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*, 182.

³ Ibid., 182.

⁴ Bernard Kouchner, “La Loi d’Oppression Minimale,” In Mario Bettati and Bernard Kouchner, *Le Devoir d’Ingerence. Peut-on les Laisser Mourir?* (Paris: Denoel, 1987), 21, cited in Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*, 182.

⁵ Paddy Scannell, “What Reality Has Misfortune?” 582.

⁶ Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*; 183.

suggests, while presence on the ground is necessary to affirm the reality of present suffering, it is not immediately sufficient. In defining existential uncertainties, Boltanski asserts, they are “rarely the result of a perceptible inadequacy, as would be the case if, for example, the reported scene was confused or obscure,” but instead arise from uncertainty in assigning the specific actors to the roles of persecutor, victim, and benefactor.⁷ But as even the very recent history of humanitarian crises suggests, few disasters are without significant barriers to witnessing. Consider the persisting uncertainty over the magnitude of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, or the impossibility in separating out Gaddafi’s dead innocents in Libya from Obama’s, or the difficulties in bearing witness to the present victims and perpetrators of climate change or racism. While new media have perhaps produced the potential for suffering to be publicized as it happens wherever it happens; this potential is never fully realized, and publicity alone is rarely enough. Rather present suffering must be unambiguously defined and its ethical implications clearly articulated in order to motivate action. While Boltanski’s focus is on the communicative uncertainties introduced by the mediation of a spectacle of distant suffering, another category of existential uncertainties must inevitably arise when disasters do not, or do not immediately, produce a spectacle. Indeed the initial spectacle yielded by Katrina was not captured until the day after the storm, and was not immediately one of suffering, but of ‘looting’ and ‘lawlessness.’ The spectacle of tens of thousands of poor, black people helpless and stranded downtown did not form until Wednesday August 31, and Thursday, September 1, as those scattered throughout the city made their way or were brought to the Superdome, the Convention Center, and the section of the Crescent City Connection above water.

Eric Klinenberg’s analysis of the news coverage of the 1995 heat wave in Chicago that claimed the lives of hundreds and led to health emergencies for thousands of the city’s most vulnerable is instructive. Klinenberg highlights the news media’s difficulties in covering a crisis that defied witnessing and thus, also defied the requirements of live reporting.⁸ The problem of defining the crisis and its limits allowed

⁷ Ibid., 159.

public officials to voice their skepticism that the deaths were “really real;” that there was in fact a disaster and that government should be held responsible for failing to protect the poor, elderly, and infirm who were most vulnerable to extreme heat.⁹ With time, local politicians tried to refute the city’s responsibility by arguing that most of the deaths attributed to the heat by the media were actually due to natural causes. Like Katrina, government officials went on to deny responsibility by blaming the victims themselves, then by pointing to the limits of government power and the right of individuals to be free of government, and by framing the disaster as an anomaly that could not be anticipated and thus could not be prepared for.¹⁰ The mayor’s official report masked the racial and class dimensions of the disaster by neglecting an analysis of how heat deaths were distributed by neighborhood.¹¹

Like the Chicago heat wave, Katrina initially defied witnessing. While Katrina was predicted to be a catastrophic storm, a full day passed before the ‘worst-case scenario’ was in fact confirmed. As a case study of the reporting of a live, developing crisis, Katrina illustrates the strategies by which reporters construct a sense of immediacy and presence. The work of relaying images of unabated suffering and an awareness of how suffering is compounded by the progression of time was particularly crucial in summoning a political will to action. By bringing distant viewers in contact with the victims of Katrina, it enabled audiences to not only ‘own’ the experience, but to also own the consequences of progressing time without action. Below, I analyze the process by which the central news media came to recognize Katrina as a crisis beyond the everyday. In the initial hours and days after the storm, the central news media accommodated diverse, premature and conflicting assessments of what the full range of the disaster in fact was; where were its centers and peripheries, and what was a proper sense of urgency. To their detriment, federal officials initially responded to the mediated storm, rather than

⁸ Eric Klinenberg, *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 181.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 190.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 181.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 179.

the storm itself. Before the fragile consensus could form that Katrina was a ‘manmade’ disaster and that uncommon compassion must be extended to the victims to address an injustice, the crisis itself would have to be defined and the roles (victim, perpetrator, benefactor) clearly assigned. As I show, the politics of pity in the wake of Katrina was powerfully shaped by this initial period of uncertainty.

Mediating Hurricanes

Since hurricanes occur regularly in the U.S., their reporting is a ritual and routine news practice. As they develop in the Atlantic, tropical depressions are named and tracked by the National Hurricane Center. As they grow in size and intensity, they are known through reference to the Saffir-Simpson scale—a measure that ranks hurricanes from 1-5 (5 as strongest) according to wind speed. The newsworthiness of a hurricane as it forms is a function of its projected path and potential to intensify. For many of us, as audiences, our experiences of hurricanes are wholly mediated. Since it is impossible to observe hurricanes directly, they are represented and conceived through radar and satellite imagery. Forecasters map the storm’s present location, its projected path, and its potential to grow and intensify over incremental blocks of time in the immediate future.¹² Since hurricanes are not directly seen, reporters anticipate their arrival on the ground and confirm their reality as they reach the shore. Thus, central to hurricane reporting is the construction of a hyper-real experience of time—a structured anticipation as the storm approaches, an initial uncertainty and blindness as to what has just happened and what is presently happening, followed by a longer period of witnessing on the ground to uncover the storm’s effects.

While journalists are often quick to speculate—citing estimates of the dead, the homeless, those without electricity, the total of insured and uninsured damage, the impact

¹² Weeks and years later, this period of anticipating the storm was revisited in news stories and documentaries. A satellite image of Katrina at the peak of its intensity as it nearly filled the entire Gulf of Mexico captures the vulnerability of unprotected life and isolates a moment in the otherwise steady march of time before the Gulf Coast emerged ‘post-Katrina.’ Much like the famous 9/11 photos showing United Airlines Flight 175 seconds prior to impact with the south tower of the World Trade Center, this satellite image took on more specific meaning after the storm as a means of reestablishing the urgency of the moment.

on markets and the region—the full scope of the impact of a hurricane is never immediately known. Instead, it requires an unfolding process of witnessing on the ground over time. The number of deaths reported in the first week ranged from Governor Blanco’s figure of 4 to 6 dead in the entire state of Louisiana on Monday to Mayor Nagin’s estimate later in the week of 10,000 in New Orleans alone.¹³ First week estimates of the time it would take to pump floodwaters out of the city ranged from more than a month to more than 6 months.¹⁴ What during the first week appeared to be a national fuel crisis, with reports of rising prices and widespread shortages following the shutdown of production and refining in the region, turned out to be an unnecessary panic.¹⁵ Early fears of an epidemic of waterborne illnesses did not materialize. The impossibility of witnessing hurricanes in the present, coupled with the demand for an immediate assessment of the disaster produces another category of existential uncertainties. These uncertainties arise from both an initial blindness to the full impact of the disaster and from conflicting accounts that are inevitably reported as a result.

Another critical part of witnessing is the work of conceiving the space of the disaster. Katrina’s immediate destruction stretched from southern Florida to the coastal regions of Alabama, Mississippi, and eastern Louisiana, to as far north as Tennessee. In all, it affected 90,000 square miles, an area “altogether the size of Britain.”¹⁶ Reporters had to devise strategies to conceive of and manage this space, to find centers and peripheries, and to uncover spaces that ‘care forgot.’ Reporters had to understand and communicate how the storm had impacted a person, a family, a city block, a neighborhood, a town, the region, and the nation. An important strategy was the constant shifting and reestablishing of perspective. From the aerial views documenting the sheer

¹³ Tom Vandenbrook and William M. Welch, “Huge Storm Carries Danger Northward,” *USA Today*, Tuesday, August 30, 2005, 1A; Jacqueline L. Salmon and Josh White, “Toll Suspected to Soar as Body Recovery Begins,” *The Washington Post*, Tuesday September 6, 2005, A10.

¹⁴ James Dao and N.R. Kleinfield, “More Troops and Aid Reach New Orleans,” *The New York Times*, Saturday, September 3, 2005, 1A.

¹⁵ Vikas Bajaj and Anthony Ramirez, “Spot Shortages of Gas Reported Around Country,” *The New York Times*, Saturday, September 3, 2005, 1A.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Vargas, *ABC World News Tonight*, Thursday, September 1, 2005.

scale of the destruction to personal experiences of loss, understanding Katrina demanded a systematic, additive process of uncovering that developed over the course of days and weeks and continues today.¹⁷ Most national correspondents were unfamiliar with the areas and people they were reporting on. As is clear from the news texts, and as Douglas Brinkley confirms, many did not know what towns or neighborhoods they were in, or even how to pronounce the names of streets.¹⁸ Street signs were initially covered by flood waters, denying reporters a point of reference to distinguish one block of houses flooded to the eaves from the next. Over time, the news media's witnessing enabled distant audiences to understand the spatial and temporal limits of the disaster—permitting it to be discussed and assessed as a whole.¹⁹

In the half-hour national evening news programs I analyzed—*ABC World News Tonight*, *ABC Nightline*, and *NBC Nightly News*—much of the reporter's time shown on location was scripted and pre-recorded. The monumental task of communicating the full scope of the massive disaster was constrained by the brief, headline structure of the programs. During the first week of reporting, *ABC World News Tonight* and *NBC Nightly News* incorporated into their roughly 22 minutes of airtime as many as six reporters on the ground in three states; not including introductions and a segment summarizing other news of the day. While cable news programs also relied on scripted and pre-recorded stories and interviews, they were considerably less structured. These limitations of time on the major networks were managed in part by the insertion of short breaking news updates throughout the day, again, primarily during the first week.

National news programs began with a retrospective account of the day's events—what Aaron Brown regularly referred to as 'the broad strokes'—followed by reports from the disaster zone providing a slightly more detailed but brief account. On Tuesday August 30th, as the levee breaches were confirmed, live reporting of Katrina legitimately

¹⁷ For example, the daily injustices which continue to be exposed by local media and activists, the ongoing projects of compiling the oral accounts of survivors, and so on.

¹⁸ Douglas Brinkley, *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2006).

¹⁹ Paddy Scannell, "What Reality Has Misfortune?" 574.

displaced other news and monopolized entire evening news programs. As the crisis intensified, lead anchors appeared on location in New Orleans, Gulfport, and Biloxi, the appointed centers of the disaster, affirming the importance of being on the spot. Aaron Brown, host of *CNN NewsNight*, remained in the studio, but as the crisis developed, he shared anchoring duties with Anderson Cooper who was live throughout the region. Fox's Shepherd Smith, ABC's Bob Woodruff, and NBC's Brian Williams reported live from New Orleans during the first week. Likewise, their return to the studio and their suits during the second week of reporting signaled the end of the crisis.

Mapping out Katrina in Time and Space

Katrina was a Category 1 hurricane when it struck south Florida on Friday, August 26th leaving seven dead and over a billion in damages.²⁰ Initially projected to veer north toward the Florida panhandle, the National Hurricane Center issued a revised path late Friday afternoon showing a possible landfall near the mouth of the Mississippi River. Due to the recent update, national news programs reported that evening that Katrina's projected path remained unclear—"anywhere between southeast Louisiana and the Florida panhandle."²¹ With the revised projections, experts warned that the warm loop current in the Gulf could provide the conditions for Katrina's strength to quickly intensify. According to an expert appearing on *ABC World News Tonight* Friday evening, "If Katrina were heading for New Orleans, then we would be really worried that [it] would go from what it is now, a Category 2 hurricane, to being a major hurricane, maybe even a catastrophic hurricane."²² Max Mayfield, director of the National Hurricane Center, warned that time is absolutely critical—our "worst nightmare [is] to have people going to bed preparing for a Category 1 hurricane and waking up to, say, a Category 4 or 5 hurricane."²³

²⁰ Terry Moran, *ABC World News Tonight*, Friday, August 26, 2005.

²¹ *ABC World News Tonight*, Friday, August 26, 2005.

²² Dr. Hugh Willoughby, *ABC World News Tonight*, Friday, August 26, 2005.

²³ *Ibid.*

Over the weekend, Governor Kathleen Blanco (D) of Louisiana argued precisely this—that many residents did go to bed thinking Katrina was a weak Category 1 heading for the Florida panhandle. In fact, *USA Today*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post* all reported on Saturday morning what had been the consensus of Friday afternoon on Katrina’s trajectory.²⁴ By Saturday afternoon, reporters and officials concurred that New Orleans must prepare now for a potentially catastrophic storm.²⁵ That evening, news broadcasts were devoted to impressing the severity of the storm and the threat it posed to New Orleans. Prior to the storm, the national news demonstrated a clear understanding of what was at stake for the city. Reporters frequently mentioned that the levees maintained by the Army Corps of Engineers were only built to withstand a Category 3 hurricane, and that much of the city is below sea level and therefore vulnerable to catastrophic flooding in the event of a breach. Nearly two days before the storm, Bob Woodruff reported on the logistical difficulties in evacuating New Orleans²⁶ and low-lying regions, expressing concern for those who will require government assistance.²⁷

Over the weekend, local, state, and federal officials emphasized the threat to Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama and states of emergency were declared. In Mississippi, a mandatory evacuation was ordered for the entire area south of I-10, the coastal zones particularly vulnerable to storm surge. Throughout the weekend, a massive evacuation of the coastal areas of three states was underway. Still, authorities and reporters maintained that the storm could veer away at the last minute and spare New Orleans. Instead of confirming plans for public transportation to shelters beyond the

²⁴ Of the newspapers I consulted, only the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* reported the updated storm path Saturday morning.

²⁵ Bruce Nolan, “Katrina Takes Aim,” *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, August 28, 2005, National, 1.

²⁶ Mayor Nagin’s decision to wait to declare a mandatory evacuation of the city was according to a plan giving residents of lower lying areas to the south, including St. Bernard Parish, Plaquemines Parish and the inhabited barrier islands, time to evacuate first. Additionally, it was reported that Nagin waited to declare a mandatory evacuation for fear that the city could be held liable for business losses. See Bruce Nolan, “Katrina Takes Aim;” 1.

²⁷ This will in fact be a common practice on every network today, as journalists on the ground are already making distinctions between those taking the storm seriously, those who are not, and those who do not have the means to evacuate on their own.

hurricane's reach, officials issued calls for personal responsibility. Governor Blanco asked "neighbors [to] be concerned for their neighbors...[to] watch the news, act early, and pray."²⁸ FEMA director Michael Brown appealed to residents to "do what you can now to insure that your family and business are safe."²⁹ On Sunday, when Mayor Nagin finally ordered a mandatory evacuation of New Orleans, traffic was so snarled exiting the city and local gas shortages were so widespread that getting out of the path of the storm, even for those with the means to do so, was near impossible.³⁰ Residents trapped in the city after the storm later cited fears of being stuck in traffic as the storm arrived. While it was clear over the weekend that time was limited for those in the storm's path, this gave way with distance. News correspondents weighing in on the politics of deservedness only days later would recall that there were plenty of warnings and time to evacuate and that many people had simply refused to act.

As a way of further contextualizing Katrina's threat, the news media invoked the memory of past storms. All day Friday (and Saturday in the national newspapers), Katrina was compared to the recent memory of Hurricane Ivan in 2004—which made landfall as a Category 3 near the resort towns of Gulf Shores and Orange Beach, Alabama—and Hurricane Dennis, which struck the Florida panhandle as a Category 3 storm the previous month. By Saturday evening, the storms revised trajectory and rapid development had *ABC World News Tonight* and other news programs invoking the specters of Hurricanes Betsy (1965) and Camille (1969).³¹ Betsy struck New Orleans as a strong Category 3, sending storm surge into Lake Pontchartrain which eventually overtopped levees along the Industrial Canal and caused widespread flooding in the Ninth Ward, New Orleans East, and sections of St. Bernard Parish. Betsy left 75 dead and a

²⁸ Governor Kathleen Blanco, *CNN Saturday Night*, Saturday, August 27, 2005

²⁹ FEMA Undersecretary Michael Brown, *CNN Saturday Night*, Saturday, August 27, 2005

³⁰ While critics would later cite an aerial photograph of a flooded parking lot of empty school buses as evidence of the failures of city government, the city did coordinate transportation for the elderly and infirm to the Superdome. A product of faith-based initiatives, the city had an evacuation plan called "Operation Brother's Keeper" that largely evaded public criticism.

³¹ Bob Woodruff, *ABC World News Tonight*, Saturday, August 27, 2005.

billion and a half in damages.³² Like Katrina, Camille was initially projected for the Florida panhandle, but instead straightened out making landfall near southeastern Louisiana, leveling the Mississippi beach towns of Bay St. Louis and Pass Christian. Camille would eventually be blamed for 143 deaths in Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama. This memory work was presented with images and footage showing visual proof of what did in fact happen in these very spaces forty years ago. While this strategy of remembering was intended to communicate a sense of urgency to local residents, CNN's Erica Hill and Jonathan Freed admitted to worries that it would not persuade everyone, noting "the collective memory of any community is only as old as some of its newest residents."³³

In order to spatially construct the impending disaster, reporters were positioned on the ground all along the Gulf Coast from Orange Beach, Alabama to New Orleans. In the days prior to and immediately after the storm, the areas under scrutiny were the cities and towns, spaced out geographically in order to capture a swathe of the coast—New Orleans, Biloxi, Gulfport, Mobile, Gulf Shores. As the days progressed and reporters were able to spread further throughout the region, new centers of suffering and neglect were discovered—Waveland, Pascagoula, Ocean Springs, Bay St. Louis, Pass Christian, Slidell, D'Iberville, Grand Isle, while former centers were gradually recognized as peripheral.³⁴ Nearly two weeks after the storm, the national news media continued to 'discover' towns and parishes that had yet to see any state or federal assistance.

Reporting before the storm in New Orleans was centered on the Superdome downtown, the French Quarter, and Canal Street. The Superdome, declared by city officials as the 'shelter of last resort,' was the site where on Sunday, approximately 9,000

³² While it was never a priority (it took nearly 40 years to complete), Betsy prompted a major federal project coordinated by the Army Corp of Engineers to improve levee infrastructure to withstand a Category 3 storm.

³³ Jonathan Freed, *CNN Saturday Night*, Saturday, August 27, 2005.

³⁴ The day of the storm Mississippi and Alabama were framed as centers of the disaster. One of the first specific reports of storm damage was an oil rig that had been blown up river destroying a bridge near Mobile, Alabama. By Thursday when President Bush arrived in Mobile to meet with FEMA director Michael Brown and other officials, Alabama was very much on the periphery of where ongoing action on the ground was taking place.

of the city's poor and elderly had gathered in a slow moving line in the rain to be searched for weapons and to submit to means-testing by a small contingent of National Guard. If Katrina turned out to be 'catastrophic,' the Superdome would be a logical center for witnessing the human story as it unfolds. The decision by national news organizations to report from the French Quarter was likely because it had come to signify New Orleans in the national imaginary, but the lack of anything to witness there would lead to initial confusion. Few, if in fact any, news organizations began in the poor neighborhoods of New Orleans, or the poor rural areas of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, or in the hospitals and nursing homes.

The French Quarter was mostly vacant before the storm, causing correspondents to greatly underestimate how many residents remained behind.³⁵ And since it occupies some of the highest ground in New Orleans, this limited view would lead correspondents immediately after the storm to report that New Orleans had been spared the worst, suffering mostly wind damage. They reported this as Lakeview and other areas to the north were being inundated with the waters of Lake Pontchartrain and as the Ninth Ward and St. Bernard Parish to the east faced massive flooding from storm surge via the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet and the Industrial Canal breach, all of which caused water levels in other parts of the city to gradually rise throughout the day. CNN correspondent David Mattingly live from the French Quarter Monday night, as other parts of the city were filling up—some slowly, some quickly—reported that residents planned to do a quick clean-up so that people could come downtown to celebrate the upcoming Labor Day weekend.³⁶

New Orleans Spared?

Live reporting came to an end late Sunday evening, as Katrina made landfall near the mouth of the Mississippi around 6 am Monday morning. While there were

³⁵ This despite pre-storm reports that an estimated 100,000 people lacked the means to evacuate the city on their own. See Mary Foster, "Gulf Coast Braces for Storm's Impact; Katrina Gaining Strength over Ocean," *The Washington Post*, August 28, 2005, A15.

³⁶ David Mattingly, *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, Monday, August 29, 2005.

momentary glimpses of the strength of the wind outside hotels, the storm itself mostly defied witnessing in the present. In the days, weeks, and years after the storm, residents who lived through it recounted their individual experiences—what happened to them and their families, what they saw and heard and how they felt. Those who waited out the storm at the Superdome described the sound of torrential rain and wind and the eerie metallic sounds of the roof as it was being peeled away. Video footage taken from inside the darkened Superdome retrospectively provided viewers a sense of what it was like to be there.

Immediately following the storm, barriers to witnessing led to the insertion in broadcast news programs of longer thematic pieces. On Monday, the short space of time between the waning of the storm and scheduled airtime led *ABC World News Tonight* to focus its regular “A Closer Look” segment on the global impact of Katrina—calculating the daily costs of oil production and refining capacity, and the likely impact on fuel costs, the price of commodities and the impact on the market. In addition to a segment on the economic impact, *NBC Nightly News* did its “In Depth” segment on a retrospective account tracing Katrina’s gradual development over the weekend into a Category 4 storm.³⁷ While Katrina occupied a significant portion of evening news broadcasts on Monday, it did not monopolize them until revelations of levee breaches and extensive flooding in New Orleans on Tuesday. Radar images of Katrina gradually dissipating as it continued its northeasterly path into Tennessee reinforced a sense of the urgency of the immediate past, marking a moment that had come and gone, and in hindsight suggesting the beginning of a new cycle of impending immediacy—the calm prior to the “storm after the storm.”

Monday was marked by confusion, a lack of information, and a guarded sense of optimism from reporters in New Orleans. Immediate witnessing of the damage in various parts of the city and throughout the region was impeded by debris, downed trees and power lines, obstructed roads, flooding, and the near total collapse of communication infrastructure due to downed cell towers. Reporters on the ground in the city were limited

³⁷ The following day’s “In Depth” segment, rather than a thematic piece, would be focused on the present looting taking place in the city.

by their own local perspectives. Those who waited out the storm further inland (many, including Anderson Cooper were in Baton Rouge) had to wait for winds to die down before making the drive back to the coastal areas.³⁸ The progress of responders and reporters in spreading out on the ground was further impeded by nightfall as electricity was out throughout the region.

At 12:58 PM ET on Monday afternoon, an *ABC News* Special Report featuring Jeffrey Kofman live in New Orleans on Canal Street reported that “a levee breached in the downtown area,” but concluded that “it could have been much worse.”³⁹ Other reporting throughout the day suggested unconfirmed rumors and reports of a levee breach, but it remained unclear at first what a levee breach would in fact mean for the city. According to Brinkley, FEMA received reports of the Industrial Canal breach around noon and confirmed the breach and the flooding of the Ninth Ward by 5:00 PM. Through various barriers to movement and breakdowns in communication, news of the breach did not reach the White House until around midnight.⁴⁰ National news programs continued on Monday evening to report what had been the day’s tentative consensus culled primarily from weather maps—that Katrina had jogged to the east at the last moment, sparing New Orleans a direct hit. This would lead to an early focus on Mississippi and Alabama—declared ‘Ground Zero’—which accordingly took a harder hit than expected.

On *ABC World News Tonight*, at 6:30 PM ET Charles Gibson in New York followed suit reporting that New Orleans avoided “the kind of direct hit that residents have worried about and feared for years.”⁴¹ In a live report, Jeffrey Kofman revised his earlier statement arguing that the waters “*tried* to breach the levees.” What had earlier in

³⁸ The drive from Baton Rouge led to many reports on Monday live from “somewhere east of Baton Rouge.” Cooper reporting Monday night from Meridian, Mississippi admitted that little was presently known, that he remained on the periphery of the disaster area, and that Meridian was in fact a location that residents in the flood zone areas had gone to evacuate.

³⁹ Jeffrey Kofman, *ABC News Special Report*, Monday, Aug. 29, 2005.

⁴⁰ Douglas Brinkley, *The Great Deluge*;

⁴¹ Charles Gibson, *ABC World News Tonight*, Monday, August 29, 2005. On *NBC Nightly News*, Brian Williams echoed this sentiment from the Superdome.

the day been “a levee breached in the downtown area,” was now specified as somewhere along “the Industrial Canal that connects to the Mississippi, the waters overflowed, cascading into the streets. But mostly, the levees held. It was simply the volume of rain that left many areas underwater.”⁴² Echoing Gibson in New York, Kofman confirmed from the French Quarter that while Katrina “has given New Orleans a terrible thrashing, and it is going to take a lot of time and a lot of money to put the city back together again....that said, this was not the apocalyptic hurricane that so many had feared.”⁴³

Later Monday night on *Nightline*, Ted Koppel reported the “Big Easy is spared the total catastrophe it’s feared for so long. But it’s still a catastrophe.” J.T. Alpaugh, a camera operator with a private helicopter service working with FEMA, described tens of thousands of houses underwater up to the eaves mostly to the north and west of downtown and described in detail rooftop rescues by the Coast Guard. Despite the view, he did not mention the 17th Street and London Avenue Canal breaches that had occurred earlier that morning contributing to much of the flooding. While Alpaugh provided a sense of the broad scope of the damage in New Orleans, he was unable to specifically identify what neighborhoods were underwater. Additionally, his aerial tour only provided a partial view of the city—to the north and west. He did not mention or confirm the rumored breaches in the Industrial Canal to the east of downtown that had been flooding St. Bernard Parish and the Ninth Ward since early morning. Alpaugh’s focus on downtown led to an inordinate amount of time on what perhaps seemed critical at the time, the wind damage to the Hyatt Regency and the roof of the Superdome—both of which would emerge as peripheral as the larger picture of the city developed.

Following Alpaugh, FEMA director Michael Brown, in a live interview, confirmed that he was unaware of any levee breaches, while in a later prerecorded segment in the same broadcast, correspondent John Donovan again reported that at least one of the levees “burst.”⁴⁴ When Ted Koppel asked Michael Brown if Mississippi and Alabama had received less damage than New Orleans, he responded:

⁴² Jeffery Kofman, *ABC World News Tonight*, Monday, August 29, 2005.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

No. And in fact, what happened - believe it or not, I think New Orleans is the one that got off easy because Katrina moved to the east 30 or 45 miles. And that prevented what we would have seen had it hit the bull's eye. And that is widespread flooding, breeches of all of the levees. And you would have seen downtown inundated also.⁴⁵

Alpaugh's report and the accompanying aerial video showing widespread flooding in at least a portion of the city did not sit well with the day's headline and Brown's assessment that the city had been spared. As we now know, all of the levee breaches occurred before noon on Monday.⁴⁶ But the premature assessments of what would be 'ground zero,' as well as the retrospective positioning of the news, did the work of announcing the end of the disaster. The headline structure of the news, the 'broad strokes' of the day, while providing a framework for understanding and contextualizing what had happened also signaled the end of the happening. The city continued to fill up through the night and by morning, reporters downtown finally discovered firsthand how widespread the flooding in fact was.

Aaron Brown began the second hour of *CNN NewsNight*, as he usually did, with a replay of the same pre-recorded introduction that led the first hour. But on Monday, this routine led to a moment of dissonance as new developments were reported by CNN correspondent Jeanne Meserve. Meserve and her crew encountered extensive flooding in an area identified with help from locals as Edgewood Park, a neighborhood of Gentilly, north of the French Quarter and west of the Industrial Canal. Meserve was one of the first to reveal the humanitarian crisis still unfolding, in this case, in a poor neighborhood of "very humble homes."⁴⁷ This piece is a remarkable turning point in the process of witnessing Katrina.

⁴⁴ John Donovan, *ABC World News Tonight*, Monday, August 29, 2005.

⁴⁵ Michael Brown, *ABC Nightline with Ted Koppel*, Monday, August 29, 2005.

⁴⁶ Even though Aaron Brown on *CNN NewsNight* on Tuesday would report that the levee breaches had occurred Monday night.

⁴⁷ Jeanne Meserve, *CNN NewsNight*, Monday, August 29, 2005.

It's been horrible. As I left tonight, darkness...had fallen. And you can hear people yelling for help. You can hear the dogs yelping, all of them stranded, all of them hoping someone will come.

But for tonight, they've had to suspend the rescue efforts. It's just too hazardous for them to be out on the boats. There are electrical lines that are still alive. There are gas lines that are still spewing gas. There are cars that are submerged. There are other large objects. The boats can't operate. So they had to...leave those people in the homes.

We watched...some of them come in. They were in horrible shape, some of them. We watched one woman whose leg had been severed. Mark Biello, one of our cameramen, went out in one of the boats to help shoot....He saw bodies....Dogs wrapped in electrical lines who were still alive that were being electrocuted.⁴⁸

While it was clear to Meserve that water levels were slowly rising, she could not confirm if this was consistent everywhere or only true of some neighborhoods. While she personally observed water levels up to the eaves of houses, the rescue workers she spoke with reported that conditions were much worse in the Ninth Ward, where bodies had been sighted and “the houses were covered to their rooftops.”⁴⁹ Without confirming a levee breach, the accounts of residents seemed to describe precisely this.

[Residents] told me that the water came up very suddenly on them. They said most of the storm had passed and what apparently was the storm surge came. Some...talked about seeing a little water on their floor, going to the front door, seeing a lot of water, going to the back door, seeing more...water, and then barely having time to get up the stairs. One man I talked to was barefoot. He hadn't had time to put on shoes. Another woman was in her housedress and flip-flops.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Meserve revealed critical information that was not yet made available by Jeffrey Kofman's view from the French Quarter, Brian Williams' view from the Superdome, J. T. Alpaugh's aerial view of downtown and Lakeview, Mayor Nagin's view from the Hyatt Regency or Governor Blanco's view from the "command center" in Baton Rouge. For the first time it was reported that a large number of people remained in their homes, that the water, at least near the Industrial Canal, appeared to be continuing to rise, and that many people trapped in their attics risked drowning since rescue efforts could not continue through the night. Meserve provided audiences with a renewed sense of immediacy, an image of what was continuing to transpire in an unidentified working-class neighborhood, as well as perhaps a sense of the scope of the crisis: A fire captain interviewed said he discovered 75 people in need of rescue, including children, in ten square blocks of a residential area.⁵¹ Foreshadowing the crisis of residents stranded in the city, Meserve reported that rescue efforts were reduced to merely getting people to dry land.

Aaron Brown struggled to reconcile this new information with what had been the guiding narrative of the broadcast and the day—that New Orleans had "dodged a bullet," that the "levees mostly held" and that the reported flooding was primarily due to the volume of rain. Indeed, after Meserve's report, Brown reflected, "The last eight or ten minutes kind of takes your breath away, doesn't it? I was going to say the worst of Katrina is over. I'm not sure, in fact, that we can say that. What we can say is the worst of the weather is over. But what remains, we are just beginning now, I think, to understand."⁵² Around the same time, after a full day of reports on the ground and statements from officials confirming that New Orleans had avoided the worst, Ted Koppel reflected, "We in the media tend to view major hurricanes in three phases. The 'get out of town it's coming and it could be a disaster' phase. The 'gee, it's not as bad as it could have been phase.' And then, usually by the cold light of day, the 'it's going to

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Aaron Brown, *CNN NewsNight*, Monday, August 29, 2005.

take months to recover from all of this' phase. We are at the moment transitioning into phase three."⁵³

These premature assessments had become so powerful that they structured the narrative of Katrina and undermined visual evidence to the contrary for nearly 24 hours after the storm. On NBC's *Today Show* on Tuesday morning, Governor Blanco of Louisiana was interviewed live from the command center in Baton Rouge where state and federal officials were monitoring developments on the ground. Blanco confirmed they were getting reports of what Jeffrey Kofman had first reported nearly 24 hours ago—the flooding to the east, near the Orleans and St. Bernard Parish line. As the *Times-Picayune* was reporting canal breaches and widespread flooding yesterday in Lakeview and elsewhere in the city, and residents were waking up to massive flooding as the city had continued to fill up overnight, Matt Lauer reaffirmed the commonsense of yesterday: “The headline seems to be that while the people in New Orleans are getting battered, they have avoided the worst-case scenario from Hurricane Katrina, at least up to this point, although again, they’re facing some nasty weather.”⁵⁴ Still unaware that Katrina was, among hurricanes, a special case, Lauer’s co-host added that additionally the headline would be the threat to Tennessee and other states still in Katrina’s path as it weakened to a tropical storm.⁵⁵

Monday night marked the beginning of the reporting of a developing crisis in the city that continued until Saturday (9/3), when the federal government arrived in force and the Superdome, the Convention Center, and the major hospitals were finally evacuated. Throughout the week, as journalists made their way into the disaster area, new spaces were discovered where newsworthy suffering was unfolding or where a picture of past suffering could be reconstructed from the evidence left behind. The process of witnessing was refined over the course of the week according to axes of breadth and depth. Spatially, the full scope of Katrina’s destruction was mediated through aerial photographs. On

⁵³ Ted Koppel, *ABC Nightline*, Monday, August 29, 2005.

⁵⁴ Matt Lauer, *The Today Show on NBC*, Tuesday, August 30, 2005.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Tuesday, broadcasters showed some of the first views from above of the devastation in Biloxi and other areas of Mississippi.⁵⁶ Soon after, viewers saw the images of the Ninth Ward, the subsequent flooding downtown, and the photos of the levee breaches, visually verifying by mid-week that in fact 80% of the city was likely underwater.

As the days wore on, journalists on the ground did the slow work of uncovering and piecing together the local narratives and personal stories that would come to shape understandings and memories of Katrina. In doing so, reporters improvised strategies to bring together the time and space of the victims of the storm and distant viewers in their homes. For example, on Tuesday, Brian Williams contextualized a story on looting in New Orleans by inviting the viewer to imagine herself there in the same time and space: “Life here in New Orleans these days, if you want to come close to imagining it, take one of your average days, say nothing of 48 hours, and then take away air-conditioning, power, electric lights, food, gasoline, and fresh water and you’ll come close. And we saw that frustration spill out into the open today.”⁵⁷ Similarly on Tuesday reporter Ed Reams described to Aaron Brown what it was like to be in the Superdome through the storm:

Things were fine there until Katrina started ripping off the membrane of the top and also started peeling away part of the roof. That’s when the electricity went out and then it started literally raining inside the Superdome. After that, water stopped running. The sewer system is backed up. And it was extremely humid inside, if you can imagine being inside a place that is already wet from that falling rain and then with all the people inside.

So, if this goes on for a couple of days, you can imagine, people are getting to the end of their rope. The tensions are starting to rise. And with no word on what is going on outside, no access to radio or TV...no word on their loved ones or their property, you can imagine, people are pretty anxious inside the Superdome right now.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ J.T. Alpaugh, *ABC Nightline with Ted Koppel*, Tuesday, August 30, 2005.

⁵⁷ Brian Williams, *NBC Nightly News*, Tuesday, August 30, 2005.

⁵⁸ Aaron Brown, *CNN NewsNight*, Tuesday, August 30, 2005.

As time went on, the misery of being there was often communicated by reference to the smell—the bodies decomposing in the 90 plus degree heat; the fetid floodwaters described as a “toxic gumbo” of oil, industrial and household chemicals, human and animal waste, that eventually led to severe skin irritations and infections; the smell that was unlike anything else and would come to define, in part, the memory of the Superdome for those detained there. Day after day, residents became increasingly vulnerable to injury from debris, dehydration from exposure and a lack of water, disease from decomposing corpses and waterborne illnesses, and long term health problems from exposure to lead, petroleum and other chemicals. Health conditions grew increasingly critical from a lack of medication and proper treatment.

As the week wore on in New Orleans, new spaces of suffering were uncovered. A focus beginning Wednesday (8/31) was the I-10 overpass—a stretch of high ground where residents had either been left by rescuers or had gathered on their own, without food, water, shelter or medical help, awaiting transportation out of the city. All week there remained the Superdome, described as a “festering sore,” where water, military rations, and medical care were on short supply. As the population there gradually increased, rumors of violence ultimately convinced national news organizations to pull out and cease documenting the suffering there. Indeed on Thursday (9/1), Brian Williams left the Superdome over safety concerns and introduced *NBC Nightly News* from the nearby suburb of Metairie.⁵⁹ Another space of suffering brought into national focus was Charity Hospital where the first floor flooded and doctors and nurses continued to hand ventilate critically ill patients after generators failed. While the suffering at Charity was not directly witnessed by news cameras as it happened, after the evacuation, reporters provided photographs, video tours, and first-hand accounts from the doctors there as evidence.

On Thursday (9/1), the news media discovered tens of thousands of residents gathered in front of the Morial Convention Center, within minutes of the Superdome, again without food, water, or medical care. Rumors of violence at the Convention Center

⁵⁹ Brian Williams, “Survivors in New Orleans Desperate for Supplies and Waiting for Evacuation,” *NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams*, Thursday, September 1, 2005.

were later confirmed when it was revealed that four mutilated bodies were discovered inside. Michael Brown famously admitted that FEMA was not aware of the residents at the Convention Center until reporters had happened upon them.⁶⁰ The discovery of new centers of suffering led to a privileged moment of public scrutiny while former spaces of urgency receded into the background. For example, on Thursday (9/1), the crisis at the Superdome had to compete for time with the Convention Center, the I-10 overpass, various hospitals in the region, the FEMA triage center at Louis Armstrong International Airport, and the rest of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, not to mention the public relations antics unfolding in Washington.

As the weeks wore on, new spaces formerly on the periphery became centers of unfolding action. Areas that escaped substantial flooding, including the French Quarter, Uptown and the Garden District became theaters of resistance to government's forced evacuations. Former centers of suffering, both witnessed and unwitnessed, became fleeting monuments—moments for retrospective news accounts reclaiming the urgency of the moment through the evidence left behind—Anderson Cooper's pilgrimage to the trashed-out Superdome after the evacuation; the spray-painted X left by rescue workers on formerly flooded houses that when properly decoded, provided a record of what was found there, the images from inside Charity Hospital, Memorial Medical Center, and St. Rita's Nursing Home. Finally, new centers emerged as families separated by the storm and the response were reunited and the debates over provision unfolded in Houston, Baton Rouge, Atlanta and elsewhere.

After New Orleans was evacuated, during the second and third week of reporting, *CNN NewsNight* played recordings of 9-1-1 calls received during the storm that authorities were unable to respond to. These calls revisit the immediacy, fear and helplessness of the moment, constructing for viewers a more intimate perspective by which they might re-experience the storm. Much like the reporting of 9/11, as information was accumulated, it was integrated in retrospective news reports revisiting critical moments of the disaster to become part of the collective memory of the

⁶⁰ "FEMA Director Michael Brown Discusses Relief Efforts in Hurricane Zone," *NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams*, Thursday, September 1, 2005.

experience. Still photos and montages were another way of drawing attention and inviting reflection on a particular space and moment. Aaron Brown often concluded broadcasts with still photos that worked to isolate or privilege a particular moment in the historic present from the otherwise steady blur of images and stories of suffering unfolding simultaneously in various sites. Reflecting on this, Brown argued, “Hurricanes are all about motion in many respects—violent motion, an ideal subject for video. But as we showed you with that picture, the still photo of the mother and child, sometimes a still can capture the event and the impact of the event as powerfully as video can.”⁶¹ Unlike video, which particularly in the context of a news program communicates a sense of liveness and presence, still photos capture a moment that is already past. They invite reflection. While they document, photos that circulate publicly are also imagined to contain meaning, to communicate something beyond what is there, in a way that is not typically expected of video. Still photos have an intention. Photos were used in Katrina reporting as historical evidence, as a means of referencing shared cultural narratives, and as a way of commemorating what is imagined to be revealed as essentially human in the midst of crisis.

News Media of the Center and Witnessing

As Hurricane Katrina churned roughly six hours away from landfall off the eastern coast of Louisiana, Aaron Brown and correspondent Miles O’ Brien reflected on the news media’s role in drawing public attention to spaces of present suffering. For Brown, while the news media are there when the storm hits, “the next day, the sun comes out and we tend to pick up and leave. The people who stay behind...have to pick up their lives, and a storm like this could take not days, but weeks, and potentially months.”⁶² Pointing to the ongoing work of rebuilding after Hurricane Andrew in 1992, O’Brien concurred, “In some sense when the media is there, the Red Cross is there, the focus of

⁶¹ Aaron Brown, *CNN NewsNight*, Tuesday, August 30, 2005.

⁶² Aaron Brown, *CNN Sunday Night with Aaron Brown*, Sunday, August 28, 2005.

the nation is on a place like this. In some sense it's easier for people. Eventually we go away and the hardships continue for many months to come."⁶³

This discussion brings into focus the vanishing point at which formerly newsworthy spectacles of suffering are no longer newsworthy. In finding the end of a mediated crisis, two possibilities emerge—either the suffering itself is brought to an end (however this is determined), or the will to continue to bear witness to it ends (it is no longer spectacular suffering, but banal, everyday suffering). In either case, the end of the mediating of a crisis, like the beginning, is unclear; its borders are uneven and contested. For most disasters, there is an initial politics of defining it and determining that it is in fact a crisis (a local, national, or international crisis depending on who it impacts and who, if anyone, is responsible), as well as a politics of determining when the crisis is no longer a crisis, or no longer newsworthy. Thus, at each end, there are existential uncertainties that emerge as a result of communication over distance. The waning of national attention and interest on the victims of Katrina produces uncertainties. Is the crisis in fact over? What new abuses and injustices are unfolding now that the national spotlight is elsewhere? Since Katrina was defined, in part, as a racial and class injustice, evaluative uncertainties developed as well. As the weeks passed, was the news media's continuing focus on the poor and black victims of Katrina excessive and revealing of a political agenda?⁶⁴ Did this focus detract from the suffering of others?

Local media very often lack the power to make the rights and concerns of the readers and viewers they serve a matter of national attention. Before Katrina, the *Times-Picayune* and other local news agencies were particularly vigilant in making the vulnerability of the city a matter of persistent and recurring newsworthiness, producing numerous investigations on the effects of coastal development, the politics of levee construction and maintenance, the erosion of wetlands, and the potential impact of climate change on the intensity and regularity of hurricanes as they are fed by warmer water temperatures in the Gulf. Indeed, in 2002, the *Times-Picayune* ran a week-long five-part series on what would happen if a major storm hit New Orleans. While this work

⁶³ Miles O'Brien, *CNN Sunday Night with Aaron Brown*, Sunday, August 28, 2005.

⁶⁴ See Howard Kurtz, *CNN Reliable Sources*,

emerged from local concerns and stimulated a great deal of local debate, it failed to raise the levees and the vulnerability of the city to the level of a national problem. The response from President Bush and Congress was to substantially underfund levee projects, to fail to act on climate change, and to continue to allow development in wetlands under the controversial ‘No Net Loss’ plan.⁶⁵

After the storm, local media continued to provide information to residents in the disaster area. Once the *Times-Picayune* resumed printing, the newspaper became a valuable resource for circulating information. WWL radio continued to broadcast all week long, reporting on local conditions, and famously carrying Mayor Nagin’s angry call to the federal government to act on Thursday.⁶⁶ In the years after the storm, local media has continued to monitor all aspects of the recovery, from improprieties in distributing federal block grants in Louisiana under the Road Home program to debates over the future of public housing in New Orleans. Thus it is critical to examine as well the witnessing and advocacy work of local media both before and after the storm—work that continues presently. While the national news media inevitably move on, local media continue the work of witnessing and advocating on behalf of their readers and viewers.

In the years since Katrina, the national news media have returned periodically to the Gulf Coast during Mardi Gras and on the various anniversaries of the storm to again witness the slow pace of rebuilding in poor neighborhoods and to expose this or that example of bureaucracy, corruption, or abuse. Despite this lack of a sustained sense of urgency, it remains that suffering allowed to persist constitutes an injustice. As O’Brien argues with respect to the victims of Andrew, work remains to be done and local attention inevitably is not enough. The focus of the nation ideally should persist for a time well beyond the initial crisis. But it is a fundamental aspect of the news that competing scenes of suffering are always unfolding elsewhere. It is likely inevitable that injustices will

⁶⁵ The law permits commercial development in wetland areas provided the loss is offset with new or restored wetlands. See Michael Weisskopf, “EPA Plans ‘No Net Loss’ of Wetlands; Developers, Farmers to Be Restricted,” *The Washington Post*, January 19, 1989.

⁶⁶ See Douglas Brinkley, *The Great Deluge*; Judith Sylvester, *The Media and Hurricanes Katrina and Rita: Lost and Found*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

persist without a national spotlight on spaces of human suffering and vulnerability, and thus, without the national news media continually reproducing a will to commit to action over time.

Chapter III

Finding an Anti-Racism of the Center: From the ‘Racist Media’ to the ‘Race-Baiting Media’ in Katrina Reporting

Katrina, as the story goes, exposed the persisting injustices of racism and poverty in the U.S., as victims of the storm were recast as victims of their own government. As conditions on the ground grew worse, the initial frames of looting and violence gave way to a competing frame that *most* of the victims of Katrina were rightly victims and that they deserved immediate care rather than ongoing neglect and suspicion. On Thursday, September 1, a dominant ethos developed within central media that one should properly feel pity for the suffering victims and denounce all levels of government (especially federal government) for failing to effectively respond and thereby intensifying the crisis. This ethical alignment of central media, a new understanding of Katrina as an injustice rather than simply a misfortune, still defines our collective memory of that week. What was contested then, and remains so, is how to understand the nature of the injustice. One interpretation was that it was less a systemic problem of social inequality and neglect than one resulting from the incompetence of a few who happened to be in positions of power in government. Some, like Adolph Reed Jr. writing in *The Nation*, pointed to the significance of race as it continues to structure opportunities and patterns of exploitation and the persistence of racism as it invisibly underwrites support for the neoliberal dismantling of the welfare state.¹ For many others, it was evidence confirming the inevitable bureaucratic violence that ensues when government is responsible for the care of citizens, no matter who they are.² A variant of this argument, endorsed by Jonah

¹ Adolph Reed Jr., “Undone by Neoliberalism: New Orleans was Decimated by an Ideological Program, Not a Storm,” *The Nation*, 283 8, September 18, 2006.

² See for example Deroy Murdock, “Bumblers not Bigots,” *The National Review Online*, Wednesday, September 7, 2005.

Goldberg in *The National Review*, was that the injustice was the continuing legacy of the welfare state as it had undermined black families.³ For many, the injustice of Katrina was colorblind, but perhaps not class-blind. The interpretation finally adopted by President Bush was that Katrina's injustice—notice the past tense of the verb—“has roots in a history of racial discrimination, which cut off generations from the opportunity of America.”⁴

From Wednesday, August 31 through Friday, September 2, the spectacle of mostly poor, black suffering in New Orleans confirmed for most onlookers (including many of the reporters themselves) that Katrina had differentially impacted poor, black people, and that the delay in the federal response was a further injustice. That this became the dominant interpretation of Katrina among professional journalists speaking for the center and upholding the rule of objectivity is remarkable for several reasons. First, interpreting the spectacle as evidence of government's indifference to poor, black people is to take a political position, and thus, to deviate from the political center. Second, as Frank Durham has argued, it is remarkable because the mainstream news media tend to support the legitimacy of official interpretations during moments of crisis.⁵ Throughout the crisis, President Bush insisted that “the storm did not discriminate and neither would the recovery”—a statement that not only denied the injustices of the present, but past and likely future injustices as well.⁶

The politics of pity then was initially shaped by this distance between mainstream news media interpretations and official assessments of the crisis, what Durham has described as a “decentered media.”⁷ The aim of this chapter is to better understand how

³ Jonah Goldberg, “About that ‘National Conversation,’” *The National Review Online*, Friday, September 9, 2005.

⁴ George W. Bush, “Address to the Nation on Hurricane Katrina Recovery from New Orleans, Louisiana,” Thursday, September 15, 2005.

⁵ Frank Durham, “Media Ritual in Catastrophic Time: The Populist Turn in Television Coverage of Hurricane Katrina,” *Journalism*, 9 (2008): 95-116.

⁶ George W. Bush, “Remarks on the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and an Exchange with Reporters in New Orleans, Louisiana,” Monday, September 12, 2005.

⁷ *Ibid.*

this decentering on matters of race came about and how, in time, a recentering was achieved that reconciled government and media interpretations without disrupting relationships of power. Following Boltanski, I will show how this politics of pity, encompassing both a decentering and a recentering, was an outcome of *evaluative* uncertainties over which unfortunates matter, *existential* uncertainties in assigning the roles of victim, perpetrator, and benefactor, and uncertainties over the *motivations* of those who accuse and those who do not accuse, but side with a benefactor. In terms of which unfortunates matter, debates in the news centered on the relevance or irrelevance of race and class, which was shaped in part by difficulties in directly witnessing racism. In assigning the roles, debates centered over whether to define the residents of New Orleans remaining in the city as victims or perpetrators and likewise, whether to define government as a benefactor or a perpetrator. With respect to uncertainties over the motivations of those who accuse, charges of racism and government indifference were criticized as attempts by the left to gain politically and to create internal divisiveness instead of (colorblind) national unity. Interestingly, there were no criticisms of those who denied the relevance of race by accusing accusers.

I argue that we can better understand the shifting terrain of struggles over racial justice by analyzing the news media as a contested space in which the racial spectacle of Katrina was assimilated through the negotiation of a new *anti-racism of the center*. Despite the centrality of race and racism to understanding Katrina, and despite the news media's shift from a non-racial (regarded by some critics as implicitly racist) positioning to a race-conscious and seemingly anti-racist (but still racist) positioning, both colorblind rhetorics and arguments advocating 'free markets' as social provision persisted as legitimate precisely because they are not widely recognized as racisms—indeed they pose as anti-racisms. Finally, I argue that mainstream media discussions of New Orleans culture tended to emphasize sameness and post-racial identification, and thus undermined culture as a viable ground for articulating a vision of racial justice. I conclude by outlining the limitations of the news media of the center in dealing with race and its complicity in reproducing racisms after Katrina.

Pairing Katrina with Race

Poverty preceded racism in explaining why many had remained in the city despite a mandatory evacuation. Before the storm, reporters observed that those waiting to enter the Superdome were mostly the city's poor.⁸ Elsewhere, journalists legitimately expressed their concerns that those who remained were foolishly defying evacuation orders and endangering the lives of responders who must rescue them. On Tuesday, August 30, reporters bearing witness to the looting downtown remained quiet on Katrina's racial dimensions. Police officers stood by helplessly, unable to respond, since precincts and jails had flooded. While the residents interviewed offered that they were merely finding food and water, fresh clothes, medical supplies, or a pair of shoes to protect their feet from debris, there was little legitimacy to the sense that Monday or Tuesday's looting was about survival. Wednesday evening, Aaron Brown concluded from a phone interview with a Jefferson Parish official that most of the looting taking place was "just crime...inexcusable, appalling crime."⁹

On Wednesday, August 31, exaggerated and unconfirmed rumors of violence continued to be circulated by the media—murders, fights, and reports of sexual assault at the Superdome and rumors of roving armed gangs in New Orleans that had police 'outgunned.' While they were themselves victims, overwhelmed, and under sustained scrutiny by the national media, city police and parish officials did little early on to discredit the racialized myths of opportunistic violence and crime leeching into the suburbs that had by then become one of the dominant news frames for understanding Katrina. Scenes of looting in New Orleans were posed in contrast to what was reportedly taking place in the more rural, coastal areas of Mississippi and Alabama. Here residents, many of them white and equally abandoned, expressed grief and a resolve to rebuild with

⁸ Jeffrey Kofman, "Hurricane Katrina Category Five Storm to Hit New Orleans," *ABC World News Tonight*, Sunday, August 28, 2005.

⁹ *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, Wednesday, August 31, 2005, Interview with Deano Bonano, Jefferson Parish Chief of Emergency Operations. Bonano confirms, "most of what we're seeing are people breaking in homes and stores to get jewelry, TVs, et cetera."

or without government's help.¹⁰ While looting occurred in rural areas, it largely went unreported.¹¹ Wednesday morning (8/31), President Bush gave his first public address from Washington explaining the severity of the crisis and confirming that the full resources of the federal government had been mobilized. That afternoon, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin ordered city police to suspend search and rescue efforts in order to deal with looting and to restore order as reports of shots fired suspended evacuation efforts at the Superdome.¹²

While the images of looting in New Orleans no doubt communicated racialized meanings,¹³ the pressure to recognize race and to speak to questions of racism only began to be felt on Wednesday (8/31). That day, a Yahoo! News article carried an Agence France Presse (AFP) photo of white residents wading through floodwaters described in the caption as "finding" food with an Associated Press (AP) photo of black residents described as "looting." While there was no intention on the part of Yahoo! News to raise the question of the media's racism, criticism of the racial implications of the juxtaposition immediately went viral, prompting "a flurry of blog entries, emails and calls" to Yahoo! News, the AP, and AFP.¹⁴ As one person reportedly wrote the AP, "This is irresponsible

¹⁰ See for example Anderson Cooper's segments from Waveland, Mississippi, *Anderson Cooper 360 Degrees*, Thursday September 1, 2005, or Katherleen Koch's reporting from Bay St. Louis; *CNN NewsNight*, Tuesday, September 6, 2005.

¹¹ The emphasis on blacks looting might well be attributed to the implicit racial scripts of journalists and a sense of its special newsworthiness as social disorder news. Equally significant was the fact that the looting in New Orleans provided a convenient spectacle downtown in precisely the areas where national news had gathered to witness the aftermath. By contrast, the Mississippi coast is largely rural and its population is diffuse. Furthermore, large swathes of the Mississippi coast were completely destroyed.

¹² Robert D. McFadden and Ralph Blumenthal, "Bush Sees Long Recovery for New Orleans; 30,000 Troops in Largest U.S. Relief Effort," *The New York Times*, Thursday, September 1, 2005, A1.

¹³ A tremendous body of research has found powerful framing effects and the priming of implicit racial biases as a result of exposure to images and narratives of black criminality. See for example Donald R. Kinder and Lynn M. Sanders, *Divided By Color: Racial Politics and Democratic Ideals*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Tali Mendelberg, *The Race Card: Campaign Strategy, Implicit Messages, and the Norm of Equality*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, *News that Matters: Television and American Opinion*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

¹⁴ Jocelyn Noveck, "Looting or Finding? Language in Photo Captions Fuels Debate," Associated Press, September 2, 2005;

journalism and fuels the attitude that all African-Americans are looters.”¹⁵ Its pervasiveness on the web and its implications that the mainstream news media were circulating subtle racist messages made it a subject of discussion in the mainstream press.¹⁶

Increasing talk of racism on the web soon forced the media to take notice. On Thursday, the central news media very suddenly and dramatically recognized the racial dimensions of Katrina. CNN’s Jack Cafferty reported,

Despite the many angles of this tragedy...there is a great big elephant in the living room that the media seems content to ignore. That would be until now. Slate.com’s Jack Schafer wrote today in his column that television coverage has shied away from talking about race and class. Schafer says that we in the media are ignoring the fact that almost all of the victims in New Orleans are black and poor. And he’s right. Almost every person we’ve seen, from the families stranded on their rooftops waiting to be rescued, to the looters, to the people holed up in the Superdome, are black and poor.¹⁷

Likewise, the same day, Bob Faw of *NBC Nightly News* reported:

67 percent of New Orleans residents are black, and the uglier truth [*sic*] is that huge numbers of them are poor. Nearly 30 percent here live below the poverty line. Only a handful of large American cities have lower household incomes than New Orleans. For youngsters, it’s even worse. Only Mississippi next door has a higher child poverty rate than Louisiana. Half of all children here, say estimates, live in poverty. It was bad before Katrina. Most of the poor, read black, didn’t have insurance. Some needed to wait for government paychecks, due the first of the month today. Over 100,000 couldn’t leave because they didn’t have transportation. What they learned, what they’d know all along, is that disasters do not treat everyone alike.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid. See also Tania Ralli, “Who’s a Looter? In Storm’s Aftermath, Pictures Kick Up a Different Kind of Tempest,” *The New York Times*, Monday, September 5, 2005, C6.

¹⁷ Jack Cafferty, “Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina; New Orleans Mayor Pleads for Help; Race and Class Affecting the Crisis?” *CNN’s The Situation Room with Wolf Blitzer*, Thursday September 1, 2005.

That surviving is easier for whites, who have, than for blacks, who don't.¹⁸

As the “elephant in the living room” was revealed, conditions continued to deteriorate on the ground, exacerbated by the lack of a significant federal presence. Not far from the Superdome, the news media stumbled upon tens of thousands of mostly black residents stranded at the Morial Convention Center, many of whom were mistakenly told that FEMA had set up a shelter there. Just outside the Convention Center, reporters found two bodies covered in sheets that were immediately interpreted to signify federal neglect.¹⁹ The same day, in an interview with NBC’s Brian Williams, FEMA head Michael Brown admitted that he had only just learned about crowds stranded at the Convention Center by watching the news.²⁰ Mayor Nagin announced a “desperate SOS,” and in an interview Thursday night on a local radio broadcast, he roundly criticized Bush and FEMA, stating, “This is a national disaster. Get every doggone Greyhound bus line in the country and get their asses moving to New Orleans. They’re thinking small, man. And this is a major, major, major deal.”²¹ Echoing the consensus of Thursday, Ted Koppel observed, “to hear federal and local officials describing what is happening on the ground in New Orleans is to know that one group or the other is seriously out of touch or incapable of confronting the truth.”²²

On Friday, the federal government’s presence was finally felt in New Orleans as supply lines reached the center of the city and evacuations got underway. But the consensus that government’s failure to respond had cost lives was by now fully formed.

¹⁸ Bob Faw, “Hurricane Katrina Sheds Light on Class, Race and Misery,” *NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams*, Thursday, September 1, 2005.

¹⁹ See “Photographer Describes Life Inside the New Orleans Convention Center,” *NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams*, Thursday, September 1, 2005.

²⁰ “FEMA Director Michael Brown Discusses Relief Efforts in Hurricane Zone,” *NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams*, Thursday, September 1, 2005.

²¹ “Mayor to Feds: ‘Get Off Your Asses’” *CNN.com*, Friday, September 2, 2005, http://articles.cnn.com/2005-09-02/us/nagin.transcript_1_public-school-bus-drivers-new-orleans-nagin-major-deal?_s=PM:US

²² Ted Koppel, *ABC’s Nightline with Ted Koppel*, Thursday, September 1, 2005.

NBC Nightly News turned a critical eye on FEMA, arguing that since 9/11, an emphasis had been placed on terrorism rather than on preparing for natural disasters.²³ NBC's Martin Savidge asked, "If we can get troops into Iraq in 24 hours, why can't we get troops into...New Orleans, in less than five days."²⁴ Despite progress, evacuations of remaining patients and staff were stalled at Charity Hospital due to gunfire. The emphasis of live reporting on Friday shifted to FEMA's understaffed field hospital at Louis Armstrong International Airport where the violence of government care was on full display. President Bush's tour of the Gulf Coast on Friday led to further criticism as he congratulated Michael Brown for doing "a heckuva job" in Alabama, while mostly staying clear of New Orleans.

Following Thursday's tectonic shift to the visibility of race, news commentary on Friday connected the dots to a government that was indifferent to the plight of poor, black people.²⁵ Jesse Jackson, on the ground in the city, made news describing the I-10 overpass under which residents had gathered to avoid the elements and to wait for buses as recalling "the hull of a slave ship."²⁶ In Washington, Representative Elijah Cummings warned, "We cannot allow it to be said by history that the difference between those who lived and those who died...was nothing more than poverty, age, or skin color."²⁷ Later Friday night, rapper Kanye West went off-script live on NBC's *A Concert for Hurricane Relief*, referencing the "finding" vs. "looting" controversy, expressing his anger about the way "the media portrays us," and pointing to the long period of time elapsed without an

²³ "Government Focus Has Been Mostly on Preparing for Terrorist Attacks, not Natural Disasters," *NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams*, Friday, September 2, 2005. See also Jim Vandehei and Peter Barker, "Critics Say Bush Undercut New Orleans Flood Control," *The Washington Post*, Friday September 2, 2005, A16.

²⁴ Martin Savidge, "Reporters Carl Quintanilla and Martin Savidge Comment on Slow Government Response to Hurricane Victims," *NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams*, Friday, September 2, 2005.

²⁵ See for example, "Racism and Hurricane Katrina Survivors: Aid Slow for Black Victims in New Orleans," *ABC's Nightline with Ted Koppel*, Friday, September 2, 2005.

²⁶ Jesse Jackson, "Rescued New Orleans Citizens Left Stranded Underpass at Interstate 10," *ABC's Nightline with Ted Koppel*, Friday, September 2, 2005. According to this same piece, while Jackson was cheered by some, "others weren't buying it," implying that Jackson's tour was more about political posturing than alleviating suffering.

²⁷ Rep. Elijah Cummings, *ABC Nightline with Ted Koppel*, Friday, September 2, 2005.

effective federal response as evidence that “George Bush doesn’t care about black people.”²⁸ In the following days, a succession of public figures, including Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and former Presidents Bill Clinton and George H. W. Bush, appeared in the media to defend the President’s character, detailing his record of compassion and concern for the black community. Thus, beginning on Thursday (9/1) and Friday (9/2), the charge that the federal government’s inaction was an act of racism became a subject of sustained deliberation for the next two weeks.

In a span of four days, from Tuesday, August 30 to Friday, September 2, there was a reversal in the dominant news framing of Katrina, from a position of colorblindness with occasional references to the poverty of those remaining in New Orleans, to a sustained focus on Katrina’s racial and class dimensions. In part, the shift was necessary to explain the spectacle of black suffering, but it was spurred on by criticisms on the web that the news media’s colorblindness in that particular moment read as a racism. It is important to note however that in these discussions, a belief in the merits of colorblindness itself—that is, non-racialism as an anti-racist stance—was never criticized. Despite the momentary illegitimacy of non-racialism to explain Katrina, the Bush Administration continued to advocate colorblindness, arguing “the storm did not discriminate and neither would the recovery.”²⁹ Two more weeks passed before the President officially conceded that race and poverty had unjustly shaped outcomes in the wake of Katrina.³⁰ With this official concession and promises to address social inequalities in the recovery came a gradual decline in the newsworthiness of racism.

The Racism of Popular Anti-Racisms

While the reframing of Katrina seemed at first to create possibilities for examining and addressing racial inequalities, the news media’s emphasis on the politics

²⁸ Kanye West, *NBC’s A Concert for Hurricane Relief*, Friday, September 2, 2005.

²⁹ George W. Bush, “Remarks on the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and an Exchange with Reporters in New Orleans, Louisiana,” Monday, September 12, 2005.

³⁰ George W. Bush, “Address to the Nation on Hurricane Katrina Recovery from New Orleans, Louisiana,” Thursday, September 15, 2005.

of representing the victims and on the policing of officials suspected of being racist undermined a broader discussion. For example, scenes out of New Orleans were constantly compared by reporters to a ‘war zone,’ or as recalling a ‘Third World disaster area.’ As the unfolding spectacle of black criminality and suffering in the first days of the crisis was juxtaposed with colorblind talk, and an implicit refusal to directly deal with questions of racism, various politicians and commentators made news criticizing the media’s choice of images and language as implicitly racist, and as misrecognizing U.S. citizens as unwanted ‘refugees.’³¹ Afterwards, the term ‘refugees’ was largely but not entirely replaced by the term ‘evacuees.’

While the news media’s racism was implicit and operated on the level of representation, government’s racism was imagined as willed, a result of either, as Kanye West put it, active malice on the part of the Bush administration, or as Illinois Senator Barack Obama put it, a “general indifference” that was the same as “active malice.”³² While I do not want to minimize the importance of these discussions, it is problematic that these emphases came to monopolize and exhaust public debate. Charges of the racism of media representations, while apt, too often became fodder for critics who saw them as anecdotal or as mere politicking. For example, while CNN eventually adopted ‘evacuees’ in place of ‘refugees,’ Fox’s Shepard Smith persisted that they were in fact “refugees, mind you, refugees in the United States of America,” implicitly denying the charge that use of the term in this context was racist and refusing to submit to the forces of political correctness.³³ The Yahoo! News piece juxtaposing a white family reportedly “finding” food, with black people reportedly “looting,” while it stimulated considerable

³¹ In light of the controversy, CNN adopted the term ‘evacuees’ in place of ‘refugees.’ Anchors and correspondents in their own way clarified that their use of the term ‘refugees’ was not intended to racialize or Other the victims, but was rather a criticism of government. In a similar spirit, reporters would ask how a ‘third world’ scene of suffering like this could exist in the richest country in the world. Reflecting on the decline of the US, *NBC Nightly News* described Katrina as “the first time the Mexican military has crossed into the United States by land or by sea since 1846.” See *NBC Nightly News with John Siegenthaler*, Saturday, September 10, 2005. Reporting live from the field hospital at Louis Armstrong International Airport, correspondent David Mattingly reflected “this is not the American that I grew up in.” See *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, Thursday, September 1, 2005.

³² George F. Will, “A Poverty of Thought;” A27.

³³ Shepard Smith, *Fox Report with Shepard Smith*, Wednesday August 31, 2005. For a discussion denying that ‘refugees’ is a racist term, see “The O’Reilly Factor,” *Fox News Network*, Friday, September 2, 2005.

controversy, was likewise fairly easily contested as anecdotal. As a Yahoo! spokesperson argued, “We’ve explained that this was two separate news organizations, two separate photographers and two separate occasions. . . . Once people understand that, they’re no longer angry with us.”³⁴ As Jonah Goldberg in the *National Review* argued, the juxtaposition was “evidence of precisely nothing” and if anything, its evidence of “the racism of the French media.”³⁵ Thus, for some, there was no evidence to suggest that this type of implicit racism was representative of all media, or of any particular media outlet.

Likewise, the same is true for charges that the federal government’s inaction was motivated by racism. Jessie Jackson’s critique of government claiming that the I-10 underpass resembled the ‘hull of a slave ship,’ rightly implying that Katrina’s lineage can be traced to the legacy of old-style racism, was criticized by conservative voices in the media as liberal ‘race-baiting’ and political posturing, encouraging divisiveness at a time when the nation needed to pull together.³⁶ In investigating the subject of racism, the news media was rarely able to think beyond a conception of government officials motivated by racist sentiments to commit racist acts of neglect. At stake was the question of whether government officials were, as Deroy Murdock in the *National Review* saw it, “bigots” or just “bumblers.”³⁷ Thus, the weeklong spectacle of racial neglect notwithstanding, in nearly every case, accusations of racism collapsed under a burden of proof. For example, the news media criticized the Jefferson Parish Sheriff’s Department and Gretna City Police for preventing trapped residents on Thursday (9/1) and Friday (9/2) from escaping across the Mississippi River into the suburb of Gretna. According to witnesses, officers fired shots in the air to keep the crowd from advancing. Later on *CNN NewsNight*, Jefferson Parish Sheriff Harry Lee in an interview with Anderson Cooper denied charges of racism, arguing that the officers were simply doing their jobs protecting property in

³⁴ Jocelyn Noveck, “Looting or Finding?”

³⁵ Jonah Goldberg, “We’re Going West,” *The National Review Online*, Wednesday, September 7, 2005.

³⁶ Jesse Jackson, “Rescued New Orleans Citizens Left Stranded Underpass at Interstate 10,” *ABC’s Nightline with Ted Koppel*, Friday, September 2, 2005. According to the piece, while Jackson was cheered by some, “others weren’t buying it;” the implication being that rather than doing something to help, some saw Jackson’s presence as an attempt to somehow further his political career.

³⁷ Deroy Murdock, “Bumblers not Bigots,” *The National Review Online*, Wednesday, September 7, 2005.

Jefferson Parish, and that there was nothing the officers could do at the time to help.³⁸ According to Lee, when he arrived on the scene on Friday he was able to arrange for their transportation to the airport.

Another example centered on the town of Kenner in Jefferson Parish, a suburb on New Orleans' west side. The story was featured on two successive nights (9/18 and 9/19) on CNN. Police Chief Nick Congemi, a white man, alleged that city manager Cedric Floyd, who is black, had purposely abandoned a group of mostly Hispanic tenants of a large apartment complex and that his inaction was motivated by racism. According to Congemi, Floyd failed to arrange for temporary housing for tenants of the complex in an effort to force them out of Kenner. A lengthy exchange between the two men aired on CNN in which Floyd, identifying himself as a "minority," denied the charges, at which point Congemi charged him with class privilege, calling him a "rich minority."³⁹ While race clearly mattered, the central media's search for evidence so as to fit the requirements of live broadcasting, too often implied a 'post-racial' moral. For example, the preferred reading of the above case (of a black official being called a racist by a white official) must be that racism transcends the color line. Even while recognizing Katrina's racial dimensions, David Ignatius of the *Washington Post* observed, "It was wonderful to see the big picture on the front page of Thursday's *Post* that showed a white man carrying to safety a black man who couldn't walk. It was a message that we aren't prisoners of racial stereotypes."⁴⁰

The mere visibility of racism as a topic of debate was critical in managing the crisis of sensibilities after Katrina. That is, the ritual of accusations and taking sides at least made it *seem* that something approximating justice was happening. As these examples suggest, live broadcasting and commentary played a critical role in managing popular understandings of what racism is and how it was imagined to operate in the wake of Katrina. This is not to suggest that there was a lack of insightful analysis of the racial

³⁸ Anderson Cooper, *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, Tuesday, September 13, 2005.

³⁹ Nick Congemi, *CNN Sunday Night*, Sunday, September 18, 2005

⁴⁰ David Ignatius, "Time to Mend the Safety Net," *The Washington Post*, September 2, 2005, A29.

dimensions of Katrina in the central media—in the editorial pages of the *New York Times* or in the *Nation*. But when representatives of the Left and Right met to deliberate on Fox or CNN, or when reporters pressed officials, the discussion could nearly always be distilled to ‘bumblers’ vs. ‘bigots’ and the burden of proof. While the central news media legitimated racism as a subject worthy of serious consideration, it played an equally critical role in limiting these discussions, ultimately enabling prevailing logics and relationships of power to persist.

Colorblindness and Class as Depoliticizing Rhetorics

Critical race scholars have argued that rhetorics of colorblindness reassert white privilege through the privatization and depoliticization of difference.⁴¹ As Jodi Melamed has argued, colorblindness, as a neoliberal appropriation of the cosmopolitanism once synonymous with a progressive multiculturalism, obscures the racialized logics of global neoliberal capitalism.⁴² Thus, colorblindness must be seen properly as a powerful rhetoric of racial neoliberalism, what David Theo Goldberg has aptly described as “a racism without racism.”⁴³ Despite that most voices from the left saw racism and poverty as interconnected, popular political discussion centered on whether the inequalities brought to the fore by Katrina should rightly be attributed to race or to class. By arguing for class consciousness, conservative critics were able to salvage the legitimacy of colorblindness.

⁴¹ See for example Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, “‘New Racism,’ Color-Blind Racism, and the Future of Whiteness in America,” In *White Out: The Continuing Significance of Racism*, edited by Ashley W. Doane and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 271-84. Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek, “Whiteness as a Strategic Rhetoric,” In *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity*, edited by Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith N. Martin, (London: Sage, 1999), 87-106; Charles A. Gallagher, “Colorblind Privilege: The Social and Political Functions of Erasing the Color Line in Post Race America,” *Race, Gender and Class* 10 (2003): 22; Lisa A. Flores, Dreama G. Moon and Thomas K. Nakayama, “Dynamic Rhetorics of Race: California’s Racial Privacy Initiative and the Shifting Grounds of Racial Politics,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 3 (2006): 181-201.

⁴² Jodi Melamed, “The Spirit of Neoliberalism: From Racial Liberalism to Neoliberal Multiculturalism,” *Social Text* 89, 24 4 (2006): 1-24.

⁴³ David Theo Goldberg, *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2009), 360.

While the second week of reporting began an examination of Katrina's racial dimensions, week three marked the beginning of a reversal. On Monday, September 12, the results of a *CNN/USA Today/Gallop* poll examining public perceptions of the response to Katrina were released.⁴⁴ The poll found a significant divide separating the perceptions of black and white respondents and concluded that black respondents were far more likely to view race as a factor in the federal response. According to the poll, "six in 10 blacks interviewed said the federal government was slow in rescuing those stranded in New Orleans after Katrina because many of the people in the city were black," while only "one in eight white respondents shared that view."⁴⁵ Furthermore, 63% of black respondents said the federal response was delayed because many of the victims were poor, compared to 21% of white respondents. In terms of attributions of blame, the study found that black respondents were more likely to blame President Bush (37%) for the problems in New Orleans while white respondents were more likely to blame Mayor Nagin (29%) and the residents themselves (27%). 67% of white respondents said they believed that President Bush does care about black people, compared to only 21% of black respondents. With respect to looting, "half of all whites said people who broke into stores and took things were mostly criminals. Only 16 percent of blacks agreed, with 77 percent saying the looters were mostly desperate people trying to find a way to survive."⁴⁶ Finally, 77% of black respondents resented use of the term "refugees" to describe displaced residents compared to only 37% of white respondents.⁴⁷

The survey is a critical turning point in news media discussions of racism. The line of questioning is indicative of how racism had been defined by and through the news media up to this point. The findings legitimated the claims of conservatives and others

⁴⁴ See "Reaction to Katrina Split on Racial Lines," CNN.com, Tuesday September 13, 2005, <http://www.cnn.com/2005/US/09/12/katrina.race.poll/index.html>. According to the article, the poll was based on interviews with 848 whites and 262 blacks measured from September 8-11, and had a margin of error of plus or minus 6 percentage points. See also Susan Page and Maria Puente, "Views of Whites, Blacks Differ Starkly on Disaster," *USA Today*, Tuesday, September 13, 2005, 1A.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

who sought to reinvest in colorblindness and nonracialism. According to the poll data, most respondents (read most white respondents) did not believe that racism was relevant at least in the way in which it had been defined, as the intent of a racist administration. Furthermore, the findings confirmed that both white and black respondents (by a slim margin) perceived class as more significant than race in shaping outcomes in the wake of Katrina. These rejections of the racism thesis might have been interpreted as evidence that those polled had a more sophisticated understanding of how contemporary racisms operate than what the survey captured. Instead, the findings were interpreted to show the wide gulf separating the perceptions of white and black people on Katrina's racial dimensions; and as such, they permitted oppositional voices from the right to be heard, and to suddenly appear as the voice of reason.

The following evening, Tuesday, (9/13) *CNN NewsNight* host Aaron Brown welcomed Brent Bozell, President and founder of the Media Research Center, a conservative media watchdog.⁴⁸ In a September 7 web column, Bozell criticized Aaron Brown as “race-baiting” in a prior interview with Rep. Stephanie Tubbs Jones, a black woman.⁴⁹ In his column, Bozell criticized what he perceived as “the far Left’s attempts to stir up racial divisions and the news media’s fanning of those flames.”⁵⁰ Citing NBC’s Brian Williams, ABC’s Ted Koppel, and CNN anchors Aaron Brown and Wolf Blitzer, Bozell demonstrated how widespread the view had become that racism was to blame for the delayed federal response. Citing what he described as Brown’s repeated attempts to get Rep. Tubbs Jones to endorse the idea that government’s inaction was motivated by a racist or classist impulse, Bozell rightly suggests that the wrong questions were being asked; that the very grounds of the debate had from the beginning been poorly defined.

Given that Louisiana is one of the least affluent states in the nation, and two-thirds of the residents of New Orleans are black, is it any surprise that most of the people left behind

⁴⁸ Bozell’s Media Research Center is a conservative media watchdog organization devoted to uncovering ‘liberal bias’ in the media. His web columns can be accessed at <http://www.mrc.org/bozellcolumns/archive.aspx>

⁴⁹ The interview with Rep. Tubbs Jones aired on the Friday, September 2nd broadcast of *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*.

⁵⁰ See L. Brent Bozell III, “Cheering on Racial Division,” Media Research Center, September 7, 2005, <http://www.mrc.org/BozellColumns/newscolumn/2005/col20050907.asp>.

were poor and black? There's a difference between citing racial and class realities and goosing black politicians to endorse the poisonous idea of a conscious conspiracy of neglect against poor minorities.⁵¹

While there is ample precedent to support suspicions of an overtly racist federal government, Bozell rightly suggests that a conspiracy of neglect does not exhaust all potential expressions of racism. Bozell's calling attention to "racial and class realities" however does not go so far as to raise the question of the history, institutions, and discourses that produced and reproduce these realities. He goes on to provide additional evidence of the news media's 'race-baiting' by referencing CBS commentator Nancy Giles's tacit endorsement of the view that government would have responded more quickly had Katrina predominantly impacted white, middle-class Americans.⁵² He concludes his column, charging that the news media has wrongly politicized a "human tragedy for Gulf Coast residents of all colors."⁵³

In the September 13 interview with Brown, Bozell maintained that the idea that Katrina should be understood as a racial issue was a minority view held by the far Left that had been blown up by the news media.⁵⁴ According to Bozell,

The fact of the matter is that two-thirds of New Orleans is black. Katrina didn't aim for that. Nor was the federal relief response as inadequate as it was inadequate because they were blacks. You know, in 1992, Hurricane Andrew decimated the East Coast. The response from the federal government was terrible. It was mostly whites. Was that racism?⁵⁵

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² A view that had come to exhaustively define racism to such an extent that it was later used as a measure of people's perceptions of the persistence of racism in the September 12 CNN/USA Today/Gallop poll.

⁵³ Bozell, "Cheering on Racial Division."

⁵⁴ Indeed, Bozell might have used the CNN/USA Today/Gallop Poll findings to support his claim.

⁵⁵ *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, Tuesday, September 13, 2005.

Brown conceded and responded by invoking the findings of the *CNN/USA Today/Gallop* poll, suggesting that evidence of the continuing relevance of race lies in a difference in perception.

BROWN: Perception is powerful and perception is important, and what we know from polls is that black Americans do look at this differently than white Americans, as they look at a lot of things differently from white America.

BOZELL: And Aaron, perception is dangerous if it's not rooted in reality, which is my point. If anyone had come forward in the last 15 days with any tangible proof to back up the suggestion that there may have been racism at place, I'd like to hear it, and then report it. But there's no evidence. It's just this accusation that's being thrown out. What I see is whites and blacks helping each other in New Orleans. I don't see any racism.⁵⁶

Brown's interpretation that perceptions of the storm's aftermath differ according to race reduces an already narrow definition of racism as active malice to one defined by differing political beliefs. Bozell's response that "perception is dangerous if it's not rooted in reality" resonates with the well-worn neoliberal/post-racial argument lamenting what remains of the civil rights legacy of race-consciousness as reproducing a pathological and false culture of victimization.⁵⁷ Bozell goes on to argue that central media's support of the racism thesis is "dangerous," and that the politicization of race threatens to "split the seam of the cultural fabric in this country."⁵⁸

The Brown-Bozell debate is exemplary of discussions in the news media in which colorblindness is legitimately reasserted to contest the emerging consensus of Katrina as a racialized injustice. A common strategy was to deny racism completely by pointing to the indefensibility of the mechanical way it was imagined to operate. Based on her

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ See Ward Connerly's essay on what Katrina has wrought in terms of how it has legitimated a renewed commitment to identity politics and the culture of victimization and how this undermines equality. Ward Connerly, "End the Race Party: Identity Politics Will Get the GOP Nothing Good," *National Review Online*, September 30, 2005, <http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/connerly200509300813.asp>

⁵⁸ *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, Tuesday, September 13, 2005.

hesitancy to respond, it is possible Rep. Tubbs Jones was reluctant to speak to the issue because of the way the question had been posed. It also explains why the news media's experts on Katrina's racial dimensions, mostly Democratic politicians, often still had to take the position of defending the claim that racism had anything to do with it. In an interview with Anderson Cooper on *CNN NewsNight* the evening after Bozell's appearance, Obama pointed to a "definitional problem:"

OBAMA: In the African-American community, there's a perception that even if there was an active malice on the part of these various agencies, there seemed to be a general indifference towards how people without automobiles, people who did not have the ability or the resources to check into a hotel, how they would get out. And I think that in the African-American community, at least, there's a perception that inner city communities have generally been abandoned. This is just one more bit of evidence about indifference.⁵⁹

COOPER: Some who are listening will say, well, look, the mayor of New Orleans is African-American. He knew there were 100,000 people in this city that didn't have access to automobiles, and yet didn't really have a plan in place to get the buses that they had to pick up people and get them out of town. I know you say you're not about pointing blame. But should he share in that...do you think he's cut off from the realities of the African-American populations in his city?⁶⁰

While Obama, like Brown, defines racism as a 'perception' within the black community, he does try to move the debate beyond plotting racist politicians. Cooper's response however reaffirms the political legitimacy of colorblind arguments. The terms of the debate reflect the requirements of objectivity to maintain two conflicting sides. As long as it remained legitimate to argue that racism had nothing to do with it, the discussion could not move beyond government officials as bigots vs. bumbler, intent or no intent, racism or not racism. There was no smoking gun showing definitively that President

⁵⁹ Barack Obama, *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, Wednesday, September 14, 2005.

⁶⁰ Anderson Cooper, *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, Wednesday, September 14, 2005.

Bush did not care about the black or poor residents of New Orleans and likewise, no evidence that the federal government had willed a bureaucratic and uncoordinated response because the victims stranded in the city were mostly black and poor. In the rare moments where the focus shifted from trying to understand the motivations of the perpetrators to trying to understand the condition of the victims, the debate would shift to race vs. class—read race vs. colorblindness. Thus, central media’s “definitional problem,” as Obama put it, provided a space that otherwise might not have been available for critics to salvage the political currency of colorblindness.⁶¹

Writing in *the Nation*, Adolph Reed Jr. immediately saw the political right’s investment class as a means of depoliticizing and discrediting this popular reinvestment in race. As Reed writes,

The abstract moralizing patter about how and whether ‘race matters’ or ‘the role of race’ is appealing partly because it doesn’t confront the roots of the bipartisan neoliberal policy regime....Race is too blunt an analytical tool even when inequality is expressed in glaring racial disparities. Its meanings are too vague. We can already see that the charges of racial insensitivity and neglect threaten to divert the focus of the Katrina outrage to a secondary debate about how Bush feels about blacks and whether the sources of the travesty visited upon poor New Orleanians were ‘color blind’ or racist.⁶²

While race is ‘blunt’ in engaging with neoliberalism,⁶³ as Reed would likely agree, an oppositional politics structured according to class must incorporate difference.⁶⁴ A

⁶¹ In his study of Katrina’s racial dimensions, Michael Eric Dyson devoted an entire chapter to reframing the question of how racism operates from the way in which it had developed in the news. See Michael Eric Dyson, “Does George W. Bush Care About Black People?” In *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster*, (New York: Basic Civitas, 2006).

⁶² Adolph Reed Jr., “Class-ifying the Hurricane,” *The Nation*, October 3, 2005.

⁶³ Aihwa Ong’s work makes this clear in arguing that neoliberalism is a project that both takes account of and disavows race. It takes account of race in the sense that it has unfolded within the context of global as well as various local and situated histories of racial exploitation. Likewise, it resists race in other ways as a project of consolidating class power, which Ong conceives through reference to the figure of *homo economicus*. See Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*.

⁶⁴ Nancy Fraser has very convincingly argued for the importance of recognition and cultural rights as fundamental for democratic inclusion and participation in political life and thus foundational for waging an effective politics of redistribution. See Nancy Fraser, “From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of

reinvestment in class at the expense of race does little to confront racism. Echoing the findings of the *CNN/USA Today/Gallop* poll, most everyone who was made to form an opinion on the matter in a national televised debate chose class over race. Faced with the charge of ‘race-baiting,’ Aaron Brown admitted, “I don’t support the notion that race as such is the issue here, though I’m less sure honestly about class.”⁶⁵ Not only was class more accurate in capturing the diversity of poor people, it also worked to depoliticize difference, making it potentially available to everyone. An anti-racist politics after Katrina must clarify not only the ways in which race and class inequalities very often overlap, but also the ways in which they diverge.

‘Unleash a Liberty Zone’⁶⁶ or ‘Nattering Nabobs of Neo-Keynesian Nonsense’⁶⁷

On the evening of September 15, 2005, President Bush addressed the nation live from New Orleans, affirming the nation’s commitment to rebuild and outlining the administration’s plans for the recovery. In his speech, the President reconciled what had been the official narrative of the administration with the evolving consensus formed by and through the news media over the past two weeks. First, he surrendered the official line that government had responded as effectively and efficiently as it could have given the magnitude of the destruction and formally admitted to failure on the part of federal government to adequately plan for and respond to the disaster. Second, he conceded what had formerly been the official line of colorblindness:

Within the Gulf region are some of the most beautiful and historic places in America. As all of us saw on television, there’s also some deep, persistent poverty in this region as well. That poverty has roots in a history of racial discrimination, which cut off generations from the

Justice in a ‘Postsocialist’ Age,” *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the Postsocialist Condition*, (New York: Routledge, 1997), 11-40.

⁶⁵ Aaron Brown, *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, Tuesday, September 13, 2005.

⁶⁶ Mallory Factor, “Unleash a Liberty Zone,” *National Review Online*, September 16, 2005, <http://www.nationalreview.com>

⁶⁷ Michael T. Darda, “Nattering Nabobs of Neo-Keynesian Nonsense,” *National Review Online*, September 12, 2005, <http://www.nationalreview.com>

opportunity of America. We have a duty to confront this poverty with bold action. So let us restore all that we have cherished from yesterday, and let us rise above the legacy of inequality.⁶⁸

President Bush went on to detail his proposal to establish a Gulf Opportunity Zone (GO-Zone). The GO-Zone was received by popular commentators as a “conservative New Deal,” combining increased federal spending with experimental “free market” policies aimed at expediting the return of markets and stimulating economic growth in the region.⁶⁹

According to the President, the GO-Zone should include “immediate incentives for job-creating investment, tax relief for small businesses, incentives to companies that create jobs, and loan guarantees for small businesses, including minority-owned enterprises.”⁷⁰ The language of the proposal taps into myths of small business and grassroots entrepreneurialism, obscuring what William Greider writing in *The Nation* finds as its proper lineage in an ethos of giving “precedence to private financial gain and market determinism over human lives and broad public values.”⁷¹ A sidebar to Naomi Klein’s piece in *The Nation* entitled “Purging the Poor,” included a range of “Pro-Free-Market” proposals then under consideration by House Republicans.⁷² Among these were proposals to suspend Davis-Bacon, which guarantees prevailing wages for workers employed under federal contracts; to suspend environmental protections governing offshore drilling and oil refineries; to eliminate all barriers to faith-based and charitable organizations participating in the recovery; and to provide additional tax incentives.⁷³

⁶⁸ George W. Bush, “Address to the Nation on Hurricane Katrina Recovery from New Orleans, Louisiana,” Thursday, September 15, 2005.

⁶⁹ Richard S. Dunham, Mike McNamee and Eamon Javers, “The Right’s New Deal for the Gulf Coast,” *BusinessWeek*, September 22, 2005, http://www.businessweek.com/bwdaily/dnflash/sep2005/nf20050922_2242_db016.htm (Retrieved October 12, 2010)

⁷⁰ George W. Bush, “Address to the Nation on Hurricane Katrina Recovery from New Orleans, Louisiana,” Thursday, September 15, 2005.

⁷¹ William Greider, “A ‘New’ New Deal,” *The Nation*, October 3, 2005

⁷² Naomi Klein, “Purging the Poor,” *The Nation*, October 10, 2005.

Taken together, the proposals implied a stark neoliberalism, a space in which market logics and discipline would encourage efficiency and private investment while government's role would be limited to funding private contracts. Increasingly debates over racial justice are silently waged via struggles of state vs. market.⁷⁴ In the wake of Katrina, despite the media's efforts to police racism and government's efforts to reaffirm a commitment to difference-blind compassion, arguments supporting market solutions to the humanitarian crisis and more implicitly, the further dismantling of social rights, were able to persist.

As President Bush outlined the GO-Zone, Mallory Factor in the *National Review* warned that Katrina should not be a moment to abandon the "free enterprise agenda—which is to say at the expense of jobs and wealth for all Americans."⁷⁵ Invoking myths of free markets and trickle-down provision, Factor argued,

The politically correct notion that it is insensitive to continue with vital pro-growth policies in the aftermath of Katrina hurts the nation generally and has an adverse impact on the people most in need of help. Promoting economic growth and prosperity is important, now more than ever, since successful rebuilding of the Gulf Coast depends on a vibrant national economy. In the last two years, the economy has grown by about \$1.5 trillion, which is a tribute to President George W. Bush's 2003 tax cuts. Keeping that pie growing will make it possible to offer more to New Orleans.⁷⁶

The suggestion that neoliberalism is 'politically incorrect' in the wake of a disaster betrays a double meaning, linking neoliberalism as a racial project. Factor went on to reclaim compassion, arguing:

We are now committed as a country to generously and compassionately rebuilding the hurricane zone and

⁷³ See "GOP Opportunity Zone," in *Unnatural Disaster: The Nation on Hurricane Katrina*, edited by Betsy Reed, 69-72.

⁷⁴ Bradley Jones and Roopali Mukherjee, "From California to Michigan: Race, Rationality and Neoliberal Governmentality," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 7 4 (2010): 401-22.

⁷⁵ Mallory Factor, "Tax Cuts <I> Are," *National Review*, October 20, 2008.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

replacing what was lost. . . . We cannot allow the tragedy of Katrina to undermine what's best for the country's economic health. This is not the time for stifling regulations and high tax rates, including the expiration of the 2003 tax cuts. This is not the time to destroy family farms and businesses, and with them hundreds of thousands of jobs. It is not inconsiderate to underscore the vital need for policies promoting economic growth and prosperity in the wake of tragedy. It would be inconsiderate not to.⁷⁷

The ideology of the center, as it was reflected through central media, interpreted the GO-Zone as relatively uncontroversial; a bi-partisan compromise and a long overdue outpouring of federal compassion. The headline focused on the massive commitment of tax dollars, the “largest relief effort in U.S. history,” and the implications of President Bush’s language that the nation would do whatever it takes and stay as long as it takes. Critics mostly expressed concerns about maintaining fiscal responsibility; where the estimated 200 billion dollars would come from, rather than on how and to whom it would be distributed.

The GO-Zone is a striking example of how popular political rhetoric obscures the relationship between neoliberal capitalism and the reproduction of racial and class inequalities. While the proposal is framed as extending compassion and introducing creative, entrepreneurial ideas, it remains a set of policies that ignores the racialized logics of, and the centralization of wealth that has historically resulted from, unfettered capitalist exploitation. Thus, neoliberal racism operates under the auspices of an anti-racism and a stated commitment to extend compassion to “minority-owned enterprises.” Official rhetoric conceding the need to recognize difference in policy and to redistribute resources is remarkably able to co-habit with policy proposals that undermine these goals. According to this emerging anti-racism of the center, there is no apparent contradiction in the President vowing to fight that poverty that has its “roots in a history of racial discrimination” while also introducing a range of “free market” principles as a means of guiding the recovery. The contradiction is further hidden because it is

⁷⁷ Ibid.

articulated in the affirmative as encouraging the creativity of markets rather than negatively as a struggle against cultures of dependency.

Culture and the Politics of Identification

On Wednesday August 31, as the humanitarian crisis was reaching its climax in New Orleans, ABC's *Nightline* aired a special broadcast devoted to a discussion of New Orleans culture. Given that other news at the time was focused on rooftop rescues, the suffering at the Superdome, and the growing awareness of FEMA's inadequacies—it may seem odd that an entire episode of *Nightline* was devoted to recognizing the people, history, and culture of New Orleans. Host Ted Koppel frames the program as a response to “the more practical minded among us...[who] will wonder whether it makes sense to rebuild in such a vulnerable place,” as well as “the cynical [who] will hear the tales of looting and shooting and see the misery of the homeless” and conclude that the city is lost.⁷⁸ Thus, the broadcast was meant to address arguments already circulating in the media that favored risk management and fiscal responsibility and that overlooked the more intangible value of the city, its residents, and its culture to the nation.⁷⁹

The broadcast, entitled “My New Orleans,” featured a multi-racial (yet mono-cultural) panel of celebrity New Orleanians, including jazz musician, Wynton Marsalis; professor of American Studies and Communication at Tulane University and host of NPR's *American Routes* Nick Spitzer; best-selling author, Michael Lewis; and former congressional correspondent and senior news analyst for NPR, Cokie Roberts. The program is exemplary of discussions in the press and in popular media in the wake of Katrina which emphasized the peculiar sameness yet difference of New Orleans culture to promote identification and to inspire national pride. As such, the program incorporates elements of both denunciation and sentiment—it answers critics who see race and culture as negative and costly and in its eloquence, it invites the viewer to side with culture and with the celebrity panelists as benefactors who want to see the city restored.

⁷⁸ Ted Koppel, “My New Orleans.”

⁷⁹ Echoing the much publicized remarks of then Republican House Majority Leader Dennis Hastert.

In the program, racial difference is emphasized and withheld in complex ways so as to construct the deservedness of New Orleans and to create symbolic ties to the nation. That is to say, the panel makes use of tactical rhetorics that both value race as culture and imply a post-racial distancing from the concept of race as a politicized social identity. New Orleans is racialized in order to signify difference as a culture-bearing space. As Marsalis argues, “we are the only city in the world with a full culture that is our own.”⁸⁰ In this program and elsewhere, New Orleans signifies difference—a place of carnival, magic, sex, a place on the margins of global capitalism, a place “on the precipice between the lake, the river and the gulf” where ‘fatalism’ has always been part of life.⁸¹ While this implicit referencing of race can and is often invoked to suggest an antagonistic, oppositional, or irreconcilable Otherness—New Orleans as dark, cultured, backward, underbelly—in the program it is appropriated to make a case for the worthiness of the city. New Orleans is racialized in order to recognize a difference that is worth preserving.

The culturing of New Orleans positions the city as a living museum piece—a unique remnant of a bygone era that must be preserved—as well as a space of exception to the rule of America as cultureless wasteland of fast food and strip malls. What must be preserved above all else is the intangible ‘authenticity’ which transcends the surface of the city and the spaces most often frequented by tourists—not the mass-marketed representation of New Orleans, the Mardi Gras beads that have found a place in every CVS in the nation, but the grittiness and the “down-home funkiness” of New Orleans culture as it is lived by regular people.⁸² The emphasis on preserving the aura implies that inequality has a place in the new New Orleans in order to return to that “intangible sense of community,” and to avoid the whitened, gentrified, theme park that threatens to emerge in its place.⁸³

⁸⁰ Wynton Marsalis, “My New Orleans.”

⁸¹ Michael Lewis, “My New Orleans.”

⁸² Michael Lewis, Cokie Roberts, “My New Orleans.”

⁸³ Nick Spitzer, “My New Orleans.”

The panel constructs a colorblind and post-race ethnic identity rooted in a sense of place. New Orleanians, regardless of other axes of difference and inequality, are members of their own ‘ethnicity.’ New Orleans as an ethnicity is imagined as the triumph of multiculturalism; it was formed of a ‘gumbo’ of cultures with separate histories that have happily integrated. As Wynton Marsalis argues, “We have our own way of speaking English, our kind of sing-song New Orleans way—even for the white and the black New Orleanians—and whenever we hear a person who’s from New Orleans in another place in the world, we immediately feel at home.”⁸⁴ Similarly, Cokie Roberts observes:

It’s not just a place. It’s almost like an ethnicity. It is...our own music; our own food; our own religious rituals; our own holiday that we’ve exported to the rest of America...Anyone from there relates to everyone else from there in the way that people from different ethnic groups do.⁸⁵

This post-racial racializing of New Orleans is a rhetorical tactic that reworks the neoliberal conception which characterizes those who politicize their racial identity as pathological and “handicapped by their own monoculturalism.”⁸⁶ On the contrary, New Orleanians as a group are cast as cosmopolitan, multi-racial, and colorblind, so that their status as bearing culture is recast as a boon rather than a stigma. This notion of a post-race ethnicity is by definition depoliticized and removed from relations of power. Difference, rather than defining a common experience of oppression and a common ground for the formation of oppositional political solidarities, works primarily to frame the city’s deservedness.

The multiculturalism of New Orleans is deployed to forge ties with the nation. Invoking the metaphor of the melting pot, several commentators describe New Orleans as a dense gumbo of intermingling cultures, made strange or unique by the particular regional history of French, Spanish, Creole and African-American contributions. Nick Spitzer describes “the intimacy of social life and the tremendous sense of different

⁸⁴ Wynton Marsalis, “My New Orleans.”

⁸⁵ Cokie Roberts, “My New Orleans.”

⁸⁶ See Jodi Melamed, “The Spirit of Neoliberalism,” 1.

cultures that have mixed and mingled quite happily in many ways, different than the rest of the United States.”⁸⁷ Registering difference and sameness, the statement suggests that New Orleans is more American than America, invoking a particular discourse of the nation as tolerant and hospitable. Furthermore the statement erases race and class antagonisms, presenting New Orleans as a multi-racial and cosmopolitan utopia—an example the rest of the nation should strive to emulate. Michael Lewis suggests that unlike many U.S. cities, there is a peculiar continuity in New Orleans in that multiple generations of families have remained rooted to the city. As he observes, in New Orleans, “people are not defined by what they do or how they get their money, so much as by who their family is—and that’s very different from the rest of this country.”⁸⁸ New Orleanians are thus exceptional Americans that have truly realized the dream of colorblindness, but beyond this, they are the bearers of a unique and fictive ethnicity⁸⁹ and history which imbibes their citizenship with a cultural depth that other Americans seem to lack, particularly in this global era of individualism, uprootedness, and mobility.

An interesting example of how difference is invoked to reference sameness occurs in the context of a discussion of New Orleans music. As Wynton Marsalis argues,

Louis Armstrong, who was our greatest ambassador, brought our music around the world. What he brought...that everyone loved was the sound of democracy. And it came from the African-American community. So, there was a certain level of dispersion cast on it...out of ignorance and racism at the time. But musicians around the world, regardless of race, heard the sound of democracy. The organization, a form of music that addressed their individual rights and how you use choice to negotiate those rights with a group, which is New Orleans jazz. And everyone loved that sound.⁹⁰

In this analysis, what is initially perceived to be cultured and particular—the historical

⁸⁷ Nick Spitzer, “My New Orleans.”

⁸⁸ Michael Lewis, “My New Orleans.”

⁸⁹ See Etienne Balibar, “The Nation Form: History and Ideology,” 96. In Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, (London: Verso, 1991).

⁹⁰ Wynton Marsalis, “My New Orleans.”

racializing of jazz—is found to be ‘universal’ as a musical expression of Western liberal democracy. This imagery of exporting American democracy unavoidably resonates with current political rhetoric advocating the opening up of the world to the promise of enlightened cosmopolitanism, colorblindness, and (market) freedom. Both the language of jazz and of (neo)liberal democracy is imagined as eventually transcending racial particularisms and ushering in a post-racial world. As Nick Spitzer continues, “the music [of Fats Domino—rock n’ roll/rhythm and blues] has transformed the world in the same way that jazz did before it because it’s involved black folk and white folk, Afro and European sensibilities, street rhymes and soul.”⁹¹ Unlike the universal language of jazz, at first misunderstood as black noise; rock n’ roll is imagined as always having been a multicultural form of expression. Thus, these acts of memory very often elide the question of power. While difference is celebrated, there are also rhetorical efforts throughout to assimilate Otherness and encourage identification (i.e. jazz as both racialized and the essence of Western liberal democracy, the Lower Ninth as poor, black version of Graceland,⁹² the jazz funeral and the ‘second line’ as bootstrap individualism). That is to say, in these tactical rhetorics, difference is recognized so that it may be understood and familiarized (made white).

Since it avoids the question of power, the culture of New Orleans served as a non-offensive plea for deservedness. While this argument was initiated quite soon after the storm, it has persisted nearly unchanged in the years after Katrina. Imagining New Orleans as a post-race ethnicity is revealing of this evolving anti-racism of the center. It accounts for difference, but does so in a way that avoids an analysis of power and that makes difference palatable and available to everyone. We are all in some way New Orleanians. As Marsalis put it, New Orleans is “the soul of our country.”⁹³ The valuing of culture became a strategy to create identification and to advocate for the deservedness of the city and the region, while undermining the potential of wider solidarities beyond New

⁹¹ Nick Spitzer, “My New Orleans.”

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Wynton Marsalis, “My New Orleans.”

Orleans and beyond Katrina.

Finding an Anti-Racism of the Center

In the early days of the Katrina crisis, the news media was criticized as lacking an adequate measure of compassion for those who were victims of not only a natural disaster, but in time, a manmade injustice. The news media's criticism of the victims and suspicion of their motives, coupled with a dogged adherence to colorblindness in the face of a dramatic spectacle of black suffering, led to criticisms of the news media's racism. When the federal government replaced the victims of Katrina as the real perpetrators responsible for the crisis, the news media transitioned into a more traditional watchdog function. The frame of federal government as persecutors led to a more consistently compassionate treatment of the victims, including a will to better understand their condition and their motivations, which in turn led to an adjustment of the center from color- and class-blindness to race- and class-consciousness. The particular circumstances legitimating this adjustment—the news media's siding with the victims against government—also contained it. Thus, central media's understandings of racism—this new, always evolving anti-racism of the center—was largely limited to an analysis of whether or not the actions of government were motivated by racism or classism.

Just one week later, conservative commentators legitimately gave voice to their worries about the news media's "race-baiting."⁹⁴ Likewise, with distance, discussion turned to the show of emotion expressed by journalists in their coverage of Katrina, and particularly worries that journalist's displays of compassion were indicative of a gap in upholding the ideal of 'objective' reporting.⁹⁵ Furthermore, emerging defenses of the Bush Administration, debates over the limits of what government can achieve given the unprecedented magnitude of Katrina, and emergent anxieties over federal acts of

⁹⁴ See for example "When Government Fails—Katrina's Aftermath," *The Economist*, September 10, 2005; George F. Will, "A Poverty of Thought," *The Washington Post*, Tuesday, September 13, 2005, A27.

⁹⁵ For example, introducing a debate on CNN, moderator Howard Kurtz asked, "Does the sudden focus on the country's have-nots reflect a liberal point of view? As hurricane correspondents get more aggressive, are they holding the government accountable, or just airing their own opinions?" See *CNN Reliable Sources*, Sunday, September 18, 2005.

compassion becoming excessive or indiscriminate, signaled that the frame was being contested. In a September 15 address to the nation, President Bush conceded that race and poverty unjustly structured outcomes after Katrina and vowed to stay as long as it takes to bring back the Gulf Coast. In so doing, he took a critical first step in reconciling official and media interpretations of the crisis. By shifting to an official position of race- and class- consciousness, the President undercut the media's frame of the federal government as racist perpetrators. Bureaucratic bumblers? Without question. Few had any motive to attempt to refute it. But there was no evidence of racial bigotry that could not be refuted.

Looking at the life of the racism frame, the 'decentering' and 'recentering' of central media on matters of race was moderated by existential uncertainties, evaluative uncertainties, and uncertainties over the motivations of those who accuse. The initial 'decentering' was brought about by existential uncertainties over who should rightly occupy the position of perpetrator—the victims themselves for taking advantage of the crisis, or all levels of government for failing to plan and to respond. It was further shaped by evaluative uncertainties over which unfortunates mattered and by uncertainties over the motivations of those who initially blamed the victims for their own misfortune. The racism frame provided an answer to these uncertainties. But as the racism frame was contested by and through the news media from various quarters, new uncertainties were articulated. Was it really black people that were the victims or poor people regardless of race? Was the government's inaction motivated by racism, or classism, or was it just bureaucratic bungling? Isn't it true that many of the so-called victims were just thugs? Were they victims through some fault of their own, or victims of government neglect and indifference, or of the legacy of the welfare state and other policies that create dependency and burden economic growth? Did those charging racism, including the news media, really have the best interests of the victims in mind, or were they instead attempting to profit from their misery, either politically or in some other way? What were the motivations of those who denied racism or tried to make New Orleans seem a post-racial utopia? While the 'decentering' on matters of race was an effect of two diverging certainties (the news media charging racist neglect and government denying it) the

‘recentering’ was achieved over a longer period of time, by restoring the legitimacy of these old uncertainties. Tactics for waging a progressive racial politics in the so-called ‘post-race’ era must learn from the experience of watching the spectacle of the central news media as it grappled with the spectacle of black suffering after Katrina and the poverty of anti-racist discourse that was the result.

Chapter IV

‘The Saints and the Sinners Marching In:’¹ Human Interest Stories and the Limits of Colorblindness in Katrina Reporting

On Thursday September 1, as the news media began to speak about the black poor of New Orleans, the *Washington Post* ran a front page article describing the conditions inside the Superdome where tens of thousands of residents remained stranded since Sunday with limited provisions and medical care, in stifling heat and humidity, with no air-conditioning, electricity or functioning restrooms. In the article, the Superdome is described spatially through reference to the circles of hell. On the floor level, the first circle, “a form of civilization had taken hold—smelly, messy, dark and dank, but with a structure. Families with cots used their beds as boundaries for personal space and kept their areas orderly.”² By contrast, the third circle, among the skyboxes, was a perpetually dark “place for abandonment and coupling” while the fourth, the “darkest and highest of all,” was where “the lurkers lived, scary in the shadows....the gangsters and the druggies.”³

This concern with distinguishing the worthy from the unworthy reflects an understanding of our ethical obligations to one another as citizens as a relationship of contract rather than status. The deserving poor earn the pity of their fellow citizens through their actions, motivations, and beliefs. These categories—those judged worthy but in a state of limbo at field level and those judged progressively unworthy that haunt the mezzanine—do critical work in managing anxieties over the fairness of redistributive

¹ Carl Quintanilla, “Water Continues to Rise in New Orleans,” *NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams*, Tuesday, August 30, 2005. The reference to saints and sinners is meant to distinguish good citizens trapped in New Orleans from those who responded to the crisis by engaging in looting and lawlessness.

² Ann Gerhart, “And Now We Are in Hell,” *The Washington Post*, Thursday, September 1, 2005, A1.

³ *Ibid.*

practices in the wake of Katrina, anxieties that historically have been, and continue to be, entangled either explicitly or implicitly with the logics of race. The need to distinguish the deserving from the undeserving poor, even after Katrina was widely interpreted as a racial and class injustice perpetrated by government, points to the intractable embeddedness of fears over redistributive practices that fail to discriminate.

This mapping of the Superdome sheds light on how the logics of race continue to shape the politics of pity despite both the particular view that race unjustly shaped outcomes during Katrina and more generally the power of the norm of racial equality to structure public discourse. Since the author wants to demonize a particular group of mostly black people, she must avoid explicitly referencing race. The reader by now knows that the lurkers in the shadows, the gangsters and druggies, are primarily black, but so too are the families struggling to carve out a private space, to give structure to the chaos, and stay together despite the inhuman conditions. Since race is not referenced anywhere in the article, it is not difficult to imagine the author legitimately arguing that it has nothing to do with race, in which case, the best that we might do is agree to disagree.

The article has another seemingly non-racial alibi in that it defies essentialism. While race and class were found to unjustly determine who had the means to evacuate the city, social differences are leveled when the level of analysis shifts to the poor, black residents of New Orleans.⁴ Those remaining in the city can be differentiated by their conduct. Thus, the article is exemplary of the news media's tacit challenging of stereotypes through a seemingly colorblind analysis of the soul. References to the 'best' and 'worst' of humanity as it is expressed by the mostly poor, black victims who are presently the subject of intense public scrutiny emerges as a way of speaking past questions of race and power while more deeply embedding racial logics in a rhetoric that seemingly has nothing to do with race, even as the persistence of racism is elsewhere a matter of public debate. There is an anti-racist alibi in insisting that some of the black

⁴ The act of making this population visible as an object of scrutiny and as a space of intervention (and not others) is an act of power.

poor behaved admirably, while only some made a choice to exhibit the ‘worst’ of humanity.⁵

Throughout the entire month of focused national attention on Katrina, officials and reporters trying to make sense of the aftermath often referred to an uncontested truism—*disasters tend to bring out the best and the worst in people*. For Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour-R, Katrina’s uncovering of “the best in most people [and] ...the worst in some people” as a matter of choice justified dealing with looters “as ruthlessly as we can get our hands on them.”⁶ In a CNN interview on Thursday, September 1, FEMA director Michael Brown was careful to distinguish the helpless residents stranded without food and water at the Morial Convention Center from those “causing trouble...screaming and yelling about things...and just being thugs.”⁷ A full two weeks later, Anderson Cooper observed, “It always interests me that in any kind of conflict zone, no matter where it is in the world, some people step up and become heroes, and some people who you thought would behave one way don’t behave that way at all and become desperate and become monsters.”⁸

Human interest narratives in the wake of Katrina explain why people behave the way they do by analyzing their beliefs, attitudes and motivations. At stake for journalists was the problem of understanding what compels one person to rise to the occasion while another exploits the crisis in order to personally gain from the misery of others. Even though being poor and black were highly correlated in New Orleans pre-Katrina, to argue that race matters was for some to deny the victimization of others who had no less

⁵ There are of course different standards of behaving admirably. The ‘best’ as it was displayed by the victims was typically not the same standard of selflessness displayed by the mostly white Americans featured on the news who descended on the Gulf Coast to help.

⁶ Haley Barbour, *CNN NewsNight*, Wednesday August 31, 2005.

⁷ Brown’s comment is in relation to having just learned that thousands of residents were stranded at the Morial Convention Center in downtown New Orleans. “We are moving heaven and earth to get pallets of food and water to those people. I’ve watched all day long the stories of the people who are causing trouble, who are, you know, screaming and yelling about things and--and--and just being thugs. And then I hear about this group today. And I told my team, I said, ‘I don’t care what it takes, you get stuff to them and you get it to them now.’” See Michael Brown, “FEMA Director Michael Brown Discusses Relief Efforts in Hurricane Zone,” *NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams*, Thursday, September 1, 2005.

⁸ Anderson Cooper, *CNN NewsNight*, Wednesday, September 14, 2005

suffered. Class, however, does little to explain differences observed in the behaviors and attitudes among the poor—this remains the work of race. How the poor responded under these conditions was conceived implicitly in terms of a choice to inhabit and perform either the script of blackness or whiteness. Thus, despite a will to move past race in these narratives about people, the logics of race are silently reinvested through reference to the best and the worst as it is expressed in the face of crisis.

In addition to the victims of Katrina remaining in the city, another group that became the subject of close moral scrutiny was the nation's 'Army of Compassion' as it descended on the Gulf Coast. According to the news and official statements, pity was imagined as rightfully occupying a central role in the immediate humanitarian response. Broadcast and print journalism regularly provided information for the American Red Cross and other charitable organizations. In nearly all of President Bush's public addresses after Katrina, he stressed the role of charitable organizations "on the front lines providing help to people who need help."⁹ In his September 15 address outlining plans for the recovery, the President argued, "It is the Armies of Compassion—charities and houses of worship and idealistic men and women—that give our reconstruction effort its humanity. They offer to those who hurt a friendly face, an arm around the shoulder, and the reassurance that in hard times, they can count on someone who cares."¹⁰ In his news appearances, FEMA Director Michael Brown regularly appealed for cash donations to the Red Cross and other private and charitable organizations.¹¹ Perhaps because charitableness and unpaid, volunteer labor were so central to the government's plan to tackle the immediate humanitarian crisis, human interest news was invested in understanding what motivated compassion; how it might be encouraged and incentivized, as well as what threatened to undermine it.

⁹ "President Remarks on Hurricane Recovery Efforts from Louis Armstrong International Airport, Kenner, Louisiana," Friday, September 2, 2005, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/09/20050902-8.html>

¹⁰ George W. Bush, "Address to the Nation on Hurricane Katrina Recovery from New Orleans, Louisiana." Thursday, September 15, 2005

¹¹ FEMA, "Cash Sought to Help Hurricane Victims, Volunteers Should Not Self-Dispatch," Monday, August 29, 2005, <http://www.fema.gov/news/newsrelease.fema?id=18473>

Human interest stories analyzing outpourings of compassion resonate with the Christian parable of the ‘Good Samaritan.’¹² Since the unfortunate’s identity in the Samaritan parable is left unspecified, the story can be read to suggest that the type of compassion favored is one blind to status and other considerations of worthiness. As an enemy of the Jews, the Samaritan is the least likely candidate to be considered a neighbor. The irony of this reading does the work of leveling difference, individualizing both the sufferer and the Samaritan. One finds one’s neighbor in he who acts out of selfless compassion to help in a time of need. The currency of this depoliticized myth of people helping people in human interest news undermines an analysis of power. It provides a post-racial narrative of a compassionate nation in opposition to this larger narrative unfolding elsewhere in the news of the federal government perpetuating a racialized injustice.

Human interest news examining the actions and motivations of victims and Samaritans in the wake of Katrina often took the form of defying stereotypes by treating subjects as individuals with the freedom to choose their behavior and how it should be interpreted. Often, the very people imagined to be threats or as likely to take advantage of the crisis turn out, upon closer inspection, to embody family values, personal responsibility, and selflessness. Human interest news as a genre in the reporting of Katrina puts forth an alibi of anti-racism by affirming that appearances and initial judgments are often deceptive, that we must look deeper, but also with the caveat that

¹² In the gospel of Luke (10:25-37) Jesus tells the story in response to a lawyer’s question as to who one should consider one’s neighbor.

A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. And by chance there came down a certain priest that way; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was; and when he saw him he had compassion on him, And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him: and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee. Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbor unto him that fell among the thieves? And [the lawyer] said, He that showed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise.

sometimes our initial judgments are confirmed. Thus implicit in these stories is an enlightened racism posing as an anti-racism, since the irony depends on the readers' prejudice and his pleasure in having it confirmed or disconfirmed. News stories about Samaritans mimic the themes and narrative structure of a whole range of televisual entertainment texts that posit the citizen as in a state of 'ethical incompleteness' and that package a sentimental, paternalistic vision of compassionate citizenship.¹³

The Good Samaritan narrative informs obligations by framing acts of compassion as non-compulsory, and thus, genuine. In France, there is a Good Samaritan statute imposing "a general duty to assist, requiring no special relationship between the victim and potential rescuer."¹⁴ In the U.S., there is a general absence of a tradition of a legal obligation to extend compassion. While a few states have "duty to assist" laws, they are restricted and very often unenforced.¹⁵ More common in the U.S. are laws that protect Samaritans acting in good faith from legal repercussions. This legal legacy reflects a larger sensibility that compassion should be motivated by personal choice rather than made compulsory and enforced by government. It affirms myths of the authenticity and desirability of private care precisely because it is not compulsory. It also points to a belief in protecting citizens from the state in their role as Samaritans, in their choice to remain bystanders, and as unfortunates at risk of being subjected to regulated, compulsory, care. These myths of the authenticity and the moral superiority of civil society and the state's bureaucratic, regulated and violent care regularly surface in human interest narratives. In other words, in news stories examining private flows of compassion in the wake of Katrina, we can trace the working out of a politics that does not seem to be a politics advocating private action as an antidote to the state's passive violence. These largely anecdotal narratives furthermore work to undermine broader examinations of institutional racism beyond the state.

¹³ See Toby Miller, *The Well-Tempered Self: Citizenship, Culture and the Postmodern Subject*, (John Hopkins University Press, 1993).

¹⁴ John T. Pardun, "Good Samaritan Laws: A Global Perspective," *Loyola of Los Angeles International and Comparative Law Review*, 20 (1997): 591-613. The statute was publicized in relation to the death of Princess Diana and the failure of the paparazzi to assist.

¹⁵ Ibid. 597-601. These include Minnesota, Wisconsin and Vermont.

In this chapter, I argue that human interest narratives reveal the ways that racial logics persist in shaping the politics of pity, even as racism in the news is being carefully policed, by distinguishing among those who give selflessly, are productive, and are motivated by the heart and those who are selfish, who consume, who are burdensome, and who look to profit from the misery of others, and by framing these conditions as a matter of personal choice. I argue that human interest narratives broadly-speaking posit a post-racial, compassionate nation as antidote to a racist, indifferent government; a myth that supports the neoliberal project of depoliticizing and privatizing race and racism.

Identifying the ‘Criminal Element’

Before the storm, the news media policed the behaviors, motivations, and sentiments of citizens according to a standard of personal responsibility and risk management. As the first week passed, awareness of the rampant poverty in New Orleans, the elderly and infirm confined to their homes, in flooded hospitals and nursing homes, and the lack of planning by city government provided a more nuanced understanding of why some remained in the city despite mandatory evacuations and made it clear that local and state government should share in the blame. The rapid intensification of suffering as a result of the overall failures of federal government to effectively intervene led to a re-assessment of what constitutes criminality. As everyday, urban poverty suddenly became spectacular and extraordinary, reaching new heights of ‘desperation,’ formerly everyday transgressions became legitimate acts of self-preservation.

Before the storm, the news media’s presence in the French Quarter led to a focus on the few revelers that remained on Bourbon Street. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reported that while many heeded the warnings of officials, New Orleans remains “a city where natives pride themselves on staying put and throwing parties in the face of hurricanes.”¹⁶ Indeed, as other stories suggested, a popular way to wait out storms on Bourbon Street is to enjoy a Hurricane—a rum and juice concoction. Human interest

¹⁶ Drew Jubera and M.A.J. McKenna, “Katrina Storms Ashore; ‘Big One’ Lashes at New Orleans,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 29, 2005, 1A.

stories introduced readers to the colorful inhabitants of the French Quarter and the casino towns that dot Mississippi's coast. For example, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* showcased a "druid and voodoo priest" who reportedly chose not to evacuate because of the difficulty of transporting his many snakes¹⁷ and a white traveling magician, briefly employed at a Biloxi casino, who gambled and partied as Katrina approached, was drunk when the mandatory evacuation was ordered, and nearly died as he defied police by leaving a shelter as the storm approached.¹⁸ These characterizations as idle partiers willing to "take a gamble" provided evidence of what many observers in the news termed New Orleans' 'fatalism.' While many heeded warnings to evacuate, many New Orleanians and residents of Mississippi's Gulf Coast reportedly adopt a 'laissez-faire' attitude with respect to hurricanes that can be readily attributed to culture—a "regional commonsense."¹⁹ Another article captured what seemed to be the moral of the story of the flooding of New Orleans: "Laissez les bon temps rouler. The old city's motto had become its epitaph."²⁰

Even after the developments of the first week and the consensus that the poor, elderly, and infirm should be properly seen as victims of government neglect, journalists continued to examine what caused some to choose to stay behind. On Tuesday, September 6, *USA Today* ran a lengthy character study exemplary of news engaged in this work.²¹ The article tells the stories of three female New Orleanians who, for variously legitimate reasons, chose not to evacuate. While it is not explicit in the text, the descriptions suggest an effort to capture the experiences of victims across a range of ages, familial arrangements, and socio-economic statuses.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Cameron McWhirter, "Magician Gains Firm Grip on Life; Riding Out Storm Brings New Outlook," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 5, 2005, 10A.

¹⁹ Jubera and McKenna, "Katrina Storms Ashore."

²⁰ Patrick O'Driscoll, Steve Wieberg, Peter Eisler, and Rick Hampson, "Inside City, The Deluge Came After the Storm," *USA Today*, September 6, 2005, 10A.

²¹ Ibid.

[Deborah] Caldwell, 44, a casino employee, holed up with her family in her stilt-legged shotgun house not far from the Superdome. She was motivated by a desire to stay put and by a religious fatalism: She was a Christian. She trusted the Lord. She didn't have a problem dying, if it came to that.

[Twanda] Otis, 20, a cook at the Bourbon Street restaurant Remoulade, had two good reasons to leave: her baby, Richard, born seven days earlier, and her 5-year-old son, Philip. She, her children, her boyfriend and nine relatives packed into a van and tried to get out of town Sunday morning. They never made it through a snarl of traffic. Finally, they turned back.

[Pat] Thomas, 62, a retired school counselor, knew that hurricanes nearly always missed the city and never flooded her Carrollton neighborhood, whose stately homes had withstood a century of storms. So she decided to stay with her dog, Ginger. On Sunday night, as Katrina closed in, she had rice and beans and a big bottle of wine with a few other neighbors who stayed behind. They were sure they could beat the storm. That's New Orleans: *Laissez les bon temps rouler*.²²

Deborah Caldwell is a mother (her son is 19) and a working-class employee of a casino. While she unwisely chose to wait out the storm in a "stilt-legged shotgun house," she reportedly adheres to a costly "religious fatalism" that prevents her from caring for herself and her family.²³ Twanda Otis is a single, (black?) working mother, whose ultimate failure to evacuate positions her as endangering an infant and a five-year-old. Though she waited to leave town until Sunday morning, she is credited with recognizing the threat to herself and her children and attempting to evacuate. The reference to her leaving in a van with nine other family members might imply that she doesn't own her own car, and might as well indicate that she is supported by or is responsible for the care of her extended family. Pat Thomas is a case study in foolhardiness. Retired and affluent, Thomas lives among the "stately homes" of Carrollton in Uptown, and while she

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

presumably had the time and resources to evacuate, like many, she chose not to act, assuming that her home would be safe. Instead, she and her neighbors took the storm as an opportunity to throw a party.

The article goes on to tell a morality tale of personal responsibility and risk management. All three women waited out the storm safely, but found themselves in desperate situations as the levees breached and they were left stranded in the city.²⁴ The article lends itself to various readings. On the one hand, the case studies support a popular anti-racism that sees beyond stereotypes in searching for evidence of the soul. For example, Twanda Otis, the young, single, working mother with two children reads as more personally responsible than the wealthier, retired woman who willfully defied officials. Another reading might be an affirmation of the federal government's position that "the storm did not discriminate." Even though human interest stories are anecdotal evidence, they are evidence nonetheless that provided the news with a competing perspective and a sense of 'balance.' It was precisely this 'bluntness' of social categories²⁵ as terms of analysis that enabled colorblind views to persist. And indeed, pointing to the 'bluntness' of social difference and the tyranny of categories was one way that racist denials were asserted under the guise of an anti-racism.

With the end of the storm on the afternoon of Monday, August 29, came the first reports of looting and violence, and with them, a further dimension by which the news media were able to identify the deserving from the undeserving victims. Immediately, Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour-R vowed to be "ruthless" with looters, while both Governor Blanco-D and President Bush persisted throughout the week in advocating a "zero-tolerance" policy on looting.²⁶ By contrast, journalists on the ground witnessing the intensification of the suffering first hand gradually began to condone acts of looting deemed necessary for survival. That is, around the same time that the news media recognized black poverty as significant and the storm as a man-made debacle brought

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ See Adolph Reed Jr., "Class-ifying the Hurricane," *The Nation*, October 3, 2005.

²⁶ See "National Guard Pours Into New Orleans, Mississippi," *USA Today*, August 31, 2005
http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2005-08-31-katrina_x.htm

about by failures at all levels of government (during the crisis period of 8/31-9/2), there began to be broader efforts on the part of journalists to explain what under normal circumstances would be regarded as unexplainable deviance. By Friday, September 2, as this letter to the editor suggests, the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate property crime given present conditions on the ground had been thoroughly articulated.

With all businesses being closed, the foolhardy who chose to remain behind (and those who had no choice) understandably may steal food and other essentials to survive. Looters, on the other hand --- who steal luxury items and other nonessential food products --- are the lowest form of human life. Unfortunately, circumstances prevent law enforcement from incarcerating them. What they really deserve would be frowned upon by dogooders.²⁷

As time wore on, the difficulty in effectively policing looting made it difficult to uphold the legitimacy of property crime. For example, a September 8 news segment on *ABC Nightline* focused on a Greyhound bus station that had been converted into a temporary makeshift prison to house the criminals who had been “exploiting the crisis.”²⁸ Given the day after day of ‘criminals’ allowed to go free because police had nowhere to put them, the return of normal law now that the city had largely been evacuated seemed forced. As Tapper described it, ‘Camp Greyhound’ was a series of open-air barbed wire cages that served as a temporary holding center to book criminals, who, after having “hearings with New Orleans judges by video conference,” were sent on to prisons elsewhere.²⁹ Tapper subtly questions this crude “frontier justice” and the treatment of prisoners who could receive significant sentences, up to three years in prison for looting, while the warden in charge defends the return of normal law, arguing that “frontier justice” is better than none at all.³⁰

²⁷ Andrew W. Vendal, “Readers Write: Looters Demonstrate Worst of Humanity,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 1, 2005, 18A.

²⁸ *ABC Nightline with Ted Koppel*, Thursday, September 8, 2005.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

According to Tapper, “overwhelmingly, they’ve been charged with looting, but other alleged crimes range from the attempted murder of a police officer to public intoxication and not having a driver’s license.”³¹ Contrary to the earlier reports of rampant violence, the crimes being successfully policed were mostly less severe and mostly those that implicate the poor. Tapper interviews two female inmates; one was accused of robbing a pharmacy while another claimed to have picked up eyeliner and nail polish that others had dropped in the street. Both agreed that given the circumstances, the police were overreacting; that the real injustice was the petty adherence to procedure that kept them separated from their children and families who were now homeless.³² Since the meaning of looting had become widely contested and qualified, it would require regular redefinition and affirmation from figures of authority. While the warden admitted that it was necessary to redefine what is morally acceptable given the circumstances—to distinguish “looting” from “surviving”—he maintains that the conduct of the victims left with nothing must remain criminalized as a matter of principle. As he sees it, “looters are about one step –they’re about the same as a grave robber.”³³

While the actions of some victims betrayed evidence of the ‘worst’ of humanity, others that audiences might expect the worst from chose selflessness. A *CNN NewsNight* segment on Friday, September 9, featured a story about a prisoner with a heart of gold. As Brown introduced the story:

The early days of this tragedy...were filled with stories of people looting, preying on the helpless and more. In general, acting like bad people. Tonight, the story of a bad guy. An admitted and jailed forger who was brought by fate and circumstances to one of those moments in life where he was tested, and it’s fair to say he passed.³⁴

The prisoner, a white male convicted of forgery serving a sentence at Hancock County Jail in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi had an opportunity to escape, but instead he rescued a

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, Friday September 9, 2005.

deputy who had fallen trying to help a man and woman get to safety, and went on to rescue several others. What made the story newsworthy (and the moral) is that no one reportedly expected this type of behavior from an inmate, particularly one jailed for check forgery. His show of compassion for others led deputies to consider giving him a pardon. As Deputy Bob Underwood put it, “When it got down to it, he didn’t think about anything but other people—maybe for the first time in his life.”³⁵ According to the story, the experience taught him the value of helping others.

On Wednesday August 31, Texas Governor Rick Perry (R) and local officials in Houston offered the Astrodome as a temporary shelter to house those stranded at the Superdome.³⁶ That evening, CNN and other networks reported that the first bus had arrived at the Astrodome. After a period of confusion, it was determined that the bus was not an official FEMA chartered bus, but a ‘stolen’ Orleans Parish school bus carrying 60 residents of the Fischer housing development in Algiers driven by 20 year-old Jabar Gibson. As the story developed, Gibson came to signify the belief that the whole mess could have been averted by a willingness to suspend bureaucracy and flexibly act in the moment. Gibson’s arrival in Houston took the theme of the violence of state bureaucracy to the level of farce as the victims from the Algiers housing project were initially barred from the Astrodome because they had not come directly from the Superdome, where needs had been officially assessed and verified.

With distance, Gibson as the embodiment of selflessness, creative thinking, and action was qualified and contested. Six weeks later, the front page of the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* announced, “To some he is a thug, but to the 60 people on the school bus he commandeered as Hurricane Katrina’s floodwaters rose, Jabar Gibson is nothing short of a hero.”³⁷ The thesis of this front page, feature length character study was Gibson’s easy transition from ‘thug’ to ‘hero’ and back. According to the article:

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ “Texas to House Louisiana Refugees in Astrodome,” Office of the Governor, Rick Perry, Wednesday, August 31, 2005, <http://governor.state.tx.us/news/press-release/3240/>

³⁷ Josh Peter, “Taking the Wheel,” *The New Orleans Times-Picayune*, Sunday, October 16, 2005, A1.

His act of heroism came less than two weeks after his most recent arrest. Gibson, who said he was expelled from high school in the 10th grade for fighting and claims he is known by police as the ‘kingpin’ of the Fischer development, led police on a high-speed chase Aug. 18. It ended with a car wreck, four police officers suffering minor injuries, and the arrests of Gibson and Otis Louis, 22. Gibson faces a pending charge of possession of crack cocaine stemming from a June arrest. In 2002, he pleaded guilty to felony car theft charges and was sentenced to two years probation.³⁸

Gibson explained his behavior as a result of being “in the wrong place at the wrong time.”³⁹ He goes on to frame his act of compassion and heroism as a catalyst for his own conversion—“...all that’s behind me now. I’m trying to be a new me. . . . I feel like the Lord, all the problems I was going through, he just turned it around for me.”⁴⁰

The article recounts Gibson’s picaresque journey from New Orleans to Houston as threatened at every turn by the racial prejudices of others. The police officers and law-abiding citizens Gibson encounters are challenged to suspend their prejudices and their sense of the normal rule of the law of property and to recognize a circumstance in which everyday thuggery transforms into heroics. When a New Orleans police officer threatened to derail the journey before it began, Gibson managed to convince her that he needed to help “the babies and the elderly.”⁴¹ The officer’s enabling of Gibson’s conversion from thug to do-gooder is contrasted with another incident witnessed by Gibson where police officers detained a group of victims who had ‘commandeered’ some mail trucks. Later, as Gibson stopped to refuel, the owner of a rural convenience store considered but ultimately decided not to alert police as a “horde of people” filled his store. Another gas station owner, a “self-described coonass,”⁴² alerted police under the

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

pretense of calling a mechanic to fix a flat tire.⁴³ As these examples suggest, racist suspicion prevents otherwise good, law-abiding citizens from recognizing the various forms through which spontaneous compassion, selflessness and the best of humanity are expressed.

As I have tried to show, human interest news was focused on uncovering the attitudes, beliefs, and moral bearings of the victims that had remained in Katrina's path in an effort to understand precisely what motivated their actions. This popular anti-racism in human interest stories demanded examination of the soul in order to understand why some victims displayed the 'best' of humanity—looking after their families, respecting property, and looking for opportunities to give of themselves despite the tremendous losses they personally had suffered, while others, apparently equally poor and disadvantaged, were compelled to exploit the crisis for their own gain by looting stores, terrorizing and preying on families, committing acts of violence, and threatening the lives of the very people who came to their aid.

Obligatory Compassion

As soon as the winds died down, the images of uncontrolled looting seemed to indicate that city police were overwhelmed. This was confirmed on Wednesday, August 31, when Mayor Nagin announced that due to escalating lawlessness, NOPD would be forced to suspend all rescue operations and focus exclusively on policing. As part of efforts to understand why crime was going unpunished, it was reported that many officers, themselves victims, were either dead, missing, or had willfully abandoned the city. CNN reported on the officers of the 1st District downtown, reduced to merely defending their headquarters. When interviewed during the first week, NOPD Chief Eddie Compass appeared overwhelmed as he confirmed rumors of violence and the 'criminal element' that had police 'outgunned.' Many residents reported either being

⁴² "Coonass" refers to the Cajun ethnicity. While it is largely considered a derogatory term, working-class Cajuns have appropriated it as symbol of ethnic pride. Much like the term 'redneck,' the journalist's choice of referring to the gas station owner who alerted the police to Gibson's bus as a "self-described coonass" implies racial antagonisms.

⁴³ Josh Peter, "Taking the Wheel."

abandoned or ignored by police. Those stranded outside the Convention Center reported city police patrolling in cars who refused to help. Evidence of the psychological toll on city police was later affirmed by revelations that two NOPD officers had committed suicide in the days after the flooding.

After the city was evacuated, Compass addressed allegations that city police had mismanaged the crisis at the Superdome and the Convention Center. In a September 8 interview with Ted Koppel, Compass argued that it was impossible to effectively police the Convention Center and the Superdome, each housing some 30,000 residents according to his estimates, let alone to police the rest of the city, with roughly 200 officers and limited resources.⁴⁴ In a CNN interview, Compass made a list of grievances: “No medical care. We had no food, no water. We were defecating in the street, urinating in the street. No uniforms. And we were fighting a criminal element that was heavily armed. They were shooting indiscriminately around civilians, so we couldn’t return fire.”⁴⁵ Officers of the 6th Precinct were forced to set up a temporary headquarters on a dry Wal-Mart parking lot after their station flooded. Many lived out of their patrol cars or in tents.⁴⁶ Most had lost their homes. Some had lost family members; others didn’t know what happened to their families.

In a September 8 interview, Chief Compass made clear his position on officers that evacuated: “Those cowards that cut and ran....they will pay. There will be no mercy for those...who left the field of battle and dishonored this badge.”⁴⁷ On September 19, CNN aired the story of an NOPD Lieutenant who chose his family over his city. The explanation of the officer’s motivations sheds further light on the diverse personal and moral dilemmas many officers faced.⁴⁸ But according to the text, the choice of family over nation was an act of selfishness. As another officer put it, “Everybody had a wife.

⁴⁴ Eddie Compass, *ABC’s Nightline with Ted Koppel*, Thursday, September 8, 2005.

⁴⁵ Eddie Compass, *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, September 8, 2005.

⁴⁶ *ABC’s Nightline with Ted Koppel*, Thursday, September 8, 2005.

⁴⁷ Eddie Compass, *ABC’s Nightline with Ted Koppel*, Thursday, September 8, 2005.

⁴⁸ Lieutenant Henry Waller, *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, Monday, September 19, 2005.

Everybody has got families. Everybody needed to see them. But...we all didn't flee. If I had done that, how do you face your children and try to make them do the right thing ever again? Where is your moral authority over your children or your spouse or anybody? You've lost it."⁴⁹ On Thursday, September 22, CNN reported on seventy NOPD officers that began running operations out of a downtown hotel that had continued to house stranded tourists. While the majority of the police dutifully "went out to fight the looters and thugs," eight of the officers "began a four-day-long looting spree of their own."⁵⁰ According to the hotel manager, the officers returned with "everything from Adidas shoes to Rolex watches."⁵¹ They allegedly stole a generator from Tulane University Hospital, which they used to operate fans and a beer cooler in their hotel room, as well as a school bus from the Superdome that they used on their late night looting sprees.⁵² As Aaron Brown observed, "One of the many lessons Katrina taught is that human behavior can magnify chaos."⁵³

The 'best' among New Orleans' finest were those who despite the conditions and their own personal losses stayed and went above and beyond the call of duty to selflessly defend the city/nation. Anderson Cooper returned to focus on the work of the 6th District NOPD—those first described in a September 8, *Nightline* segment as working out of a Wal-Mart parking lot. They were joined by volunteer officers from Texas who were serving up some well-deserved barbecue brisket. Cooper introduced viewers to a new recruit just out of police academy who was not obligated to stay, but chose to out of a sense of duty. Reflecting on the volunteers, the 6th District Captain announced:

We couldn't ask for better guys to come in. The people around this country that are worried about the youth of today, just look over my shoulder and you'll find out that this country is in good hands. Every last one of these officers are heroes. Every last one of them....You go to the

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Aaron Brown, *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, Thursday September 22, 2005.

beginning, rumors were rampant that police had run and that the police weren't on the streets. Let me tell you, every officer in this district and the other districts, well, they had a couple who left. But the vast majority, 99 percent of the police officers in this city stood tall. I mean, we were in a police station that was shaking in the wind. Not one flinched.⁵⁴

In relation to other stories, this particular piece highlights the difference between those obligated to serve and those who arrive as private volunteers driven by the mandates of the heart. Even though they are all officers with a formal duty to serve in their jurisdictions, the invocation of volunteerism—a sense of duty that extends beyond normal everyday obligations—permits the language of private compassion to be deployed. In contrast to other contexts where the police as representatives of the state are failing in their obligations to serve, it means something significantly more that these police have decided to volunteer.⁵⁵

News stories examining the New Orleans police and the various parish officials and deputies are an interesting case study because they occupy a position at the interstices of private/public, genuine/obligatory, flexible/rigid, care/threat. While they are law enforcement officials, the storm revealed them also as victims coping with vulnerabilities, personal struggles, and loss. Thus, interpretations of their actions and motivations produce a politics of pity that is correspondingly complex. Some are vilified for choosing family over their formal duty to serve the city while others persist in their duty to serve, but their personal frustrations and divided loyalties cause more harm than good. Others, whether they are obligated to serve or not, adhere to a sense of duty.

Habits of the Heart: What Motivates Compassion?

⁵⁴ *CNN NewsNight*, Friday, September 16, 2005.

⁵⁵ The officers went on to describe themselves as the defenders of 'Fort Apache,' a reference to the 1981 Hollywood film *Fort Apache: The Bronx*. In one sense the reference invokes frontier lawlessness and racialized antagonisms pitting police against the 'criminal element.' Furthermore, the fabled precinct in the film, a last outpost of order amid lawlessness and disorder, is underfunded, underappreciated and largely abandoned by the state. Read in this light, the rag-tag volunteer defenders of 'Fort Apache' display a special idealism, motivated by a belief in law for law's sake and a commitment to the community that not surprisingly goes deeper than the state's commitment.

As FEMA confirmed myths of a bungling, bureaucratic, inflexible, and impersonal government, perpetuating further violence under the guise of care, these stories were contrasted in the news with case studies of average citizens defying FEMA's red tape and providing immediate, personalized care to the victims of Katrina. As FEMA Director Michael Brown, gas gouging service station owners and speculators, those 'race-baiting' and 'playing politics,' and the constantly shifting category of 'the criminal element' in their own way represented the 'worst' of humanity, daily newspapers and broadcast news programs were filled with human interest stories describing school fundraisers, suburban children cracking open their piggy banks, staffing lemonade stands, and holding bake sales. It was even newsworthy that a group of prisoners in Virginia donated a week of their prison wages to the victims of Katrina. All over the nation (and the world), people you might expect, and likewise, people (and nations, like Venezuela) that no would ever expect, came together to address the crisis.

The end of the spectacle in New Orleans led to more retrospective news capturing the personal stories that had been missed during the chaos of the first week. On Tuesday, September 6, Aaron Brown interviewed three white, male, college students from Duke University who decided to do what they could to help. They drove directly to the Convention Center, using stolen, forged, press passes to get past security checkpoints in the city. Like Jabar Gibson, their actions are made to serve as a critique of federal bureaucracy. As one student recounted, "Once we were past the National Guard, it literally...was a direct drive."⁵⁶ Upon their arrival, they saw "bus after bus after bus...completely empty...driving away from the city or parked roadside," not evacuating anyone.⁵⁷ The moral of the story, as another student concluded: "The people at the Convention Center, they weren't trapped by hurricane damage; they were trapped by red tape. And if we could drive right in there in twenty minutes, there's no reason why help couldn't have gotten to them sooner."⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ David Hankla, *CNN NewsNight*, Tuesday, September 6, 2005.

⁵⁸ Sonny Byrd, *CNN NewsNight*, Tuesday, September 6, 2005.

When asked what compelled them to action, one student replied, “I’ve always criticized myself for dreaming big, but not having the initiative to go through with it. And just this one time I decided, I’m not going to be an armchair humanitarian.”⁵⁹ According to another, one person’s misery is another’s “great opportunity....everything that’s available for us to do to really help people, we need to do that.”⁶⁰ But in the context of this story and nearly every other human interest narrative examining the ‘best’ of humanity, ‘everything’ is exhausted by do-it-yourself humanitarianism. Demonstrating flexibility, initiative, creativity, selflessness, and an authentic commitment to social responsibility, they underscore the value of a model of “neighbors helping neighbors.”

Later that week, on Friday September 9, *NBC Nightly News* ran a segment attempting to uncover the motivations that drive some citizens to display the ‘best’ of humanity by finding, in the language of social entrepreneurialism, “personal and very creative ways to give.”⁶¹ The segment centers on two people who “chose two very different paths to help those in need.”⁶² Joyce Floher, a white, 68-year-old grandmother, retiree, and member of the Kentucky Southern Baptists had been a committed Samaritan since she first volunteered in the wake of 9/11.⁶³ Floher is contrasted with 54-year-old Benjamin Walker, a white, “ponytailed North Carolina father of twins who’s been on disability for years and has issues with the God-fearing crowd.”⁶⁴ Watching the television coverage compelled him to do “something, anything to help.”⁶⁵ Walker, “jumped on his old motorcycle and 900 miles later ran out of gas in the middle of the Salvation Army”

⁵⁹ Hans Buder, *CNN NewsNight*, Tuesday, September 6, 2005.

⁶⁰ David Hankla, *CNN NewsNight*, Tuesday, September 6, 2005.

⁶¹ Brian Williams, *NBC Nightly News*, Friday, September 9, 2005.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

who reportedly took him in.⁶⁶ As Sandy Roberts, a volunteer with the Salvation Army reflected, “just sometimes you get a feeling about people, they’re good people.”⁶⁷

Driven by her religious beliefs to action (rather than a religious ‘fatalism’) Floher represents the ideal ‘foot-soldier’ of faith-based rhetoric; humanity, flexibility, compassion, and individualized care, everything that federal provision is decidedly not. Against her example, Walker represents what Toby Miller refers to as the “citizen in formation.”⁶⁸ While driven to help by the images of suffering on television, his journey is ultimately to find himself. As Taibbi observes, “sometimes the very act of helping is just as good for those doing the helping as it is for those in need.”⁶⁹ The story ends by suggesting a religious conversion in which Walker finds a higher purpose in serving others. According to the reporter, they had come “by different routes” to reveal “the best...of human nature.”⁷⁰

On Thursday, September 8 and Friday, September 9 *CNN NewsNight* featured the story of Paige Benson, a white juvenile probation officer and her husband, a CPA, who were driven to help.⁷¹ The Bensons, residents of Foley, Alabama, took vacation time to provide food service to the National Guard troops and police officers responding to the disaster. As Benson described it, it began as a small operation, serving a few hundred people, and grew to provide 6,000 meals a day. The Elberta, Alabama Little Leaguers “donated all the sausage so police officers and first responders and soldiers can eat.”⁷² Summarizing the moral of private care, a first

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Toby Miller, *The Well-Tempered Self*.

⁶⁹ Mike Taibbi, *NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams*, Friday, September 9, 2005.

⁷⁰ *NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams*, Friday, September 9, 2005.

⁷¹ Anderson Cooper, *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, Thursday, September 8, 2005.

⁷² *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, Friday, September 9, 2005.

responder replied, military rations “are all right. But, I mean, you get a hot meal, it means you’re closer to home. It makes you feel closer to home.”⁷³

The narrative reaffirms the myth of private provision as personalized, flexible, immediate action that resists bureaucracy. Benson’s example implicitly suggests a critique of government that Anderson Cooper makes explicit. That is, rather than assuming,

Well, the cavalry has showed up, everything must be running smoothly...what we’re seeing, time and time again...It’s individual citizens, groups of people banded together, and just grabbing what they can, ...a spatula or a grill, if that’s it, or a stethoscope or a rifle, and just banding together...Ignoring the bureaucracy and just getting here and getting things done.⁷⁴

Gaps in the government’s response are filled by private citizens who organize underutilized resources and unpaid labor in creative ways in order to meet a critical need. Thus the story lends itself to a reading that reinforces the narrative of responsible citizenship, an inflexible and bureaucratic state, and a market ideology of social entrepreneurialism. Furthermore, personalized care recognizes sacrifices that go unnoticed by government officials. As Benson observes, “they should be taking care of these people. They’re out here trying to save lives, and take care of this city...and no one’s looking after them.”⁷⁵

On Monday, September 19, *CNN NewsNight* showcased a “pistol packin’ single mom who let nothing stand in her way, including FEMA red tape on her mission to help.”⁷⁶ Rena Salomon, a white, single mother and a private contractor, left her home in Santa Clara, California, and arrived in New Orleans on Thursday, September 1, driving “a black Hummer, wearing a tank top [and] ripped jeans, with a video camera, a handgun

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Anderson Cooper, *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, Thursday, September 8, 2005.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Aaron Brown, *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, Monday, September 19, 2005.

and her own theme song.”⁷⁷ Invoking by now a fully articulated narrative of responsive, individualized, private care as antidote to the state’s violent, bungling, mass care, Salomon “drove to some of the roughest parts of New Orleans and evacuated people who were afraid of the shelters, but trusted her.”⁷⁸ In the end, she reportedly spent 12 days and \$15,000 of her own money. She, her son, and his friends, evacuated 84 residents from the city, including an extended family of 22. She brought three residents back to her home in California who had nowhere to go. In Baton Rouge she met Wendell Paul, a black man, who had been separated from his children and helped him find his sister and later his four kids at a shelter in Austin, Texas. Reflecting on the “angel in a Hummer,” Paul reasoned, “I figure I stand a better chance in finding my family with Rena than I would with anybody else. I asked for help, nobody would give it to me. National Guard turned their back, FEMA turned their back, Red Cross turned their back.”⁷⁹

The question raised is what distinguishes a Rena Salomon from others who watch and are compelled to donate some cash or clothing or canned goods, or who do nothing, or worse, who respond with armchair criticism.⁸⁰ Explaining her motivations, Salomon said, “When I started watching the TV coverage of the women wading through the water with their children and their children dying and them dying, and hearing their stories of nobody helping them, it compelled me to get out there.”⁸¹ After further probing, Solomon recounted her son’s battle with childhood leukemia, and one night in which she “prayed to God that if he helped me save my son’s life, I would forever serve him in saving his other children.”⁸² Despite all that she was able to do, she is “haunted” by those she left behind and by the sense that she could do more: “I

⁷⁷ Peter Viles, *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, Monday, September 19, 2005.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Wendell Paul, *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, Monday, September 19, 2005.

⁸⁰ Anderson Cooper, *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, Monday, September 19, 2005.

⁸¹ Rena Salomon, *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, Monday, September 19, 2005.

⁸² *Ibid.*

promised [God] they were my responsibility, and they need food, they need housing, they need cars, and I don't know what to do.”⁸³

Taken together, these stories fully articulate a discourse of personalized compassion. The critical difference between criticism (the politics of indignation), private humanitarian action, and obligatory state care is the question of incentive. The ‘good’ citizen is motivated not by a desire to criticize and demand justice (often maligned as ‘playing politics’) nor by a vaguely defined formal obligation to protect citizens and a deeper concern with managing a public image (as in federal’s government professing a commitment to Homeland Security by creating a new bureaucracy that seems to confirm that commitment) but by a deeply personal (often spiritual) experience. The attitudes, actions, and behaviors of the ‘best’ of humanity in the wake of Katrina involve taking responsibility for the suffering of others by funding private charities and directly intervening to care for individuals—rather than political organizing and activism. This finding is indicative of the pervasiveness of the Samaritan narrative as it tends to exhaust the potential ways that acts of good citizenship might be expressed in times of disaster.

Threats to Compassion

As human interest stories linked whiteness with selflessness, humanitarian action, and the ‘best’ of humanity, by the third week of reporting, anxieties had begun to be expressed that the nation’s outpouring of compassion risked becoming indiscriminate and excessive. Parallel to the myth that mass state redistributions are undiscerning as a result of an inherent bureaucratic inflexibility and an inability to scrutinize the soul of individual victims to uncover their hidden desires, the often powerful emotions that drive private compassion, if unchecked, can also lead to injustices. On Wednesday, September 14, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* ran a front-page article warning Georgians of the dangers of extending compassion indiscriminately. Atlanta, like Houston, San Antonio, Baton Rouge, and Jackson, was an important front where the private Armies of Compassion struggled in the trenches with need.

⁸³ Ibid.

The narrative recounted the experience of Lindsey Wilson, a Georgia State student that opened her heart to the victims of Katrina. While she had neither “a lot of money nor a lot of time,” she opened her home to a single mother because she wanted to help a child and “quietly help someone piece their life back together.”⁸⁴ Wilson went to her local Red Cross center in Marietta, Georgia and found Beretta Jo Hogg, a single mother with an eight-year-old son, who was there to receive cash assistance designated for the victims of Katrina. Wilson invited the mother and son to use her spare bedroom and took them shopping. Later, Hogg’s son revealed that they were not in fact hurricane victims and that they had recently been evicted from their nearby apartment. Wilson promptly called local police and Hogg was arrested and charged with a felony for deceptively accepting \$1300 of Red Cross donations earmarked for Katrina evacuees. She was taken to Cobb County Jail pending a \$2850 bond.⁸⁵ Besides the official information from authorities, the story was framed primarily from the perspective of Wilson. While she reportedly did not want to dissuade others from opening their hearts to Katrina victims, she admitted that she “lost a little faith in humanity.”⁸⁶ When asked if she would take in another evacuee (presumably a confirmed victim of the storm), Wilson replied, “I hate to say it, but no. I’m a little jaded. It hurts. I try to function on the belief that people are inherently good, but after this...”⁸⁷ Wilson’s story serves as a cautionary tale to those who open their hearts indiscriminately.

Various incarnations of the Katrina fraud story were reported in Atlanta and throughout the Gulf Coast at this time, many involving single (presumably black) mothers attempting to pass as Katrina victims. The Associated Press (AP) carried the stories of LaTanya Lewis, a Georgia resident and single mother of four children who posed as a hurricane victim and received from volunteers “a new home and more than

⁸⁴ D.A. Markiewicz, “Katrina aftermath: Fake evacuee leaves donor feeling burned,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 14, 2005, 1A.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

\$10,000 in appliances, clothes, and other aid.”⁸⁸ Emphasizing the seriousness of the fraud and the injustice of the exchange, Duluth Police Detective Frances Foster observed that the family received “more clothes than they could wear in a year.”⁸⁹ Lewis’s children were reportedly placed with state authorities. Another Atlanta resident, Nakia Dewuane Grimes, was reportedly arrested for trying to collect a FEMA relief check for \$2,000.⁹⁰ In the years since Katrina, hundreds of fraudulent claims for federal relief money have been identified and prosecuted resulting in stiff fines and prison sentences. These case studies of Samaritans being preyed upon emerged primarily in local news in those areas where anxieties developed over how the burden of compassion should be distributed. In national news, the same fears surfaced in stories examining the fairness of distributing federal spending cuts among the states and concerns about the Red Cross effectively utilizing charitable contributions. That these stories emerge all at once indicates a developing uncertainty about the worthiness of everyone receiving aid and who should rightly occupy the position of victim.

The Burdens of Compassion

The reporting of the panic in Baton Rouge from 8/31-9/2, as the city’s population nearly doubled in size, raises some interesting questions about the logics of race and the limits of compassion. News stories described the influx of residents from New Orleans as both a crisis and an opportunity. Relocating New Orleanians were a threat in that the city had to absorb the invisible ‘criminal element,’ the extra burden on public services and private compassion generated by the unproductive segment of the population; those who don’t work, those with need, as well as the vast numbers of people looking for unskilled, service and manufacturing jobs in an already overcrowded market. On the other hand, the migration was an opportunity in that the injection of consumers, entrepreneurs, and

⁸⁸ Associated Press, “Woman accused of wrongly receiving \$10,000 in hurricane services,” AccessNorthGa.com, September 24, 2005, <http://new.accessnorthga.com/detail.php?n=138777&c=2>

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

capital would likely generate booming markets in a range of sectors, from real estate to (not ironically) security.⁹¹

The national focus on Baton Rouge began Wednesday, August 31, after a fight at a temporary shelter housing 5,500 evacuees. Mayor Melvin L. ‘Kip’ Holden reportedly “blasted the state for sending ‘New Orleans thugs’ to his city,” arguing “we do not want to inherit the looting and all of the other foolishness that went on in New Orleans.... We do not want to inherit that breed that seeks to prey on other people.”⁹² According to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*—Atlanta being another city where a significant number of Katrina victims relocated—the parish-wide population was projected to triple, to nearly one million.⁹³ The threat of race emerged as the threat of numbers as it threatened the way of life in this “All-American Southern city.”⁹⁴ The same article compared Baton Rouge to New Orleans according to race, education, and income.⁹⁵ According to the article, “The population of New Orleans is about two-thirds African-American, compared to about half in Baton Rouge. The median household income in Baton Rouge is \$30,308, compared to \$27,137 in New Orleans, according to the Census Bureau. And in Baton Rouge, one in three people graduated from college, compared to 1 in 4 in New Orleans.”⁹⁶ The unstated conclusion then was that Baton Rouge was becoming poorer, blacker, and less educated.

In Baton Rouge, the primary concerns were safety and overcrowding. After the River Center incident, Mayor Holden appeared on *CNN NewsNight* one week later to affirm the city’s compassion and selflessness.⁹⁷ In Houston, concerns were expressed that

⁹¹ See Bob Dart, “Baton Rouge Balloons with Evacuees; Influx Brings Lines, Fear, Opportunity,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 6, 2005, 9A. Brady Dennis and Carrie Johnson, “Baton Rouge Swells with Victims and Problems,” *The St. Petersburg Times*, September 3, 2005, http://www.sptimes.com/2005/09/03/Worldandnation/Baton_Rouge_swells_wi.shtml

⁹² See Bob Dart, “Baton Rouge Balloons with Evacuees.”

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Baton Rouge Mayor Kip Holden, *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, Thursday September 8, 2005.

the displaced children that Texas Governor Rick Perry-R had compassionately promised to enroll in public schools would turn out to be underperforming students, lowering average test scores, threatening funding, and requiring additional services. There were further concerns that the federal government might not fully reimburse Texas for the costs of taking in displaced students and temporarily suspend performance benchmarks.⁹⁸ Worries were also expressed that Texas would have to bear a disproportionate share of the burden. With “Texas’ three biggest cities teeming with Louisiana evacuees,” over Labor Day weekend, Governor Rick Perry announced that Texas was at capacity while calling on other states to do their part.⁹⁹ In Atlanta, as in Baton Rouge and Houston, concerns were voiced about the influx of patients who would further crowd the city’s already overwhelmed healthcare system, potentially compromising the care that Georgia residents received.¹⁰⁰

On the other hand, the rise in numbers was interpreted as a boon for local businesses. In Baton Rouge, the crowded real estate market and the vast number of people looking to relocate worked to inflate property values. The Baton Rouge Chamber of Commerce estimated that new arrivals were “pumping an extra 10 billion dollars a day into the local economy.”¹⁰¹ While concerns were justified about the relocating ‘criminal element,’ those residents who will require services, and those who will crowd an already saturated job market in the low-paying, low-skilled, service sector, there was much to be gained by the relocation of entrepreneurs, business owners, and professionals. These cost/benefit assessments—what was to be gained and what was to be lost by New Orleanians settling in Baton Rouge—revealed precisely the kind of people that were valued; the professional classes, business owners, and entrepreneurs that provide

⁹⁸ Samantha Levine, “Delegation Seeks to Be Sure Texas Gets Repaid; Lawmakers Want to Recoup Money Spent on Evacuees,” *The Houston Chronicle*, Friday, September 9, 2005, A24. Editorial staff, “Help Schools that Enroll Evacuees,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Thursday, September 8, 2005, 18A.

⁹⁹ Ernie Suggs, “Texas Calls on Other States to Share the Load,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Monday, September 5, 2005, 6A; Terri Langford, “With 240,000 Evacuees Here, State Seeking Other Options,” *The Houston Chronicle*, Monday, September 5, 2005, 1A.

¹⁰⁰ Patricia Guthrie, “Metro Facilities Face Long-Term Health Burden,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Monday, September 5, 2005, 1A.

¹⁰¹ Bob Dart, “Baton Rouge Balloons with Evacuees.”

services, create jobs, and stimulate other markets through their commerce and productivity. The entrepreneurial class is constructed as selflessly providing and as productive of opportunity, while labor; those who need and who consume opportunity, are constructed as a threat according to their numbers.

News stories examining broad movements of populations and the threat of blackness are particularly interesting when read against stories in which blackness is under threat of being engulfed by whiteness. On Wednesday, September 14, *ABC World News Tonight* ended with a human interest piece capturing the experiences of a single black family relocating to Salt Lake City, Utah. The segment was framed as a tale of “strangers in a strange land,” who feel “like they’ve landed on the far side of the moon.”¹⁰² According to the report, while the climate and the cooking are different, the most shocking difference for those relocating was the people. As correspondent Jim Avila summarized it, “One evacuee said it’s like being a fly in a bowl of milk. New Orleans is 67 percent African-American. Here, it’s less than 2 percent.”¹⁰³

In this foreign space, hundreds of miles from the centers of ongoing black suffering, a few hundred black evacuees are able to experience the full range of white compassion and importantly, to recognize that it is “genuine.”¹⁰⁴ The black “children of New Orleans” are shown in idyllic pastoral surroundings riding a horse for the first time.¹⁰⁵ Eager to “merge cultures” and make their guests welcome, the residents of Salt Lake City reportedly organized a “Cajun Gumbo party” for relocating families.¹⁰⁶ While their culture is threatened by their forced exodus, the families stand to benefit from the opportunities that come with living in a thoroughly white space. As Avila argues, “black unemployment here is half that of New Orleans,” and furthermore, the city had already

¹⁰² Elizabeth Vargas, *ABC World News Tonight*, Wednesday, September 14, 2005.

¹⁰³ Jim Avila, *ABC World News Tonight*, Wednesday, September 14, 2005.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

organized a job fair for evacuees.¹⁰⁷ Contrasting this story with the plight of Baton Rouge, the threat of race is a function of the perceived costs of integration. While Baton Rouge is framed in terms of the costs to the city, the Salt Lake City story emphasizes what the evacuees stand to gain. Thus, expressions of tender-heartedness were shaped by the politics of distributing the burden and the extent to which the costs were felt by others. This is naturally more visible in local news in regions where the burden of need was being felt first-hand.

Human Interest News as Evidence and as Counterevidence

Only by critically analyzing attitudes and behaviors can distant audiences come to know the soul of the victims and of others who have descended on the Gulf Coast. Through the amassing of case studies over time, journalists were able to conjure into being a shifting cast of characters as a means of making sense of behaviors and implicitly organizing the residents of New Orleans according to a hierarchical spectrum of worthiness. A persistent critical task was to distinguish the poor abandoned by government from the foolhardy that made the costly decision to stay. Another was to separate out the unruly ‘criminal element’ from those who through targeted interventions might return to self-sufficiency.

The purpose of this knowledge was to manage uncertainties over what motivates behaviors and to justify the politics of redistribution in the wake of Katrina. In order to be just, the recovery must be worthy of the suffering yet targeted, cost-effective, and efficient. Despite the eloquence of rhetorics on the nation’s selflessness and creativity in meeting need and the state’s bungling inefficiency and indifference, it remained that neither must be permitted to give excessively or indiscriminantly. Conduct must be scrutinized so that costly behaviors or beliefs are not rewarded. Those who give must protect themselves from those who would prey on their goodwill. Equal to the consequences of inaction in the face of an unfolding spectacle of human suffering it emerged, were the consequences of excessive and indiscriminate action. Since human

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

interest narratives deal with interiority and sentiment, they often isolate individuals and the choices they make from contexts of power. More often than not, those framed in the news as selfless were those who occupied a place of privilege and distance who could bear the costs of selflessness; while those vilified as selfish or profiting were the marginalized and vulnerable, who could least afford selflessness, and who had little power to affect how their behavior was interpreted.

To be sure, in the reporting of Katrina there are moments where there is a will on the part of the news media to come to terms with what are normally ‘anti-social’ behaviors. For example, some forms of ‘looting’ were informally decriminalized and justified by the need to survive in light of the lack of federal action. As it became clear that many residents remained in the city because they had no means of leaving, the blaming of victims gradually gave way to the blaming of local government for failing to organize an evacuation. But despite this compassionate will to understand the condition of the poor, to rationalize their attitudes and motivations, and to temporarily decriminalize their conduct, some behaviors—addiction, gang behaviors, resisting police, stealing luxury items—entirely resisted understanding, emerging as self-centered attempts to somehow profit from the crisis. Likewise, the crimes of the poor—check fraud, looting ‘non-essentials,’ passing as Katrina victims to receive benefits, ‘acting like thugs’—were framed as preying on the nation’s goodwill. Thus, it would emerge that some people, specifically a subset of the mostly poor, black people historically denied full citizenship that are presently under intense media scrutiny, just “become monsters.”¹⁰⁸ The only way the news media could understand these behaviors was to resort to the soul—the ‘best’ and the ‘worst’ as it emerges organically out of individuals, an internal struggle between good (selflessness or mere self-sufficiency—i.e. preserving the family) and evil (a will to personally gain). Thus, the politics of pity in the wake of Katrina often hinged on this point where legitimate need transformed into predation.

¹⁰⁸ It is remarkable to consider the intensity of anger incited by the possibility that the extremely poor, many of whom have lost everything (family members, their homes, their jobs), might respond to the crisis by looking out for their own interests. It is particularly revealing of the present ideology of the center when we compare the intensity of this anger expressed in the news media over victims looting a bag of diapers or a bottle of wine with the complacency, verging on admiration, for the investor class who do their looting after the disaster legitimately.

Throughout the crisis, the news media were constantly struggling, revising, and reformulating news frames in relation to challenges from within and without in order to produce a news that passes in the moment as not simply non-racial, but anti-racist. The central media played a critical role in accommodating the spectacle of Katrina by staking out within this loose and shifting terrain an *anti-racism of the center*—a news that attempts to satisfy the expectations of both those who will see poor, black suffering and interpret it as evidence of the persistence of racism and those who will see Katrina as a national crisis for all people no matter what their skin color; a news that paradoxically recognizes racial and class inequalities while at the same time, in other ways, confirms the virtues of colorblindness and national unity—both in the spirit of what is taken to be an anti-racism. Thus, the central news media reveals the complexity and multiplicity of ways in which race was imagined to matter or not matter, including as well various ways in which popular and often contradictory notions of anti-racism were articulated and defended.

The human interest genre must be read against and in dialogue with larger struggles over the dominant interpretations of Katrina taking place in live reporting and in the editorial pages. Human interest narratives differ from other types of news both in terms of their level of analysis—the individual—and in terms of their empirical weight as evidence; they are the data from which journalists draw inferences about how people have responded to the crisis. Their claims to truth are rooted in their claim to represent everyday experience, and as such, they provided a reservoir of evidence and counterevidence relevant to larger struggles over the meaning of Katrina.

Since human interest stories consider the disaster at the level of the individual, they can be read as affirming another type of popular anti-racism that sees difference not, or at least not primarily, in terms of social identities and inequalities but in terms of personal choice and self-conduct (i.e. those who chose to be “thugs” vs. those who chose to be “heroes”). In this way, the central news media accommodated both a narrative of Katrina as a racialized injustice with a more implicit narrative communicating racialized anxieties via the threat of opposing values and attitudes as they shape the conduct of individuals. That is, while blackness was recognized by the central news media as a

category of victimization, it remained that expressions of blackness via “thug” behavior posed a threat. Despite central media’s anti-racist reinvention of themselves during the crisis of 8/31-9/2, the threat of race remained in the news both through behaviors that go beyond what white compassion is willing to accommodate and through demands for rights that go beyond what white compassion is willing to extend (i.e. a “right of return”). While a new anti-racism of the center was being staked out by the news media including an awareness that most victims are black and poor and that government’s indifference to poor, black people is, in part, to blame, human interest stories continued to be structured by an obsessive, ostensibly colorblind accounting of those who produce, create, contribute, and sacrifice vs. those who are costly, burdensome, who demand, and who consume.

Human interest stories additionally provided evidence and counterevidence for larger narratives refiguring the proper role of government and private compassion in light of the crisis of 8/31-9/2. Generally speaking, the relationship between those who extended compassion and those who consumed it was a question of fortune rather than privilege. Also, despite (or perhaps, because of) the visibility of these questions surrounding the government’s racism and indifference to the poor, a critical part of what was celebrated of private compassion was a supposed anti-racist reassertion of colorblindness. That is to say, the charge of a bumbling, indifferent, and racist federal government established a colorblind, compassionate nation as its complementary other. Human interest stories provided evidence supporting both the news media’s celebration of private, colorblind, creative, and personal acts of compassion and its complement, a demonizing of state forms of provision as *essentially* inhuman, violent, and bureaucratic. Through these myths, it seemed natural to prefer the authentic and spontaneous kindness of strangers over the bureaucratic, inflexible, and regulated kindness of the state. It is precisely these myths, and how they work in the managing of provision that I examine in the next chapter.

Chapter V

‘Am I My Brother’s Keeper?’ Katrina Reporting and the Politics of Provision

Throughout the period of sustained focus on Hurricane Katrina in the national news, questions were raised regarding who should be responsible for preparing for and responding to the crisis and who should take the lead in the recovery. At stake was the politics of how the nation’s commitments to the victims of Katrina should be defined and how they might best be fulfilled. The news media played an important role in defining who should be responsible for fulfilling various aspects of the recovery—what government can do, what should be expected of corporate citizenship, what civil society and private individuals can do, and what is best achieved by the ‘free market.’ After Katrina, the news media of the center was a site of struggles to determine a proper and legitimate balance between freedom *of* the market and *from* the market; the need to be protected *by* government and *from* government; the right to give freely and creatively (or not) to those who are deserving of goodwill and the right to be protected from those who would seek to exploit it. The politics of finding this balance centered on the power of particular discourses to manage uncertainties over the motivations of government, of market actors, of charitable and non-governmental organizations, and of the victims themselves.

Immediately after Katrina, there was anticipation in the news that the federal government would descend on New Orleans with a surgical military precision recalling the 2003 invasion of Iraq. But the lack of an immediate federal response activated competing narratives of on the one hand a racist government indifferent to the plight of poor, black people and on the other hand, a bumbling, bloated, and inefficient government that responded to the crisis with bureaucratic paralysis. While the left saw the Katrina crisis as the result of a lack of government, voices from the right argued that

it was instead an outcome of excessive government—a view given weight by the oppressive presence of government as it began to resemble a military occupation of New Orleans. After President Bush promised a federal commitment to rebuild the city at a cost of an estimated \$200 billion, the narrative of a police state shifted to alternatively, a caring and compassionate federal government, a potentially excessive and wasteful welfare state that created dependency, and a state that lined the pockets of Halliburton executives with taxpayer's money.

The politics of defining the role of the market was split on the one hand by a discourse emphasizing the need to foster entrepreneurialism and to create conditions suited to maximizing profit as the key to jumpstarting the recovery. On the other hand, critics on the left saw the President's proposed GO-Zone as an effort to enable profiteering by temporarily suspending social, environmental, and labor protections. While some saw the resuming of markets and the rule of self-interest as a means of compassionately meeting need, others held that the selfish pursuit of self-interest should be trumped for a time by the 'dictates of the heart.' Civil society, the nation's 'Army of Compassion,' was framed from all quarters as providing flexible, efficient, targeted, authentic care. Over time, a new discourse emerged framing compassionate individuals as potential victims and emphasizing the need to exercise caution.

In the following analysis, I trace the development of two parallel narratives. The first captures the work of determining who is best suited and should be responsible for the care of the victims of the storm, which unfolded as a succession of evidence affirming the inherent selflessness of the nation, the bureaucracy, ineptness, fickleness and possible racism of the state, and the creative power of entrepreneurs and markets to compassionately provide. The second captures the relative emphasis of selflessness and self-interest as rationalities for governing redistributive practices and to guide the recovery. As the Bush Administration confirmed, government often operates according to a logic of self-interest—cronyism, politics as usual, and indifference. When government operates according to a logic of selflessness, it can only lead to pathological excess, waste, and further injustices that reward the wrong types of subjects. While market actors operate according to a logic of self-interest that can lead to profiteering, it can also

compassionately generate wealth and opportunity. Through the discourse of compassionate capitalism, it is legitimate as well that market actors can combine selflessness and self-interest in order to achieve a positive social outcome—to ‘do well and do good.’ Civil society operates strictly according to a logic of selflessness and sacrifice, seeking only ‘rewards of the heart.’ The reporting of Katrina reveals how particular discourses come to be privileged and importantly, how these logics work to legitimate a course of action. It is through these rhetorics that we as a nation defined and legitimated our commitments to the victims of Katrina.

The Coming Storm

Over the weekend of 8/27-8/28, as Katrina was building strength in the Gulf of Mexico, the news media were engaged in the work of defining the obligations of civil society, the market, and federal, state and local government. Pre-storm preparations were almost exclusively assumed to be the responsibility of the residents themselves, while government’s role was primarily (at risk of oversimplifying) to provide information and offer strong words of encouragement. In interviews and press conferences prior to the storm, FEMA Director Michael Brown, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco-D, Mayor Ray Nagin of New Orleans-D, and Max Mayfield of the National Hurricane Center (NHC) all tried to impress upon viewers the severity of the threat, warning residents to plan ahead, stay informed through the news media, and evacuate early. Directly addressing Gulf coast residents on Saturday, Michael Brown warned “you have 36 hours now to do what you have to do to prepare to insure that your family and your business is [*sic*] safe—Sunday and Monday is too late.”¹ Thus, government officials, at all levels, were presented in the national news media as primarily concerned with promoting responsible behaviors. They address an able-bodied, utility maximizing, and risk managing subject, with adequate means to evacuate on their own, whose primary need is to be informed and convinced of the severity of the threat.²

¹ Michael Brown, *CNN Saturday Night with Erica Hill*, Saturday, August 27, 2005.

² Mayor Nagin reportedly waited to declare a mandatory evacuation of New Orleans because he was concerned about city government’s liability for lost business.

It was journalists who raised the question of those without adequate means to evacuate on their own. When asked in a CNN interview what preparations had been made to evacuate those in New Orleans without means, Governor Blanco replied “we want people to help each other” and “we are asking neighbors to be concerned about their neighbors.”³ Beyond this, she referred to two state emergency medical facilities, one in Alexandria (central Louisiana) and one in Monroe (north eastern Louisiana) and added, “I think the mayor is also arranging some transportation measures.”⁴ Governor Blanco’s lack of details on the city’s pre-storm preparation provides an early clue to what became the theme of the storm’s aftermath—a lack of coordination and communication among all levels and agencies within government, and an overall uncertainty concerning responsibility and authority. Her response also suggests a failure to conceive of the range of need that would have to be accommodated in order to realize a mandatory evacuation of a heavily populated metropolitan area.

On Sunday, August 29, Mayor Ray Nagin ordered the first ever mandatory evacuation of New Orleans, declared the Superdome a “shelter of last resort,” and arranged city buses to provide transportation downtown. In doing so, Nagin warned that residents should not conceive of the Superdome as an alternative to evacuation. Residents underwent means testing to determine their eligibility to stay at the Superdome⁵ and those with special medical needs had to call ahead to reserve a spot. Since food service had not been arranged, residents were asked to bring a three day supply of food. The Superdome was staffed by members of the Louisiana National Guard who provided security and

³ Kathleen Blanco, *CNN Saturday Night with Erica Hill*, Saturday, August 27, 2005. Without naming it, Governor Blanco was likely referencing a faith-based project organized among local churches and community groups in New Orleans known as “Operation Brother’s Keeper,” in which a resident or family with transportation is paired up with another in need of transportation in the event of a mandatory evacuation of the city.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Bruce Nolan, “Katrina Takes Aim,” *The New Orleans Times-Picayune*, Sunday, August 28, 2005. Need was assessed and officially verified at the Superdome, which later served to entitle residents to a spot at the Reliant Center in Houston. This protocol for accountability and avoiding excess became a case study of government ineptness when Jabar Gibson arrived at the Astrodome in his commandeered bus with residents who had not been means tested. Throughout the recovery, government tried to maintain some semblance of assessing need, only helping those whose need could be verified.

limited medical services. Reporters on the scene documented the slow moving queue of mostly poor, black residents waiting in the rain to be searched for weapons and illegal drugs by National Guard. These scenes implicitly invoke the vulnerability of residents forced to resign themselves to the impersonal violence of state bureaucracy operating under the auspices of care.

The federal government's role prior to the storm was the prepositioning of supplies. The federal response was coordinated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the agency that had historically organized disaster response at the federal level since the Carter Administration, and since 2003, had been subsumed under the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Beyond this, the role of federal and state government before the storm was to protect citizens *from* government. Over the weekend, Governor Haley Barbour-R of Mississippi and Governor Blanco declared states of emergency—that is, a formal declaration of the need for federal assistance once it has been determined that an effective response is beyond the capabilities of state and local governments. President Bush in turn declared Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama under a federal state of emergency, authorizing FEMA to “identify, mobilize and provide at its discretion, equipment and resources necessary to alleviate the impacts of the emergency.”⁶ The purpose of these declarations was to coordinate the response among levels of government and to free up movements of personnel and supplies within agencies and departments—to temporarily suspend the normal rule of bureaucracy.⁷

Before the storm, national and local news media largely reported without criticism the interworkings of government, particularly at the local and state levels. The pre-storm preparations reported by Governor Blanco and Mayor Nagin were relayed without analysis or criticism. Beyond New Orleans, much of the pre-storm work of local government in Mississippi and in the lower parishes in Louisiana went unreported in the

⁶ Center for American Progress Action Fund, “Katrina Timeline,” <http://thinkprogress.org/katrina-timeline/>

⁷ On the evening of Tuesday, August 30, as the full extent of flooding in New Orleans made it clear that local and state government lacked the resources to provide adequate care and restore order, DHS secretary Michael Chertoff declared the Gulf Coast an “Incident of National Significance” initiating the National Response Plan and effectively putting Michael Brown of FEMA in charge of federal deployments.

national news. Reporters in New Orleans voiced concerns about those unable to evacuate on their own,⁸ but overall, the work of government in designating shelters and reportedly prepositioning supplies was considered positive and uncontroversial. Furthermore, the news media anticipated the performance of federal government with cautious optimism. Before the storm made landfall and escalated into a crisis, Katrina was imagined as the first real test of Homeland Security in coordinating a disaster response. Rather than the specifics of the National Response Plan or how the new DHS bureaucracy was organized and would function, much of the discussion of the role of the federal government prior to the storm focused on the public relations role of President Bush. Citing evidence from his performance in the wake of 9/11, most political commentators saw Bush as a compassionate ‘feel your pain’-type President and a competent leader in times of crisis. He was compassionate almost to a fault, according to some of his critics. This was imagined to be the President’s primary function; to serve as a public relations professional, cultivating an image of compassion and inspiring hope.

Both before and after the storm, editorials dealt with the history of federal inaction to curb development in the Mississippi Delta—citing in particular the underutilized Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MR-GO)—and to properly fund wetland restoration projects. Others cited the history of the role of the Army Corps of Engineers after Hurricane Betsy in building and maintaining the levee infrastructure that guards against flooding from Lake Pontchartrain, the Mississippi River, and the Gulf via the various canals that divide the city. While some articles criticized a lack of political support on a federal level for funding levee projects, others alleged that the state levee board had often misappropriated federal money, diverting it to encourage and fund private development in areas prone to flooding. Some editorials linked the Bush administration’s environmental record toward warming trends in the Gulf responsible for increasing the severity of hurricanes.

The Politics of Blaming—9/1-9/15

⁸ See for example Bob Woodruff, *ABC World News Tonight*, Saturday, August 27, 2005.

News analyzing the failures of local, state, and federal governments to coordinate and respond uncovered an unfortunate series of miscommunications. Since it was almost immediately clear that city officials and law enforcement were overwhelmed, local government was criticized primarily for failing to develop and implement a workable evacuation plan for the city's most vulnerable residents. A widely-circulated AP photograph showing a flooded parking lot packed with school buses confirmed that more could have been done by local government before the storm. Criticisms of Governor Blanco's role in the developing crisis were highly politicized and divided according to those who saw disaster response as primarily a federal responsibility and those who saw it as a state and local responsibility with the federal government acting in a supporting role—ranging from those defending President Bush to those pushing an agenda of states' rights and limited government. Arguments for federal responsibility contended that state resources were overwhelmed, particularly as one-third of National Guard troops who might contribute to the response were deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq. Voices from within the administration criticized what they saw as Governor Blanco's lack of decisiveness and leadership, citing as evidence her failure to make specific and timely requests to FEMA. According to the administration, Blanco's initial call to the federal government to "send everything you've got" did not meet their requirements for a specific request.⁹ Blanco later specifically requested 40,000 troops.¹⁰

On Thursday, September 1, frustration gave way to anger as the news media discovered an estimated 15,000-30,000 additional residents stranded without food, water, or medical care at the Morial Convention Center that FEMA did not know about. The lack of a significant federal presence in New Orleans and throughout the region did not sit well with President Bush's assessment from Mobile, Alabama on Friday morning (9/2) that "Brownie" was "doin' a heckuva job." The following week, investigative news

⁹ Douglas Brinkley, *The Great Deluge*;

¹⁰ During the first week as the expected federal response failed to arrive, Karl Rove attempted to persuade Governor Blanco to hand over control of the National Guard to the federal government. In this way, it would have made it seem as if the lack of action was a product of Blanco's failures to lead, as her ceding of command to the federal government would have coincided with the arrival of federal troops in the city. See Douglas Brinkley, *The Great Deluge*;

reports exposed Brown's padded resume, his lack of experience in disaster response, and his past as a college roommate to former FEMA Director under Bush, Joseph Allbaugh. On Friday, September 9, Brown was relieved of his duties by DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff, who argued that in light of the media attention, his presence was a distraction and furthermore, that he was needed in Washington to plan for future disasters. The following Monday (9/12), Brown handed in his resignation. The second week was punctuated by public relations visits and press conferences from the disaster area by members of the administration. Meanwhile, stories of the nation's volunteerism and outpourings of compassion from both private citizens and businesses developed as a counter-narrative to the ongoing tragic farce of government's regulated care. As Anderson Cooper put it, "What's happened here has been a story about failure, of governments and officials and systems in place. But it's also a story about kindness, of strangers helping strangers and neighbors in need.... Governments can help, but they can't do this. Holding, hugging, human connections were strengthened by the storm."¹¹ There remained however a few bright spots in the official response. The Coast Guard was immediately praised for its speed and efficiency in being on the spot and carrying out roof-top rescues, as were Louisiana State Wildlife and Fisheries personnel who performed boat rescues.

The first week of reporting can be described as a shift from a frame of a competent and coordinated government mobilizing and descending on the disaster area to a growing awareness late in the week that state and local governments were overwhelmed; that federal inaction and delays had greatly intensified the crisis; that FEMA, once an effective and flexible apparatus of emergency response, had been thoroughly gutted by the Bush administration and headed by an incompetent political appointee; and that the promises of federal officials had turned out to be more public relations spin than leadership. While an emphasis on the immediacy of the needs of the most vulnerable began with live reporting at the Superdome and the Convention Center—infants without formula and diapers, diabetics without insulin, the sick and elderly without medications deteriorating in the stifling heat—in following weeks, retrospective

¹¹ Anderson Cooper, *CNN NewsNight*, Friday, September 16, 2005.

reports revisited this former urgency, detailing the work of doctors to keep patients alive at Charity Hospital and Tulane Medical Center, the nursing home residents who drowned in their beds at St. Rita's and Lafon, and the misery at FEMA's temporary field hospital at Louis Armstrong International Airport. As detailed knowledge of the suffering accumulated, race and class as axes of vulnerability competed with the more multiracial and class-blind determinants of health status and age. At the same time, the news media took on the much needed role of reuniting families and circulating information of missing children, eventually determining that the crisis of separated families had been exacerbated by government protocols of airlifting children without their parents and the sick and injured without the rest of their family.

Unwanted Compassion: Freedom from the State

The lessons of the first week shaped representations of the state and the nation in the weeks following the crisis. As late as Wednesday, August 31, there remained a sense that the federal government would soon arrive in force and quickly see to the care of those suffering. But the revelation of the victims at the Convention Center on Thursday (9/1) and the spectacles of suffering unfolding elsewhere fixed the narrative of the powerlessness of state and local government and the massive bureaucratic paralysis of federal government when it came to providing care. On the other hand, despite stories of violence and looting and city police being "outgunned," Lt. General Russel Honore's nonsense "John Wayne" performance (as Mayor Nagin put it) on Friday, September 2, as federal troops arrived and armored trucks rolled through the city confirmed that this penchant for bureaucracy did not restrict its monopoly on force or its capacity to police. As the second week of the Katrina aftermath unfolded, the locus of news reporting shifted to Houston and the other cities and towns where displaced residents found themselves. While downtown New Orleans was evacuated over Labor Day weekend, in other areas of the city, residents remained, many of whom resisted the efforts of authorities to evacuate them. Realizing the increasingly serious health threats posed by contaminated floodwaters and that it would likely be weeks or months before the city

could be pumped dry, Mayor Nagin declared a state of martial law and called for a complete evacuation of the city.

The topic of martial law was heavily debated, particularly since no one was entirely sure what a state of martial law in the city in fact meant. On Thursday, September 8, *Nightline* featured interviews with NOPD Superintendent Eddie Compass, Lt. General Russel Honore, the commander of the federal response, and Terry Ebbert, Homeland Security Director for the city of New Orleans. Compass confirmed that the mayor had in fact declared a state of martial law—authorizing officers to “use reasonable force, whatever force necessary to make an individual leave.”¹² Koppel followed Compass’s response by airing a segment of an interview with Honore, who denied that a state of martial law existed from a federal perspective. Characterizing martial law as a further violence, Honore concluded by reminding Koppel “these are our fellow citizens.”¹³ Confronted with this federal claim to monopolize compassion, Compass qualified his response, arguing that the first priority was to evacuate the many that wished to voluntarily evacuate, and only then would there be forced evacuations. Koppel persisted:

KOPPEL: But when you say, and when the mayor says there’s martial law, you’ve got armed deputies from all over the country running around here, from Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, up north... All they hear is, mayor says, police superintendent says martial law. Martial law, to me, means if I tell someone to move and they don’t move, I can use deadly force.

COMPASS: No, that’s not what we’re talking about.

KOPPEL: That’s what martial law means.

COMPASS: But these individuals -they are reporting when they come. They are given their mission, given their orders. That’s why we have not had any instances where innocent citizens were shot [*sic*].¹⁴

¹² Eddie Compass, *ABC Nightline with Ted Koppel*, Thursday, September 8, 2005.

¹³ Russel Honore, *ABC Nightline with Ted Koppel*, Thursday, September 8, 2005.

¹⁴ Eddie Compass, *ABC's Nightline with Ted Koppel*, Thursday, September 8, 2005.

Perplexed, Koppel got a third opinion from New Orleans Homeland Security Director Terry Ebbert, who confirmed a state of martial law from a local perspective. According to Ebbert, local police forces under Mayor Nagin maintained ultimate authority in New Orleans and federal troops remained available to provide support. Additionally, only local police could engage in law enforcement and forcibly remove citizens from their homes. Ebbert admitted there was no organizational structure or accountability in place for the volunteer deputies and officers that had converged on the area.¹⁵

Debates over the meaning of martial law introduced a new frame, the obverse of last week's reporting, in which residents pleaded to be left alone. Residents reportedly resisted evacuations for a variety of reasons—some feared relocating to a shelter and submitting to the government's dubious care or simply “feared government;” some feared giving up their pets that the government refused to accommodate, others wanted to remain to take part in the rebuilding and recovery. CNN aired the story of Ashton O'Dwyer, a New Orleans lawyer, as he resisted police in a segment that would come to capture the tone of the forced evacuations.

O'DWYER: I will leave when I'm dead. OK? Let them be warned, they come to my house, they try to evict me, they try to take my guns, there will be gunfire. Treat me with benign neglect. Get out of my neighborhood. Get out of my life. Get out of my...city.¹⁶

As Mayor Nagin tried to softly force evacuations, residents eager to return to assess damage to their homes expressed their anger at local authorities and National Guard for restricting their re-entry to the city, many also citing the mounting personal costs of their prolonged exile. Intensifying the confusion of martial law and forced evacuations, the following week Mayor Nagin announced a timeline for gradually repopulating the city, beginning with the suburb of Algiers which had escaped flooding. This led to another public drama as acting FEMA director Coast Guard Vice-Admiral Thad Allen (Brown's replacement), with the support of President Bush, urged Nagin to

¹⁵ Terry Ebbert, *ABC's Nightline with Ted Koppel*, Thursday, September 8, 2005.

¹⁶ *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, Friday, September 9, 2005.

reconsider in light of environmental concerns, the continuing threat of waterborne illness, and the general lack of basic services. These public disputes between local and federal government confirmed a persisting lack of coordination—what Nagin had weeks before referred to as “too many cooks in the kitchen.” The approach of Hurricane Rita intensified this comedy of errors, as the first wave of residents returning was immediately ordered by local authorities to once again evacuate.

From Foot Soldiers to Tax Payers

One purpose of Bush’s September 15, 2005 address from New Orleans was to outline the federal government’s plan for the recovery. The proposal was received by central news media as a “conservative New Deal,” as it brought together a vast expansion of government spending with policy proposals aimed at transforming the Gulf Coast into an experimental ‘free market’ zone. In the days following the President’s address, the tenor of the news began to shift from the wholesale celebration of neighbors looking out for their neighbors and private citizens getting things done and defying government red tape to a focus on the true costs of the recovery. At stake was determining what types of redistributions are fair, what victims should be formally entitled to, and who should ultimately be responsible for paying for the recovery. What had just days before been framed as the nation’s limitless capacity for compassion had immediately become as ABC’s Bob Woodruff described it “a very delicate political problem.”¹⁷ On Tuesday September 20, Aaron Brown asked, “Who will pick up the tab? What will you have to give up, if anything, to pay for it? Perhaps your grandchildren will?”¹⁸ Indeed, Republican Senator Bill Frist of Tennessee confirmed, “Right now, at least in the short term, we are responding, and we are responding aggressively. It does mean that our children, ultimately, are going to have to pay for it.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Bob Woodruff, *ABC World News Tonight*, Friday, September 16, 2005.

¹⁸ Aaron Brown, *CNN NewsNight*, Tuesday, September 20, 2005.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

The following evening, *ABC World News Tonight* focused its thematic “Closer Look” segment on the costs of recovery and the ongoing debate in Washington over how it should be paid for. According to early estimates, the full cost could reach \$200 billion. Charitable contributions to date totaled just under a billion. Republicans stood ideologically opposed to rolling back the 2003 Bush tax cuts, while Democrats contested proposed efforts to cut funding for Medicaid. House Republicans proposed \$500 billion in cuts to the federal budget over the next ten years to pay for the recovery. The “Closer Look” segment powerfully suggests the limits of the rhetorics of compassion. Minority leader Nancy Pelosi-D made a lukewarm offer to return money set aside for projects in her district if others in Congress pledged to do the same, while Speaker Dennis Hastert-R, who initially questioned the wisdom of rebuilding New Orleans altogether, confirmed that he would not consider any cuts for his district. House Democrat Tim Ryan of Ohio admitted that he would not be willing to part with \$2.8 million earmarked for construction of the National Packard Car Museum in Warren, Ohio, arguing that it would create employment opportunities in his district. ABC did not hear back from either Jim Oberstar of Minnesota whose district received “\$225 million in projects including \$2.7 million for a recreational trail, 50 miles long,” or Alaska’s Don Young, who received over a billion for special projects including a bridge to an island of 50 people, later made famous in the 2008 presidential campaign as the “bridge to nowhere.”²⁰ On the other hand, Montana offered to trim \$4 million for a parking lot from their nearly \$400 million budget. Likewise, House Republican Mike Pence of Indiana offered \$16 million in federal funds for highway projects in his district, but as one Muncie, Indiana resident warned, “Without a doubt, the people in the Gulf need all the help that we can give them. But we can’t give up everything for here.”²¹

The day after the President’s delivered his proposal, media scrutiny turned to the work of insurance agencies and adjusters in the region. According to *ABC News*, even though private insurance companies were expected to pay \$60 billion in claims, 60

²⁰ *ABC World News Tonight*, Wednesday, September 21, 2005

²¹ *Ibid.*

percent of homeowners in the hurricane zone did not carry federal flood insurance.²² Since the private insurance industry determined it not in the interest of profit to offer flood insurance, the federal government made it available only to certain communities through the National Flood Insurance Act of 1968. Despite this, according to ABC, on Thursday, September 15, Mississippi's Attorney General sued several major private insurers hoping to get them to pay for flood damages. At the center of the controversy was the work of distinguishing flood damage from wind damage, the latter of which most private policies covered. In these articles, there is an awareness of the injustice of insurance contracts and the return of capitalism as usual at a time characterized by outpourings of private compassion. The inflexibility and indifference of insurance contracts makes private insurers begin to look like the federal government. As Julie Rochman of the American Insurance Association apologized, "we can't, unfortunately, confuse compassion with contracts."²³ According to one victim, his insurance provider would only cover the cost of repairs to the top of his house, despite that the structure itself was a loss due to flooding. According to the attorney of another Pascagoula, Mississippi resident who was told his damage was due to flooding, "we're going to do all in our power to make 'em do the right thing."²⁴ As insurance adjusters made decisions that meant "a new home or bankruptcy," ethical questions were raised about the injustice of contracts.²⁵

The Federal Government and Global Flows of Compassion

It took a realization that local and state responders were overwhelmed to frame Katrina as a national problem requiring not only a temporary outpouring of compassion from the nation, but also as time went on, a long-term formal commitment of resources by the federal government. The spectacle of Katrina and the initial absence of federal

²² ABC World News Tonight, Friday, September 16, 2005.

²³ ABC World News Tonight, Friday, September 16, 2005.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

government made it seem a global crisis as well. Attempting to reconcile the reality of Katrina with their sense of national identity, reporters questioned the longstanding meta-narrative of American exceptionalism. This is evident in references to ‘refugees’ and descriptions of the Gulf Coast as recalling a ‘third-world disaster area.’ As Tom Brokaw observed, New Orleans looked “more like Bangladesh than one of America’s most celebrated cities.”²⁶ While this representing of the Gulf Coast as a third-world nation within was largely interpreted as evidence of the news media’s racism, given the uncertainty of motivations, it could also be read as a partially articulated indictment of the neoliberal state.

As Katrina’s devastation was revealed, observers compared it to the recent 2004 Indonesian Tsunami resulting in the deaths of nearly a quarter of a million people throughout South Asia. Indeed, Biloxi Mayor A.J. Holloway famously referred to Katrina as “our Tsunami.”²⁷ In his first address from Washington, President Bush tacitly reinforced this frame of Katrina as a global humanitarian crisis by calling upon former Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton to resume their fundraising work begun during the 2004 Tsunami. In response to the federal government’s indifference, local activists arguing for a “right of return” invoked international law governing the rights of internally displaced persons in place of an appeal for protection as U.S. citizens.²⁸

The frame of Katrina as a global crisis was heavily contested, invoking a strong nationalist reaction captured in the press. Resentment was expressed over how compassion was imagined to be distributed globally and was initially expressed as criticism of the continuing U.S. occupation of Iraq. Oppositional voices argued that the war and the rebuilding of Iraq had diverted federal funding from levee projects.²⁹ Letters

²⁶ Tom Brokaw, *NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams*, Friday, September 9, 2005.

²⁷ Charles Gibson, *ABC World News Tonight*, Tuesday, August 30, 2005.

²⁸ U.S. Human Rights Network, “Hold the U.S. Accountable: The U.S. Human Rights Network’s Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Human Rights Campaign,” <http://www.ushrnetwork.org/projects-katrina>

²⁹ Judy Keen, “Bush to Survivors: ‘The Country Stands with You,’” *USA Today*, Thursday, September 1, 2005, A4.

to the editor reflected themes of an overstretched military and anxieties over the nation's unreciprocated compassion.

I wonder whether any foreign countries will offer aid or support? I won't hold my breath waiting for the oil-rich countries to offer lower prices.³⁰

Americans are a great people who always help those in need. I would hope that we as a nation show the same amount of compassion to these devastated areas in whatever ways we can, as we did to the tsunami victims.³¹

Katrina's uncovering of a third-world nation within served for many as a warning that the nation could not go on redistributing wealth to the global South and the Middle East. Why was the government spending billions to rebuild Iraq when the money could be better spent here?

The manner in which the federal government received offers of foreign aid and how it was interpreted by the news media reveals the complexities of how national identity is shaped by ambivalence over acting as the world's Samaritan.³² What did it mean that the United States was positioned to accept cash donations from impoverished third-world nations like Zimbabwe and Uganda? When compassion selflessly flows, or doesn't, from those who are fortunate, productive, and who provide to those who are unfortunate, who need, and who consume, it often resists being seen as an act of power. The matter of international aid, however, poses an interesting moment of rupture. When the nation replaces poor, urban blacks in the position of unfortunate in need, the question of power becomes central. As the *New York Times* put it, the international community met the images of Katrina with "disbelief that such a powerful country could be so overwhelmed by a natural disaster."³³

³⁰ Arnie Krause, "Letters to the Editor: Forget Strife, Focus on Aid," *USA Today*, Thursday, September 1, 2005, A12.

³¹ Ginny Stein, "Letters to the Editor: Limited Resources Hurt USA," *USA Today*, Thursday, September 1, 2005, A12.

³² And they certainly refrained from any discussion of the role of the U.S. in the global neoliberal order that reproduces third-world misfortune by insuring that these nations remain impoverished and forever in debt.

On September 10, *NBC Nightly News* focused its regular “In Depth” segment on reconciling the national self-image with the reality of international acts of compassion, coming from, as anchor John Siegenthaler put it, “across some borders you might not expect.”³⁴ In the report, flows of international aid to the Gulf Coast are described as a “foreign invasion.”³⁵ The arrival of medical teams and clean-up crews from Mexico in Biloxi represented “the first time the Mexican military has crossed into the United States by land or by sea since 1846.”³⁶ Rationalizing the show of compassion as a reciprocal exchange, Kerry Sanders reports, “Mexican government officials say the US has carried a big stick in diplomatic relations; this humanitarian effort, they hope, now creates good will.”³⁷

In coming to terms with the reality of international aid, news stories often framed charitableness as reciprocity. According Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, “we have seen the American people respond generously to help others around the globe during their times of distress.... Today we are seeing a similar urgent, warm and compassionate reaction.”³⁸ According to the *New York Times*, Israel, a nation “long dependent on American aid,” offered medical teams, field hospitals and temporary housing.³⁹ On the Sunday, September 11 broadcast of *ABC World News Tonight*, correspondent Mark Litke framed the flow of compassion from the so-called ‘third-world’ (particularly the South Asian nations impacted by the 2004 Tsunami) to the so-called ‘first-world,’ as less a significant redistribution of resources than a symbolic gesture of reciprocity.

From shattered towns and refugee camps all across the
tsunami region, there’s been an outpouring of sympathy for
the victims of Katrina. These people haven’t forgotten. Just

³³ Juan Forero and Steven R. Weisman, “U.S. Allies, and Others, Send Offers Of Assistance,” *The New York Times*, Sunday, September 4, 2005, A31.

³⁴ John Siegenthaler, *NBC Nightly News*, Saturday, September 10, 2005.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Juan Forero and Steven R. Weisman, “U.S. Allies.”

³⁹ Ibid.

days after the tsunami hit, it was the United States at the forefront of global relief efforts, helping save countless victims from starvation and disease. Now, as they watch the images of Katrina, tsunami victims are stunned.

This man, who lost a wife, a daughter, a house, a village, asks “how could such a powerful country help save us and not save its own people?” He’s proud the tsunami nations are offering what little they can. From Indonesia, 45 doctors and 10,000 blankets. From Sri Lanka, \$25,000. From India, \$5 million. From Thailand, medical teams and rice. Thais call this gestures from the heart. In fact, these are quite remarkable gestures, given that hundreds of thousands of tsunami victims are still suffering throughout this region.⁴⁰

The federal government met offers of foreign assistance with bureaucratic paralysis. When asked to explain the bottleneck restricting flows of international aid, President Bush argued that the country could handle the challenges of Katrina on its own—“this country is going to rise up and take care of it.”⁴¹ According to the *New York Times*, “the United States is more accustomed to giving aid than receiving it, and the Bush administration seemed to have trouble accepting the role reversal, at least at first.”⁴² In response to requests for assistance from the State Department, Sweden made preparations to provide water purification equipment, emergency power generators and components for a temporary cell phone network. Four days later, they had yet to receive clearance from Washington to have them delivered. Washington’s silence was attributed to a difficulty in coordinating information and assessing needs on the ground. According to a State Department spokesperson, “the worst thing we could do...is to take things [and] have them sit on the ground and not be utilized, to have something rot.”⁴³ Rather than trying to address specific needs, the State Department pressed countries to provide

⁴⁰ Mark Litke, *ABC World News Tonight*, Sunday, September 11, 2005.

⁴¹ Joel Brinkley and Craig S. Smith, “Offers Pour In, but the U.S. is Unprepared,” *The New York Times*, Thursday, September 8, 2005, A25.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

cash instead, which was reportedly met with frustration by foreign governments. The slow response reportedly made many nations wonder if their offers of assistance were actually needed.⁴⁴

Government as Samaritan: Appropriating the Language of Private Compassion

Parallel to the developing narrative of a harmful, indifferent, bureaucratic government, there were moments in which government legitimately appropriated the language of social entrepreneurialism and private compassion. The most visible example of this in the news was Texas Governor Rick Perry's-R compassionate extending of the full resources of the state of Texas to care for its neighbor in its time of need. On Wednesday, August 31, Perry offered the Reliant Center and the Houston Astrodome as a temporary shelter and promised to open Texas public schools to all displaced school-aged children. Like other public displays of compassion, Perry framed it as a reciprocal act—compassion today would be compensated tomorrow. As Perry put it, "We realize that by the grace of God we could be the ones with this extraordinary need." But over Labor Day weekend, Houston, Dallas, and San Antonio (much like Baton Rouge) were reportedly "at capacity" and could no longer take in additional evacuees.⁴⁵ By Saturday, September 3, Texas had already taken in an estimated 250,000 evacuees in shelters, hotels, and private homes. With a further 15,000 expected to arrive on Sunday, Perry was forced to call on other states to do their part.⁴⁶ Perry framed the request not as a threat to Texans, but as a threat to storm victims who risked being denied the care they deserve. As Perry argued, "Texas is committed to doing everything it can to help our neighbors from Louisiana, but we want to make certain that we can provide them with the medical care, food, shelter, safety, education and other services they need to start getting their lives back together."⁴⁷ Responses from other states to Perry's request were also framed as acts

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ernie Suggs, "Texas Calls on Other States to Share Load," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Monday, September 5, 2005, 6A.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

of compassion—Perry was reportedly “heartened” by the number of governors who called him.⁴⁸

While the language of selflessness is privileged, the call for other states to do their part risks revealing the limits of Texas’ compassion. But according to Perry aide Robert Black, this was not the case: “We’re not worried about money...we’re worried about providing care for all of the people coming into our state.”⁴⁹ But in the story, the question of cost and the fairness of the redistribution remain critical. While Texas officials “haven’t begun to determine Hurricane Katrina’s economic impact” on the state, “FEMA is prepared to reimburse Texas 100 percent of the cost of the recovery...expected to be in the tens of millions of dollars.”⁵⁰ The tone of this article is remarkable when compared to other articles where the federal government’s resolve to cover the entirety of the state’s costs is in question. Eloquent promises of compassion no matter what the cost are only legitimate as long as there are no costs.

Another example of government stepping outside the framework of excessive and indiscriminate bureaucracy and adopting the language of private compassion was the “small-town to small-town bucket brigade.”⁵¹ In response to FEMA’s neglect of smaller, rural areas devastated by the storm, “out-of-the-way burbs” in Georgia, Alabama and North Carolina devised a strategy of adopting a town impacted by Katrina and providing locals with needed supplies and volunteers. The exchange, coordinated between local governments, powerfully invoked myths of private provision—of personalized, compassionate care, reciprocity, Southern small-town hospitality, and neighbor helping neighbor. An article in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* presented the example of Shelby, North Carolina, “a floundering mill town of fewer than 20,000 tucked in the hills west of

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid. The President deployed the same language in his September 15, address, which led some fiscal conservatives to criticize the excessiveness of the fiction that cost is not a concern.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Drew Jubera, “It’s the Neighborly Thing; Southern Towns Rush Aid to Katrina Victims,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Tuesday, September 20, 2005, A1.

Charlotte,” that adopted the town of Laurel, Mississippi, described as “a town of about 18,000 in the piney woods north of Hattiesburg, [that] reminded them of their own typically Southern town: oaks still standing tall and stately, just like those on Shelby’s historic South Washington Street; directions given with familiar pulled taffy inflections and off-hand advice (“Don’t listen to my sister, she’ll just get you lost”); and many of the people poor, but open and hospitable.”⁵² Shelby provided 75 volunteers and five semi-trucks packed with supplies to help the town of Laurel get back on their feet.⁵³

Across the region southern towns extended compassion to one another—Andalusia, Alabama adopted Meridian, Mississippi; five southern towns adopted small Poplarville, Mississippi, a town of 2,500; Ozark, Alabama adopted Bayou La Batre, Alabama; Sylacauga, Alabama adopted Moss Point, Mississippi—creating a vast regional network of “brother helping brother, neighbor helping neighbor.”⁵⁴ As one local businessman put it, “Red tape is what we used to hang up the sign that says ‘help is here!’”⁵⁵ These redistributive practices, forming an aid network crisscrossing the region were facilitated through the Mississippi Municipal League and the National League of Cities, a network of municipalities and a lobbying organization that advocates on behalf of local governments. As George Lewis, executive director of the Mississippi Municipal League put it, “They could bypass all the federal stuff and get in touch with a city and say, ‘What can we help you with?’ It’s just a commonsense approach. The simpler it is, the more effective it is.”⁵⁶ Many other towns, according to the article, that had no use for state or federal red tape just found a town in need and acted. According to Sylacauga, Alabama Mayor Sam Wright “We just found someplace to go help and went there. I don’t like to go through any rigamarole. I like to get to the heart of the matter.”⁵⁷

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Joseph Foster cited in Dennis Cauchon, “Private Citizens Offering Public Relief in Mississippi,” *USA Today*, Tuesday, September 6, 2005, 2A.

⁵⁶ Drew Jubera, “It’s the Neighborly Thing;”

⁵⁷ Ibid.

The *Journal-Constitution* reflected on the regional tradition of neighborliness and hospitality in the South, extending back to the Civil War, which has been summoned up in managing crisis after crisis. Despite the leveling forces of globalization—“fast food sprawl and Wal-Mart Super Stores” a regional sense of neighborliness, small-town values, and a common fate continues to thrive. Southerners reportedly came together in the past when Hurricane Hugo devastated the Carolinas in 1989 and when Hurricane Opal struck Alabama and the Florida panhandle in 1995. Thus, a strategy for rationalizing the small-town bucket brigade redistributions as just, rather than excessive or pathology-inducing, was to frame them as reciprocal. According to Ozark mayor Bob Bunting, “All of us small towns in the South survive day-to-day. It’s tough. Just meeting your obligations, it’s hand-to-mouth. If we got hit by a storm, we’d be in awful shape. I’d just hope other towns like ours would come help us.”⁵⁸ The stories are furthermore punctuated with the language of private compassion—of individualized knowledge and care that is discerning, targeted, and sensitive to local contexts. Invoking the whiter, Alabama counterpart to heapings of soul food, gumbo, and red beans and rice, “They’ve served sweet tea instead of water in some places, because that’s what the locals preferred. They’ve shown up with cans of Vienna sausages, a Southern hard-times staple.”⁵⁹

The informal adopt-a-town arrangements were described as personalizing the disaster, creating a sense of community and an identification with and ownership of the needs of others—a sense of looking out for one’s own. According to a city council member from Bainbridge City, Georgia, “We had a face to our efforts --- the face of Ocean Springs.”⁶⁰ The relationships that have been fostered across communities in this way have extended to include more long-term informal commitments to help rebuild. Already though, there were concerns over compassion descending into excess in going beyond a momentary commitment to humanitarian aid. According to the article, it can “drain resources, but so far, residents support the relief efforts.” According to Mayor

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Wright, “This isn’t like Christmas presents, where you hand them out and forget about them the rest of the year. When trash builds up in front [of homes in Sylacauga, Alabama], hopefully [his constituents] will be understanding.”⁶¹

FEMA as DMV⁶²

As the first week of reporting developed as a narrative of the failures of all levels of government, the next two weeks of reporting provided further evidence of how government threatened the lives of victims by restricting ‘natural’ outpourings of private compassion. On Monday, September 19, Aaron Brown interviewed Dr. Mark Perlmutter, an orthopedic surgeon from Pennsylvania who went to New Orleans as a volunteer to provide medical care for victims. Upon arrival, he was assigned to the tarmac of the Louis Armstrong International Airport which had been set up as a field hospital and medical staging area. According to Perlmutter, there was only one other doctor there, an obstetrician, doing the massive work of triaging all the arrivals being airlifted in by helicopter. “They were head to toe, four people wide, 100 yards long, ranging from people with just shock or people in coma to people with tremendous needs for insulin or medicines they hadn’t had in eight days and people who were dying.”⁶³ After trying in vain to resuscitate a woman whose death he attributed to days of neglect, he was escorted away by an official because he didn’t have a medical license issued by the state of Louisiana and hadn’t completed the proper paperwork for FEMA certification. While Perlmutter pleaded his case to a Coast Guard commander, and was ultimately asked to leave, a patient suffering from diabetic ketoacidosis passed away under the care of an inexperienced medic. Ironically, Perlmutter had brought his own supply of insulin that would have saved the patient had he been permitted to continue his work. According to Perlmutter, although as a private citizen he was protected by Good Samaritan laws, he was forced to leave in order to protect FEMA.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Rich Lowry, “FEMA as DMV,” *The National Review Online*, Friday, September 9, 2005, <http://www.nationalreview.com>

⁶³ *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, Monday, September 19, 2005.

Further recounting the horrors at the airport, Perlmutter described a section of the makeshift morgue called the “expectancy room” where patients deemed not likely to respond to medical care were left to die. A volunteer FEMA chaplain reportedly “begged for four people to be removed...and reevaluated” and was told by one of the chief medical officers, “I’m sorry, they have to stay there to die.”⁶⁴ The chaplain eventually managed to have the patients removed and discovered their conditions were simply due to dehydration and thus, easily treatable.⁶⁵ While Perlmutter’s testimony was a powerful criticism of the criminality of FEMA’s response, it also powerfully invokes essentializing myths and anxieties associated with entrusting the care of citizens to government. The story in many ways anticipates the specter of federal ‘death panels’ that raised a panic in the 2010 debates over healthcare reform. There is inherently no compassion in the state’s bungling, inflexible, regulated, mass care. The individual is annihilated. Indeed, a great deal of criticism of the federal government in the news invoked Orwellian nightmares of what must inevitably occur when the state comes into contact with the individual.

Two days later, *CNN NewsNight* ran a follow-up segment with the chaplain who personally witnessed FEMA’s “expectancy room” and a surgeon and colleague of Dr. Perlmutter, Dr. Clark Gerhart. Describing “a staggering mass of humanity,” Gerhart reflected, “It was an atmosphere of following orders, not really any reason...behind the decisions...made.”⁶⁶ The chaplain recalled one woman who “reached her hand out to me and put a grip on my hand...like a death grip. And she knew. I was persuaded that she knew she was in the morgue and she looked at me with eyes that still haunt me.”⁶⁷ According to a Coast Guard spokesman, given the circumstances, those in the “expectancy room” had received the best treatment available, “treatment complicated by sheer numbers.”⁶⁸ The lesson to be drawn, as

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ *CNN NewsNight*, Wednesday, September 21, 2005.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Gerhart put it, was that FEMA must be more flexible in incorporating volunteers, particularly since in this country we “rely on volunteerism.”⁶⁹

While the bureaucratic ineptness exhibited by all levels of government was criticized from all sides of the political spectrum, and rightfully so—there were critical differences. Criticism from the left centered on personalities (the cronyism of the Bush administration, the incompetence and padded resume of FEMA director Michael Brown) or involved a more structural critique of racism and poverty coupled with a general indifference of government to the plight of poor, black people. Opinion from the right given voice in central media was much more diverse, engaging with these lines of criticism—sometimes defending the President and criticizing the left for creating political divisions when national unity was needed; sometimes shifting responsibility to state and local government; and very often criticizing the President for eschewing principles of fiscal responsibility and limited government by creating a vast new bureaucracy in the Department of Homeland Security, thereby rendering government even more inefficient and unresponsive. Furthermore, the right engaged heavily in a line of argument that went nearly uncontested, analyzing what government, civil society, and the market can do according to their very nature.

Specifically, opinion from the right was heavily engaged in showing how government failed to care for people precisely because it is government. As Rich Lowry argued in the *National Review*, “Hurricane Katrina...laid bare the peculiar perversities of the bureaucratic mind: its utter commitment to niggling rules, its inability to take risks, its failure to think on the fly.”⁷⁰ For example, according to Lowry, a group of 1400 volunteer firefighters was forced to undergo eight hours of training in Atlanta that reportedly included a course on sexual harassment.⁷¹ An article in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* added that it was actually “a three-day induction process, including brief lectures on the history of FEMA, cultural diversity, and [procedures for] dealing with the

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Rich Lowry, “FEMA as DMV.”

⁷¹ Ibid.

media.”⁷² After their training, the firefighters were sent to serve as “community relations officers,” to staff shelters and provide information—in short, everything but fighting fires. One volunteer admitted we “feel like we’re spinning our wheels. We want to roll up our sleeves and do the work.”⁷³

The evidence continued to mount. According to Lowry, security measures after 9/11 prevented FEMA from putting evacuees on flights without security screening and federal air marshals on board.⁷⁴ According to Aaron Broussard, President of Jefferson Parish, FEMA “turned away three Wal-Mart trailer trucks with water and kept the Coast Guard from delivering 1,000 gallons of diesel fuel.”⁷⁵ Mississippi Senator Trent Lott-R reportedly “criticized FEMA for blocking thousands of trailers sitting in Atlanta ready to head to the Mississippi coast.”⁷⁶ In a multi-part, week-long series, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* followed a team of volunteer doctors and medical personnel as they tried to volunteer their time and expertise to treat patients and were continually thwarted by FEMA’s lack of information and organization. The story culminated in a feature length, front page article on Sunday, September 11.⁷⁷ At FEMA’s instruction, “the Georgians’ odyssey encompassed 10 days, four states, 1,668 miles. The team’s 31 doctors, nurses and paramedics treated not one victim of the largest natural disaster in modern U.S. history.”⁷⁸ Like the firefighters trapped in Atlanta forced to endure sexual harassment and cultural sensitivity training, the experience of the Georgia Disaster Medical Assistance Team was another case study in how government bureaucracy undermined the natural

⁷² Tom Baxter, “Advisory Assignment Frustrates Firefighters,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 8, 2005, 9A.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, The quote is attributed to Lt. Jeff Wellman, a fire investigator from Frankfort, Indiana.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Rich Lowry, “FEMA as DMV.”

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Alan Judd and Teresa Borden, “Odyssey Shows FEMA’s Disarray; Futile Trek: Georgians Sent to Mississippi, Dallas, Galveston, Houston,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Sunday, September 11, 2005, 1A.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

flow of compassion. The referencing of ‘sexual harassment’ and ‘cultural sensitivity’ training connects the irrationality of government to myths that the left has hijacked the state in order to serve ‘special interests’ and to institutionalize ‘political correctness.’

From FEMA to WEMA⁷⁹

As news texts seemed to suggest, federal, state and local governments behave as they do because they are governed by a logic that is the antipathy of efficient, individualized care that is discerning, targeted, and aimed at returning subjects to self-sufficiency. As the evidence of Katrina confirmed, all levels of government are governed by a rationality of ‘politics,’ understood as self-interest, cronyism, bureaucratic paralysis, the managing of public relations, and the petty policing of ‘political correctness.’ Politics is not results driven, but about crafting an image of action. Alluding to this widely held view, Rich Lowry in the *National Review* observed:

The only thing Washington politicians love more than beating up on bureaucracy is creating it. It’s one of the few things Washington can do--make new offices and hire bureaucrats to fill them. So, after 9/11, all of Washington supported stapling together as many agencies as possible, including FEMA, in the Department of Homeland Security--such a sprawling bureaucratic monstrosity that it will take a generation to make it work, if ever. But everyone from the president on down pretended he had protected homeland security through the mere act of naming a department after it.⁸⁰

By contrast, the government neither operates like a business—according to market rationalities of efficiency, cost-effectiveness, flexibility, creative entrepreneurialism, and the bottom line—nor like civil society—according to the dictates of the heart and Christian norms of colorblind compassion; a care that is targeted, individualized, personalized and calibrated to discourage dependency.

⁷⁹ John Tierney, “From FEMA to WEMA,” *The New York Times*, Tuesday, September 20, 2005, A29.

⁸⁰ Rich Lowry, “FEMA as DMV.”

It is perhaps little wonder that as the failures of the federal government and FEMA came to light, they were interpreted as evidence of government as usual—cronyism, crippling, layered bureaucracy, a detachment from the local, excessiveness, wastefulness, rigidity, an inherent inability to foresee the future and to operate beyond the pressures of the present. There were of course exceptions. Editorials from the perspective of the left defended the *idea* of government while vilifying the Bush Administration and prior administrations for adhering to a program of trimming government back until it is no longer effective in any type of welfare capacity.⁸¹ While a few proposed expanding government's role in the recovery, it was a view that was largely marginalized outside opinion journals of the left.⁸² The consensus among media representing the ideology of the center (the *New York Times*, CNN) was that FEMA needed an overhaul, that local and state governments must follow through on plans to evacuate the most vulnerable, and that coordination between agencies and levels of government must be improved significantly. But the view that much of the response and recovery was best handled by the private sector was widespread, bi-partisan, and never subjected to sustained scrutiny.

On Wednesday, September 14, CNN aired a segment on the Isle of Capri casino in Biloxi. The story was structured as a cost-benefit analysis of the Isle of Capri for Biloxi and the casino industry in general for the state. According to the report, the casino industry in Mississippi contributes 23 million a year to local taxes and to fund public schools.⁸³ Roughly 10 to 20 percent of the state's budget comes from the gaming industry, which creates hundreds of jobs and stimulates other industries.⁸⁴ According to correspondent Erica Hill, half the state's casinos were badly damaged by Katrina. Furthermore, "for every day the Gulf Coast casinos remain closed, it costs the state of

⁸¹ See for example Paul Krugman, "Killed By Contempt," *The New York Times*, Monday September 5, 2005, A21.

⁸² See for example, Katrina vanden Heuvel, "History Lessons," *The Nation*, September 8, 2005.

⁸³ Erica Hill, *CNN NewsNight*, Wednesday, September 14, 2005.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Mississippi \$500,000 in tax revenue.”⁸⁵ Like other examples of this narrative, private industry is framed as a benefactor and the community as the beneficiary of its selflessness and largesse. The costs to the community and to labor are rendered invisible. According to the myth of capitalist contracts, all parties consent to the casino’s profits through quid pro quo arrangements—the employees through their wages, the residents of the state and the locality through tax codes, and the customers through their patronage. According to the American Gaming Association’s 2004 statistics, Mississippi had one of the lowest tax rates for casino gaming revenues in the nation.⁸⁶ While Mississippi casinos grossed 2.7 billion in 2004, they contributed only 325 million in state and local taxes.⁸⁷ Conservatively speaking, Mississippi casinos take as much in profits as they provide through wages and benefits, tax revenue, and philanthropy.

Since the dominant news frame was government as perpetrator and since the casino industry was itself a victim of both Katrina and government policies that forced them offshore, the casino’s expressions of commitment are not questioned in the text. According to the casino, “its first priority is to rebuild the community and then it can focus on rebuilding itself.”⁸⁸ While there is a long tradition in central media of criticizing heartless corporations and their acts of compassion as calculated public relations ploys, circumstances as they were (i.e. government indifference and paralysis, the frame of entrepreneurialism and industry as key to the recovery) managed uncertainties over what motivated expressions of commitment. Motivations mattered less than the mere fact that someone was doing something. For some viewers, it likely confirmed that there are moments in which the pursuit of self-interest is trumped by the imperatives of the heart. For others, it was likely sufficient that through the will to profit, the casino’s fate was inextricably bound up with the fate of

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ In 2004, Mississippi had a maximum state tax of 8% for casino revenues and additionally, a maximum of 4% could be imposed by local governments. American Gaming Association, *2004 State of the States: The AGA Survey of Casino Entertainment*, 8; http://www.americangaming.org/assets/files/2004_Survey_for_Web.pdf

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

the community. Corporate giving was framed as customer service—defying expectations by extending care beyond what has been contracted (with the state, the city, labor). Thus, when the Isle of Capri trucked in provisions for its 1,100 employees and provided them with three months of their regular wages, an employee of the casino insisted, “We should not expect this.”⁸⁹

Various political leaders, after witnessing the spectacle of government ineptness, argued that the response and the recovery should be outsourced to the private sector. Senator David Vitter-R of Louisiana reportedly was “so impressed with the rapid response of Wal-Mart and other companies that he promised to introduce a bill to abolish FEMA and contract its job out to the private sector.”⁹⁰ Louisiana Congressman Bobby Jindal-R reported, “My office became so frustrated with the bureaucracy that we often turned to private companies. They responded more quickly and flexibly.”⁹¹ As these opinions suggest, market logics, incentives, and an ethos of citizenship as customer service is imagined as better means of achieving social justice than is bureaucratic paralysis and politicking. As one resident put it, “I still haven’t managed to get through to FEMA. It’s hard to say, but you get more justice at Wal-Mart.”⁹²

On Tuesday, September 20, *The New York Times* ran an editorial by John Tierney underscoring the need for a business model as antidote to the sad bureaucratic farce that was the governments’ response to Katrina.⁹³ As Tierney suggests, if there must be someone in charge of the recovery, instead of a “czar” from Washington, make it a creative CEO like Wal-Mart’s Lee Scott. For Tierney,

If you mention the Red Cross or FEMA to people in Slidell, you hear rants about help that didn’t arrive and phone lines that are always busy. If you mention state or national politicians, you hear obscenities. But if you visit the Wal-

⁸⁹ *CNN NewsNight*, Wednesday, September 14, 2005. It was widely reported that Wal-Mart and other major retailers made similar arrangements with their employees and local communities.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Rich Lowry, “FEMA as DMV.”

⁹² Rashan Smith, cited in John Tierney, “From FEMA to WEMA,” *The New York Times*, Tuesday, September 20, 2005, A29.

⁹³ John Tierney, “From FEMA to WEMA.”

Mart and the Sam's Club stores here, you hear shoppers who have been without power for weeks marveling that there are still generators in stock (and priced at \$304.04). You hear about the trucks that rolled in right after the hurricane and the stuff the stores gave away: chain saws and boots for rescue workers, sheets and clothes for shelters, water and ice for the public.⁹⁴

Tierney's argument for privatization is different from those advocating localism—Wal-Mart is, after all, the largest retailer in the world. Instead, the focus is on how private compassion is a byproduct of market discipline. If as the argument goes, the federal government is too large to care, to be flexible, and to recognize differential need, how can we account for the success of Wal-Mart? Wal-Mart has its own “emergency operations center” through which trucks and supplies *truly were* pre-positioned.⁹⁵ The motive to profit and to cultivate a public image of compassion and commitment to community requires flexibility rather than bureaucratic paralysis. It drove Wal-Mart executives to anticipate and prepare for a regional rise in demand for certain commodities. Furthermore, despite Wal-Mart's size, market discipline prevents it from descending into excess and waste.

[Wal-Mart] can tell you the precise location of every thumbtack in its inventory. It's legendary for tracking every transaction and pinching every penny. Its executives fly coach, and they empty their own wastebaskets. When Scott, the chief executive officer, travels with the chief financial officer, they cut costs by sharing a hotel room.⁹⁶

Tierney privileges market discipline even over a stated commitment to compassion. The marketizing of need (WEMA) is contrasted against former President Clinton's belief that FEMA could function effectively if it were headed by “a virtuous, compassionate public servant” instead of a bureaucrat. In contrast to Bush's FEMA—underfunded,

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ This invokes FEMA's widely reported claim that supplies and responders had been ‘prepositioned’ before the storm, when in truth, a concerted federal response arrived five days late.

⁹⁶ John Tierney, “From FEMA to WEMA.”

underappreciated, and buried under the new Homeland Security bureaucracy and its emphasis on counterterrorism—Clinton described his administration and the tenure of FEMA director James Lee Witt as FEMA’s “golden age,” when the agency was “especially sensitive to the needs of poor people because of their [Clinton and Witt] own backgrounds.” But as Tierney argues,

...if they [President Clinton and FEMA director Witt] cared so much, why didn’t New Orleans ever work out a feasible way to evacuate poor people? FEMA had a golden opportunity to plan it during the 1990’s. The threat of nuclear war had receded and terrorism wasn’t yet a priority, so the agency’s biggest concerns should have been an earthquake in California and a flood in New Orleans.

But it was too busy dealing with the record number of other ‘disasters’ that Clinton declared -- an average of one a week, which meant FEMA was mailing out checks for every flash flood within range of a major media market. Upstate New Yorkers suddenly became incapable of coping with the cost of snow removal.⁹⁷

Unlike Texas Governor Rick Perry’s appropriation of the language of private compassion, with Clinton (and his stated solidarity with the poor), it emerges as pathological excess. Clinton’s claim to govern according to the dictates of the heart emerges as a façade concealing the workings of ‘politics’ as usual—“mailing out checks for every flash flood within range of a major media market.”⁹⁸ When government gets in the business of compassion, it inevitably leads to excess, unfairness, and further harm.

Once immediate needs were met, the official consensus and the view of the news media was that the full recovery of the Gulf Coast hinged on expediting the return of markets. According to President Bush’s view, “it is entrepreneurship that creates jobs and opportunity...[and] helps break the cycle of poverty.”⁹⁹ While the proposal gave official

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ George W. Bush, “Address to the nation on Hurricane Katrina recovery from New Orleans, Louisiana,” Thursday, September 15, 2005.

endorsement to the idea of entrepreneurship as an act of giving, there remained a tendency in the news media to criticize profiting that was revealed as profiteering. Momentary ruptures persisted in which the return of markets emerged as a selfish will to profit from the misery of others. The earliest examples were the “gas gougers” railed against in national and local media for taking advantage of the crisis. Only the staunchest of neoliberals, the likes of Jerry Taylor of the Cato Institute, continued to defend the price mechanism and even “gouging” as a necessary means of disciplining demand.¹⁰⁰

Later, objections were raised over potential injustices arising from the push to resume the economy. On Monday, September 19, Anderson Cooper considered the ethics of the post-Katrina real estate market. In Baton Rouge, people and businesses looking to relocate were quickly grabbing up properties, the sharp increase in demand powerfully inflating property values. In New Orleans, the market was equally booming with residents looking to sell finding “investors who specialize in scooping up storm-distressed properties at deep discounts.”¹⁰¹ For Cooper, this raised the question of vulture investors profiting off the misery of others. But as one local realtor countered, “That’s true in any situation. You’re always going to have the vulture investors. But there’s something for everyone here.”¹⁰² While the segment raises the question of the motivations of those buying real estate in New Orleans, suspicions of profiteering are managed by the ethical neutrality of markets. In the eyes of the market, there is little need to distinguish those who ‘profiteer’ from those who also profit, but are motivated to invest in New Orleans by a selfless will to bring back the city. Selfless profiting, and even self-interested profiteering, is natural; it is how markets provide.

Private indifference?: St. Rita’s and Lafon Nursing Home

The news stories recounting the horrors at St. Rita’s and Lafon nursing home provided a counterpoint to the oppositions set up elsewhere pitting state vs. market and

¹⁰⁰ Jerry Taylor, “Gouge On,” *The National Review Online*, Friday, September 2, 2005; <http://www.nationalreview.com>

¹⁰¹ Anderson Cooper, *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, Monday, September 19, 2005.

¹⁰² Ibid.

state vs. private compassion. St. Rita's was a private nursing home in St. Bernard Parish owned by Salvador and Mabel Mangano that flooded, leading to the deaths of 35 residents who remained inside. Almost immediately, the Manganos were charged by the state of Louisiana with 35 counts of negligent homicide.¹⁰³ Like St. Rita's, Lafon Nursing Home operated by the Sisters of the Holy Family also failed to evacuate, resulting in the deaths of 22 of the more than 100 residents who lived there.¹⁰⁴ While St. Rita's and Lafon were covered at length in the national news, according to CNN, the Louisiana Attorney General's office was investigating reports of negligence at various other nursing home and care facilities as well. According to the *Washington Post*, only 21 of 60 nursing homes affected by Katrina evacuated prior to the storm.¹⁰⁵

At stake in these discussions was determining who should be held responsible for the care and evacuation of the residents of private nursing homes and hospitals and furthermore, who should take responsibility for determining if the threat warrants an evacuation of residents who might not survive the trip. On Friday, September 16, CNN interviewed Karen Perry, an ambulance driver with Acadian Ambulance service, the private company that attempted to evacuate St. Rita's on the Friday before the storm.¹⁰⁶ According to Perry, Salvador Mangano turned her and two other ambulances away, saying that St. Rita's had its "own evacuation plan with another private, nonemergency medical pickup service."¹⁰⁷ According to Perry, Acadian had the means to evacuate

¹⁰³ The Manganos were finally acquitted of all charges after a two-year long legal battle. According to MSNBC, the acquittal was due to a general attribution of blame to the structural weakness of the levees (and thus informally and implicitly placing the blame on all levels of government). The jury refused to single out the Manganos as solely responsible. See "Katrina Nursing Home Owners Acquitted," MSNBC, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/20649744>

¹⁰⁴ Anne Hull and Doug Struck, "At Nursing Home, Katrina Dealt Only the First Blow," *The Washington Post*, Friday, September 23, 2005, A1.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Presumably by the authority of St. Bernard Parish. According to the segment, the state required the Parish to have an evacuation procedure but did not keep it on file and it was presumed to be lost due to the flooding.

¹⁰⁷ *CNN News Night*, Friday, September 16, 2005.

everyone in the facility. Days later, ironically, Perry's husband rescued 24 residents of St. Rita's after the storm, one of which reportedly "died in his arms."¹⁰⁸

Given the revelations at St. Rita's, news stories considered whether the Manganos should be held responsible for the deaths, or whether they fulfilled their obligations to provide care for residents. As one expert observed, "In 20 years, they [the Manganos] have a spotless record. They're in their sixties themselves. They're doing this out of compassion. They wouldn't just leave people like that."¹⁰⁹ A Sunday, September 18 debate on *CNN Sunday Night* raised the question of whether the Mangano's alleged neglect of the residents of St. Rita's qualifies as manslaughter.¹¹⁰ Again, the debate hinged on attempts to manage uncertainties over their motivations. According to one expert:

The standard to apply is whether or not what they did was reasonable. They didn't just desert these people; they didn't just walk out. They made sure that there were generators to run the feeding tubes and oxygen tanks. They nailed furniture over the windows to make sure water couldn't get in, although it didn't work. They called every family. Only six people could get in to get to their relatives...¹¹¹

The obligation of the Manganos to extend compassion to their residents occupies a sort of liminal space between an informal, ethical commitment to what is 'right,' and a formal commitment to what is legal. At stake was determining what constitutes evidence of compassion, and furthermore, what type of commitment, given the circumstances and relationships, is deemed reasonable. What share of the blame should be attributed to the state or to parish government, the State Levee Board, Congress, and the Army Corp of Engineers? Should the families of the residents have an obligation to do something? What made the inaction of the Manganos or the Sisters of the Holy Family subject to formal criminal charges, while the inaction of the state was only informally and

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Jayne Weintraub, *CNN Sunday Night*, Sunday September 18, 2005

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

metaphorically criminal? Responding to these debates, in preparing for Hurricane Rita, the mayor of Galveston, Texas ordered the evacuation of hospital patients and residents of nursing homes prior to all other evacuations, arguing that it should be a formal commitment of local government. But it remains that much of the precautionary measures taken prior to Rita were a function of Katrina's proximity in recent memory.

The Red Cross: The Coca-Cola of Charities¹¹²

As federal, state, and local governments endured weeks of criticism, further blame for loss of life was attributed to the Red Cross. The media's analysis of the performance of the Red Cross in responding to Katrina is another example of rupture in which the logics underlying these discourses on the inherent nature and capacities of government and of the nation/civil society are tested and reformulated. As an organization, the American Red Cross occupies a nebulous space between public and private due to its Federal Charter. While it is officially an "independent entity that is organized and exists as a nonprofit, tax-exempt, charitable institution...It has the legal status of 'a federal instrumentality,' due to its charter requirements to carry out responsibilities delegated to it by the federal government."¹¹³ Among these responsibilities is its charge "to maintain a system of domestic and international disaster relief, including mandated responsibilities under the National Response Plan coordinated by FEMA."¹¹⁴

While the American Red Cross relies primarily on private contributions and does not receive federal funding for its day to day operations, it has historically received federal and state funding in order to fulfill its chartered obligations when private contributions have fallen short. In various public addresses, President Bush and other federal officials including FEMA head Michael Brown made formal appeals for donations to the Red Cross. Additionally, since the Red Cross relies on unpaid labor, it

¹¹² Daniel Borochoff, President of the American Institute of Philanthropy, *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, Tuesday, September 20, 2005.

¹¹³ The American Red Cross, *The Federal Charter of the American Red Cross*, <http://www.redcross.org/museum/history/charter.asp>

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

exemplifies the volunteerism of faith-based rhetoric. For example, in an op-ed piece, Red Cross chairperson Bonnie Mc-Elveen Hunter reflected:

The most remarkable thing about this ‘Army of Hope’ is that most of them are working without any compensation. In fact, volunteers make up 96% of the Red Cross workforce and are the driving force behind most of the relief organizations responding to Katrina. An undertaking of this magnitude could never be tackled by an entirely paid workforce. The cost would be astronomical, the hours too brutal and the emotional toll too great. And yet, it can be done by compassionate volunteers, working for rewards of the heart rather than rewards for the purse.¹¹⁵

Efforts to understand the successes and the failures of the Red Cross in the wake of Katrina must continually deal with this dual nature—at once, a non-profit organization of compassionate volunteers working according to the dictates of the heart, acting locally, responding flexibly and providing the ‘human face’ of disaster response *and also* a large bureaucracy entrusted with hundreds of millions of dollars in charitable contributions and a formal contractual responsibility with the federal government to provide mass care during a national disaster.

On Tuesday, September 20, the *New York Times* carried an article on the Red Cross entitled “As its coffers swell.”¹¹⁶ One of the main criticisms raised is that like FEMA, Red Cross shelters and a significant Red Cross presence on the ground was often missing, particularly in New Orleans where two days after the storm there remained no shelters, and in the affected coastal areas of Mississippi, including Hancock County (Waveland and Bay St. Louis), where there was only one shelter, located far from the more heavily populated coastal areas.¹¹⁷ According to a Red Cross

¹¹⁵ Bonnie McElveen-Hunter, “Salute Our Nation’s ‘Army of Hope,’” *USA Today*, Friday, September 2, 2005, 21A.

¹¹⁶ Stephanie Strom and Campbell Robertson, “As Its Coffers Swell, Red Cross Is Criticized On Gulf Coast Response,” *The New York Times*, Tuesday, September 20, 2005, A24.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

official, shelters were not set up prior to the storm because of the risk of flooding.¹¹⁸ According to former president Dr. Bernadine Healy, the Red Cross had been in negotiations with the state of Louisiana since the mid-90s to supply and support state-operated shelters on the basis that it was unsafe to maintain shelters in flood plains.¹¹⁹ Just as private insurers had determined it unprofitable to provide policies protecting against flood damage without the federal government shouldering the risk, the Red Cross leadership had determined that operating a shelter in a flood zone was an excessive legal risk, one that likely as well exceeded what could be expected of unpaid volunteers.

Another Red Cross official cited in a news segment on CNN admitted that state and local authorities had prevented the Red Cross from descending on New Orleans, warning that it would be too dangerous. According to a Red Cross spokesperson “we never go into an area where we have not been asked to go in.”¹²⁰ Some of the bureaucratic paralysis exhibited by the Red Cross was attributed to its relationship with government. But it remained that procedure and risk management are products of organization and implicitly this was contrasted with the frequent example in Katrina reporting of unorganized private individuals who threw caution to the wind and spontaneously acted.

The Red Cross was also criticized for the bureaucratic manner in which it distributed aid. At a shelter in Baton Rouge, volunteers distributed information while restricting assistance to only the residents formally housed at the shelter. According to one victim of Katrina, “We were just getting the runaround from the Red Cross.”¹²¹ Much like the FEMA debit card debacle, there were also accounts of inefficiency in disbursing cash payments. In DeKalb County, Georgia, CEO Vernon Jones threw the Red Cross out

¹¹⁸ Ibid. The quote is attributed to Armond T. Mascelli, vice president for response operations at the Red Cross.

¹¹⁹ Stephanie Strom and Campbell Robertson, “As Its Coiffers Swell;”

¹²⁰ *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, Tuesday, September 20, 2005.

¹²¹ Stephanie Strom and Campbell Robertson, “As Its Coiffers Swell;” Quote attributed to Mia Norflin of Carrollton, La.

of a shelter over “the agency’s mistakes in issuing emergency checks to evacuees.” According to one witness, “There were near-riot conditions a couple of times. Volunteers were poorly trained and had people in lines for hours.”¹²²

Given that the mission and function of the Red Cross is immediate humanitarian action—to “provide immediate shelter, medical care, sustenance and small amounts of cash for clothing and other necessities”—additional questions were raised about the organization’s handling of voluntary contributions, specifically its track record of fiscal responsibility, accountability, and whether it can “use all its money effectively as its role winds down.”¹²³ Nearly three-quarters of the nearly 1 billion in charitable contributions in the wake of Katrina were donations to the Red Cross. According to the *New York Times*, “Time and again in past disasters, the Red Cross has raised more money than it has needed for relief. It has also been less than clear in the past about where its money goes, and it has rarely shared its money with other organizations that tackle long-term needs of victims.”¹²⁴ As an example, the article noted that the Red Cross “raised \$55 million for the 1989 earthquake in San Francisco and spent only \$12 million on direct disaster relief, angering local officials who wanted some money to build a homeless shelter.”¹²⁵

Revelations that the Red Cross had become too big, its functions too limited, and its behaviors too bound up with the workings of government led some to propose expanding the market in charity. As Daniel Borochoff, president of the American Institute of Philanthropy, argued, “The Red Cross is the Coca-Cola of charities. People automatically think of giving to them in a disaster. Americans need to look into the many other groups that have very creative approaches and ways of helping out in a crisis.”¹²⁶ According to George Penick, President of the Foundation for the Mid South,

¹²² “Jones Puts Himself at Eye of Storm,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Thursday, September 22, 2005, 16A. Quote attributed to Rob Hoskins, affordable housing developer.

¹²³ Stephanie and Campbell Robertson, “As Its Coffers Swell;”

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ *CNN NewsNight with Aaron Brown*, Tuesday, September 20, 2005.

“Especially in rural areas and small towns, the Red Cross was either absent or overwhelmed... You had churches and nonprofit groups taking care of the evacuees in any way they could with whatever money they could scrape together.”¹²⁷ Thus, small, local, and flexible and an informal commitment to care is privileged and there is essentially a rejection of what is perceived as the bureaucracy inherent in any type of formal, mass care.

Am I My Brother's Keeper?

According to central media, the federal government's failure to respond was indicative of a set of governing logics of self-interested politics, the managing of public relations, and an inflexible, bureaucratic paralysis that made it an unwitting perpetrator operating under the guise of a benefactor. While voices from the left continued to defend the *idea* of government, given the evidence of Katrina's aftermath, there was little legitimacy to the belief that more government was the answer. It wasn't that the state wasn't there; it was that the state *was* there—threatening victims, committing racist acts of violence, routing empty buses away from the crowded Superdome, blockading roads to keep volunteers from coming in and to keep the victims from escaping, directing personnel and supplies to precisely the areas where they were least needed, undermining private and international acts of compassion, separating families and whisking them all over the country, committing overt acts of racism, declaring martial law, and so on and so forth. It would even emerge that government *was* there before Katrina—permitting private development of wetlands; building costly and underutilized new canal projects (the MR-GO) that made the city more vulnerable to storm surge; passing on federal grants earmarked for levee projects to private development; distributing federal money not to reinforce levees, but to equip Wyoming's sheriff's departments for a terrorist attack; spending money to research disaster scenarios but not doing anything to prepare for them; and so on and so forth. Thus, Katrina's evidence supported both a claim that government needed to be responsive to citizens *and* to affirm that its governing logics of 'politics' and bureaucracy made it inherently incapable of doing so.

¹²⁷ Stephanie Strom and Campbell Robertson, "As Its Coiffers Swell;"

Echoing official rhetoric, central media by and large endorsed entrepreneurialism and the resuming of markets as an act of selfless compassion and as the key to stimulating the recovery. Likewise, civil society, motivated by selflessness and goodwill, efficiently provided care, restored personal dignity, and provided the ‘human face’ of the recovery. Narratives of state vs. market and state vs. private compassion provided an explanation of what motivated actions and behaviors, thereby managing communicative uncertainties. The interpreting and filtering of news through these cultural myths was important in working out and legitimating a course of action.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals how understandings of what constitutes a reciprocal and a unilateral exchange are flexibly defined in the moment to align with these narratives. For Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, there has historically been a limited tradition of social rights in the U.S. in part because social provision has always been conceived within a framework of exchange—as either the contractual exchange of equivalents or as unilateral charity.¹²⁸ Contributory programs like Social Security and Medicare that are framed as reciprocal—you pay in what you get out—have historically proven less controversial than programs like Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and Medicaid, which are often framed as non-contributory, unilateral, and thus charitable redistributions.¹²⁹ In the case of private care, reciprocity was often invoked to rationalize a unilateral exchange from the perspective of the fortunate who does not suffer—(i.e. ‘it could be us, but for the grace of God’). In the case of entrepreneurialism and markets as generative of compassion, exploitative capitalist relationships normally regarded as reciprocal, were legitimately cast as unilateral acts of selflessness.

But there were also limits to the flexibility of these binaries, as in moments in which the outpouring of private compassion became a burden, or moments where market actors were suspected of unilaterally profiteering. While these cultural myths for conceiving the motivations of government, market actors, and civil society provided a

¹²⁸ See Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, “Contract versus Charity: Why Is There No Social Citizenship in the United States?” in *The Citizenship Debates: A Reader*, edited by Gershon Shafir, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 113-130.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 115.

sense of coherence to the Katrina story, there remained moments of rupture in which uncertainties were legitimately given voice. Finally, the politics of answering uncertainties over motivations and desires of actors was shaped by the question of a formal vs. informal obligation. Those obligated to respond to the crisis in some way (namely all levels of government) were only newsworthy when they failed to do so, while those who were not obligated to respond (i.e. businesses, faith-based organizations, individuals) were newsworthy for any act of compassion. The result was a developing discourse that devalued relationships of responsibility while celebrating non-obligatory acts of compassion.

Chapter VI

Conclusion

As the full scale of government's failures at all levels was uncovered in the mainstream press, Adolph Reed Jr., a prominent public intellectual, political scientist, and critical race scholar, argued in *The Nation* that New Orleans had been “decimated by an ideological program, not by a storm”—that the city had in fact been “undone by neoliberalism.”¹ For Reed, “demonizing government to cut public spending and regulation, plundering the public treasury through privatization and rationalizing both through the myth of magical market efficiency all underlie what happened to New Orleans. The storm exposed the consequences of neoliberalism's lies and mystifications, in a single locale and all at once.”² While there were many other opinion pieces in the mainstream press that interpreted Katrina as a racialized spectacle of neglect and as evidence that the safety net was in need of mending, Reed's polemic was perhaps unique because it identified Katrina as a potentially transformative moment—a critical rupture that threatened to unsettle the dominance of this specific historical conjuncture of market fundamentalism,³ post-racialism and other discourses aimed at depoliticizing difference,

¹ Adolph Reed Jr., “Undone by Neoliberalism: New Orleans was Decimated by an Ideological Program, Not a Storm,” *The Nation*, 283 8, September 18, 2006. Following Reed, in the months and years after Katrina, a body of scholarly work emerged examining the neoliberal dismantling of the welfare state and the progressive stripping away of the protections of citizenship as exacerbating Katrina's devastation. See for example Henry Giroux, *Stormy Weather: Katrina and the Politics of Disposability*, (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2006); Douglas Kellner, “The Katrina Hurricane Spectacle and Crisis of the Bush Presidency,” *Cultural Studies* ←→ *Critical Methodologies*, 7 2 (2007): 222-234.

² Adolph Reed Jr., “Undone by Neoliberalism,”

³ Margaret Somers has defined neoliberalism as a ‘market fundamentalism’ that brings market logics to bear in defining relationships and other areas of social life that traditionally existed outside the realm of the economic. For a discussion, See Margaret Somers, *Genealogies of Citizenship: Markets, Statelessness and the Right to Have Rights*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 73-75.

and the success of movements to dismantle the welfare state and the protections of citizenship.⁴

If New Orleans was ‘undone by neoliberalism’ before the storm, Reed’s polemic and the various others lamenting the persistence of racism and the lack of a safety net that flooded the editorial pages in early September did little to bar the same logics from structuring the recovery.⁵ After Katrina, Habitat for Humanity was, and remains, the largest housing developer in the poor neighborhoods of New Orleans.⁶ Unlike other areas of the city, progress in the heavily flooded Ninth Ward has been characteristically slow, and indeed, much of it today remains in the same condition as five years ago.⁷ Despite official intentions, a 2008 report from Tulane’s Newcomb College Center for Research on Women confirms that New Orleans post-Katrina is “by all estimates...whiter and wealthier.”⁸ 2010 census figures confirm only roughly 60% of the black population of New Orleans pre-Katrina has managed to return, and over 100,000 black residents remain

⁴ See Adolph Reed Jr., “Class-ifying the Hurricane,” *The Nation*, October 3, 2005. Neoliberalism, like other broad analytical terms, is imprecise, overused, and often misused. The tendency among scholars to speak broadly of the global dominance of neoliberal capitalism often precludes consideration of exceptions to neoliberalism, spaces of resistance, the specificity of particular historical formations of neoliberal capitalism, as well as the ways in which neoliberalism is inhabited and differentially adapted to local contexts. David Harvey sees neoliberalism as less a dogged adherence to the theory of unregulated markets than an active project for consolidating class power that involves significant intervention and regulation in favor of powerful multinational conglomerates. See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Thus, neoliberalism designates the ideological and structural assault on social rights and multiculturalism that has led to a deeper consolidation of class power in the United States under globalization. My interest is less in neoliberal or neoclassical doctrine than in the myths and essentializing rhetoric of the nation, the state, the market, and the individual, that is given voice in the media and that works in the reproduction of inequalities.

⁵ See for example Paul Krugman, “Killed By Contempt,” *The New York Times*, Monday, September 5, 2005, A21.

⁶ Chris Megerian, “The Architect of New Orleans,” *The Emory Wheel*, <http://www.emorywheel.com/detail.php?n=16453>

⁷ The Ninth Ward emerged nationally as a symbol of the plight of poor and working class black residents of New Orleans. For many critics, the progress in the Ninth Ward has served as a barometer of how social inequalities have mapped on to the recovery. What little progress there is to date in the Ninth Ward has been achieved by non-governmental community groups and partnerships—the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), the Common Ground Collective, Brad Pitt’s ‘Make it Right’ project, Habitat for Humanity and others.

⁸ Rachel E. Luft and Shana Griffin, “A Status Report on Housing in New Orleans after Katrina: An Intersectional Analysis,” <http://tulane.edu/nccrow/upload/NCCROWreport08-chapter5.pdf>

displaced.⁹ President Bush's vision of an 'ownership society' has favored homeowners, limiting eligibility for federal assistance under the Road Home program.¹⁰ There have been concerted efforts to decrease the availability of affordable public housing in New Orleans. After Katrina, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) barred reentry to four habitable public housing developments in the city before finally demolishing them. Since then, HUD and HANO have committed to restoring only a fraction of pre-storm public and subsidized housing units.¹¹ Multi-layered sub-contracting and a lack of oversight of federal contracts have enabled exploitative labor practices and reliance on undocumented labor throughout the region and in various aspects of the recovery.¹² The long, dismal record of public schools in New Orleans, rather than being recognized as a problem of poverty and inequality, has legitimated movements against all things 'public.' Over half of the students who have returned to New Orleans since Katrina are enrolled in private and charter schools.¹³ How is it possible that the very logics recognized by the news media of the center as creating this crisis of neglect differentially impacting the most vulnerable--namely racial and class inequalities and government indifference--were able to so blatantly persist in a post-Katrina U.S.? The remarkable continuity and legitimacy of this formation after Katrina requires explanation.

⁹ See "Census Shows New Orleans Losing Many Blacks," *Black Politics on the Web*, February 4, 2011. <http://blackpoliticsontheweb.com/2011/02/04/census-shows-new-orleans-losing-many-blacks/#> (Retrieved February 8, 2011).

¹⁰ The President advocated promoting an 'ownership society' as part of the Gulf Opportunity Zone. See George W. Bush, "Address to the Nation on Hurricane Katrina Recovery from New Orleans, Louisiana," Thursday, September 15, 2005. Despite this, many homeowners encountered significant delays receiving their Road Home grants. ICF International, the company contracted to manage disbursements was roundly criticized for undervaluing homes and moving too slowly to distribute federal grants—the slow pace of disbursements threatening the likelihood that residents would stay to rebuild. See Renae Merle, "Louisiana Officials Criticize Delays on the 'Road Home,'" *The Washington Post*, Monday, January 29, 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/01/28/AR2007012801036.html>

¹¹ These delays furthered the work of restricting who could return. See Rachel E. Luft and Shana Griffin, "A Status Report on Housing in New Orleans after Katrina."

¹² See National Employment Law Project (NELP), "Post-Katrina Policy Short: Subcontracted Workers: The Outsourcing of Rights and Responsibilities," October 2005, <http://www.nelp.org>

¹³ Jay Matthews, "Charter Schools' Big Experiment: New Orleans' Post-Katrina Test May Offer Lessons for Ailing Systems," *The Washington Post*, Monday June 9, 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/06/08/AR2008060802174.html>

I began this thesis with the problem of understanding the politics of pity after Katrina as it was worked out by and through the news media; specifically, how and why particular interpretations achieved dominance or were undermined, and how the ethical crisis in the wake of Katrina was resolved without upsetting the balance of power. The period of initial uncertainty in determining what in fact happened, and in assigning the roles in order to make the Katrina aftermath ethically intelligible, powerfully shaped the trajectory of the unfolding politics of pity. The lack of an immediately visible spectacle of suffering, the news media's initial focus on the spectacle of looting, followed by the spectacle of suffering at the Convention Center days later, led to a host of uncertainties over who should properly occupy the positions of victim, persecutor and benefactor, which unfortunates mattered, and what motivated the actions of the victims and government officials. As the crisis in New Orleans culminated, the news media's presence on the ground produced a 'decentered media' in which the ideological center as reflected by the news media of the center diverged from the interpretations of mostly distant government officials.¹⁴ While the news media claimed that Katrina should be rightfully recognized as a racial and class injustice, government officials insisted 'the storm did not discriminate, and neither will the recovery.' As the news media began to suspect racist indifference on the part of government, federal officials insisted that they were 'moving heaven and earth' to help the victims of the storm, including those stranded in New Orleans. While the news media gradually identified with the victims and sought to understand what motivated criminal behavior, government officials maintained a zero tolerance policy on looting and vowed to bring to justice all criminals who took advantage of the crisis to prey on others.

This momentary indeterminacy of the center revealed a rupture by establishing two divergent narratives—the one told by government officials and the one told by the news media. As the media's story became dominant, it provided an answer to what Boltanski refers to as *existential* uncertainties, *evaluative* uncertainties and uncertainties over the *motivations* of the actors involved—all of which are products of communication

¹⁴ See Frank Durham, "Media Ritual in Catastrophic Time: The Populist Turn in Television Coverage of Hurricane Katrina," *Journalism*, 9 (2008): 95-116.

over distance.¹⁵ Beginning Thursday, September 1, the central news media's developing frame for understanding Katrina was the federal government as perpetrator, indifferent to the needs of mostly poor, black people, and intensifying the crisis by failing to immediately respond. In terms of *existential* uncertainties (i.e. assigning the roles), the residents of New Orleans, formerly perpetrators; were rightfully cast as victims, while the news media revised their expectations of government performing as a benefactor. The news media's insistence on the relevance of race and class answered *evaluative* uncertainties over which suffering unfortunates mattered while also explaining *motivations*--government, at all levels, failed to effectively prepare and respond because of a racist or classist indifference; the victims engaged in looting because they were marginalized and in need, and the nation responded because they have compassion for victims and are indifferent to race and class distinctions.

But as I have shown, the politics of pity unfolded in such a way that it ended in a recentering and a reconciling of media and official interpretations; repairing, as it were, this ideological breach. The recentering was set in motion by efforts from various quarters to contest the parts of the media's narrative that threatened existing power relationships. This was achieved, I argue, by *reestablishing key uncertainties*. The claim of a racist government was disputed by many, including members of the administration, and was unseated by the rise of a competing discourse of government bureaucracy, inefficiency and paralysis. Thus, at stake was the question of motive—was government guilty of bigotry or merely bumbling inefficiency? Likewise, rather than government neglect, didn't the evidence gathered in the weeks following the crisis indicate the problem of excessive government? While we should certainly expect more from our elected officials, aren't we at some level demanding more of government than it can reasonably provide?

The renewal of uncertainties over racism as motivating government, led to disputes over the significance of race and thus evaluative uncertainties over which unfortunates mattered. Was it race that determined outcomes after Katrina or a race-blind

¹⁵ Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 151.

conception of class? Was it the poor who suffered most, or the elderly, infirm, and children among the poor who had even less power to help themselves? The persisting narrative of the ‘criminal element’--that ephemeral category of those who profited from the disaster, preyed on the nation’s goodwill, and expressed anger at their exclusion, renewed former uncertainties over the motivations of the victims. While they were all victims, some were still more worthy of comfort than others. Throughout the entire Katrina drama, the motivations of the ‘Armies of Compassion’ (i.e. the nation, civil society, and the private sector) and their role as benefactors, as victims of government, and as victims of the ‘criminal element’ that took advantage of them, remained the only consistent certainty.

Entrepreneurs were benefactors that created opportunities, that went above their obligations to victims, and that generally created positive outcomes regardless of their intentions. When they were also victims, their selflessness despite their suffering verged on the sublime. By the time President Bush delivered his address from New Orleans on September 15 promising to examine government’s failures and address inequalities in the recovery by encouraging entrepreneurialism, most of these key uncertainties had already been restored. Rather than regarded as an effort on the part of the Bush administration to politically profit from the misery it was complicit in producing, or even as ‘too little, too late;’ it was almost entirely received by the news media of the center as a long overdue outpouring of federal compassion. Rather than a wide-ranging assault on the GO-Zone as perpetuating racial and class inequalities and as further institutionalizing government indifference to the poor, the news media of the center responded by expressing anxieties about the burdens of federal excess and concerns over how the costs would be distributed.

In the reporting of Katrina, the news media of the center failed to link racism and the reproduction of racial and class inequalities to the global neoliberal project of eliminating social protections. Instead, the news media reaffirmed the logic of contractual reciprocity vs. unilateral charity, left white privilege and class privilege intact by maintaining the legitimacy of strategies to avoid confronting them (i.e. colorblindness, ‘free markets’), and left the ethos of limited government intact by maintaining the

legitimacy of strategies to defend it (i.e. the irrationality of 'politics' and bureaucratic paralysis as governing logics, the privileging of flexible, spontaneous, and unaccountable, private care). Future work must continue to examine the work of the news media in staking out the ideological center and the role that both communicative certainties and uncertainties play in the maintenance of power.

Appendix: Katrina Timeline compiled from my own research of the news and from existing timelines, including:

Douglas Brinkley's timeline in Douglas Brinkley, *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 625-637.

CNN's Katrina Timeline, available at <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2005/katrina/interactive/timeline.katrina.large/frameset.exclude.html>

Think Progress' Katrina Timeline, available at <http://thinkprogress.org/katrina-timeline/>

Week 1

Friday, August 26, 2005

National Hurricane Center Friday afternoon revises Katrina's projected path. National evening news reports a revised projected landfall stretching from eastern Louisiana to the Florida panhandle. Katrina's strength and size is expected to intensify.

Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco-D declares a state of emergency in Louisiana.

Saturday, August 27

Katrina builds to a Category 3 Hurricane.

Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour-R declares a state of emergency in Mississippi.

President Bush declares Mississippi and Louisiana under a federal state of emergency, authorizing FEMA to provide equipment and resources at its discretion.

Journalists downtown and in the French Quarter report on efforts to board up businesses and protect property.

Mayor Nagin and Governor Blanco hold a press conference and Mayor Nagin declares a state of emergency in New Orleans, but not a mandatory evacuation.

Sunday, August 28

Katrina builds to a Category 5 Hurricane and is projected to hit New Orleans.

In the morning, Mayor Nagin declares a mandatory evacuation of the city of New Orleans.

Residents line up outside the Superdome and are searched for weapons by National Guard. Roughly 10,000 residents initially take shelter here.

State's contraflow plan for routing traffic away from New Orleans metro area is hailed by Governor Blanco as a success.

Monday, August 29

Katrina is downgraded to a Category 4 and makes landfall around 7 am near the mouth of the Mississippi River. Within the hour, storm surge via the MR-GO causes 10-15 feet of floodwaters in St. Bernard Parish and eastern neighborhoods of New Orleans.

Power goes out in New Orleans in the early morning. The levee breaches have occurred by late morning—the 17th Street Canal around 5 am, the Industrial Canal at 8:14 am. The London Avenue Canal breaches around 4:00 pm. The levee breaches and their effects would not be confirmed by the national news media until Tuesday.

By noon, floodwaters are 15-20 feet deep in Slidell and other areas on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain. Some parts of the Mississippi coast have seen as much as a 30 foot storm surge.

U.S. Coast Guard and State Wildlife and Fisheries personnel begin rescue efforts in New Orleans.

First reports of looting in New Orleans

The news media is unanimous in reporting that New Orleans had been spared as weather maps showed that a last minute jog to the east had dealt Mississippi a direct hit.

CNN correspondent David Mattingly reports mostly wind damage as residents plan to clean up the French Quarter for Labor Day weekend.

News reports describe the roof damage to the Superdome.

Monday night, CNN's Jeanne Meserve provides some of the first glimpses of the crisis unfolding east of downtown near the Ninth Ward.

Tuesday, August 30

According to Brinkley, there are already 20,000 gathered at the Convention Center by Tuesday morning.

National media stationed downtown and in the French Quarter focus on looting.

Levee breaches and rising floodwaters are confirmed by news media. Aerial views of the city confirm that roughly 80% of the city is underwater.

Waters continue to rise downtown, and begin to encroach on the Superdome.

Coast Guard carries out dramatic rooftop rescues that are captured by national news.

Federal officials gradually come to understand the level of destruction today, after admitting to initially being misled by media reports that New Orleans had been spared. Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff declares Katrina “an Incident of National Significance,” initiating the National Response Plan.

Wednesday, August 31

President Bush passes over New Orleans in Air Force One and delivers his first address from Washington emphasizing the magnitude of the crisis, detailing deployments of federal resources, and asking for donations to private charities.

Governor Blanco requests 40,000 federal troops after her call Monday night for “everything you’ve got” was criticized as not a specific request.

Water levels in the city stop rising today.

A group of evacuees leaving New Orleans on their own across the Crescent City Bridge are blocked by Gretna City Police and members of the Jefferson Parish Sheriff’s Department and shots are fired.

A Yahoo! News story inadvertently juxtaposes two photos—one caption referring to black residents ‘looting’ and another showing a white family described as ‘finding’ food. This leads to debates over the news media’s implicit racism on blogs and non-traditional news sources.

The emphasis in the news on looting continues today. The news media begins to qualify some acts of looting today as necessary for survival. Aaron Brown interviews a Jefferson Parish official and confirms that most of the looting is not related to survival and is thus “inexcusable, appalling crime.”

The number of residents at the Superdome has almost tripled from the original number formally admitted prior to the storm as more continue to arrive at the Convention Center.

Mayor Nagin declares ‘martial law’ and calls for all city police in New Orleans to suspend rescue operations so as to restore law and order.

The first evacuations of residents needing special medical care begin at the Superdome. NBC leaves the Superdome, determining it unsafe to continue to remain there.

Texas Governor Rick Perry offers the Astrodome and Reliant Center as a shelter and compassionately extends the full resources of Texas to its neighbor in need.

Baton Rouge Mayor Kip Holden criticizes New Orleans ‘thugs’ that had reportedly started a fight at the River Center shelter.

Jabar Gibson’s bus arrives at the Houston Astrodome and is mistakenly reported as the arrival of the first group of evacuees from the Superdome.

ABC’s Nightline is devoted to celebrating a deracialized vision of New Orleans culture.

Thursday, September 1

President Bush appears on *Good Morning America* and claims that no one had anticipated that the levees could breach.

In an interview on NPR, Homeland Security Chief Michael Chertoff says that he has heard no reports of residents stranded at the Convention Center. Later FEMA director Michael Brown on CNN would admit that he learned about the residents at the Convention Center today from the news.

Tens of thousands of residents are reported stranded downtown at the Morial Convention Center. Bodies found here will be the first deaths attributed to federal neglect.

President Bush announces the Hurricane Katrina Relief Fund headed by former Presidents Bush and Clinton, who had initially collaborated in fundraising efforts in the wake of the 2004 Tsunami.

The news media unanimously and formally recognizes that most of the people stranded in New Orleans are black and poor.

Conditions continue to decline at the major hospitals and medical facilities that have yet to be evacuated.

The *Washington Post* carries a front page piece on the Superdome distinguishing good citizens from the criminal element.

Mayor Nagin calls in to WWL-AM radio and criticizes FEMA.

House Speaker Dennis Hastert argues that it doesn't make sense to rebuild New Orleans. Senate approves 10.5 billion in federal money to carry out the response.

The Houston Astrodome reaches capacity and evacuees are sent on to other cities in Texas.

The standoff on the Crescent City Bridge between police and residents continues today.

Friday, September 2

Memorial Medical Center, Tulane University Hospital and Charity Hospital are evacuated.

The House approves the 10.5 billion approved by the Senate. Offers of international aid and assistance continue to pour in.

An editorial by Bonnie McElveen-Hunter of the Red Cross is carried in *USA Today* saluting the nation's "Army of Hope" and praising the work of those motivated by "rewards of the heart" rather than "rewards of the purse."

A convoy of army trucks and supplies arrive in New Orleans headed by Lt. General Russel Honore. Evacuations at the Superdome and the Convention Center are underway.

Jesse Jackson tours New Orleans and describes the I-10 underpass where residents had gathered to wait for transportation out of the city as recalling the 'hull of a slave ship.'

Members of the Black Congressional Caucus criticize the response as disproportionately impacting the poor, many of whom are also black.

Kanye West goes off-script on NBC's *A Concert for Hurricane Relief*, criticizing the media's racism and announcing "George Bush doesn't care about black people."

President Bush praises FEMA director Michael Brown on the ground in Mobile, Alabama for doing a "heckuva job." In Biloxi he states, "I am satisfied with the response. I am not satisfied with all the results." He confirms that New Orleans will be rebuilt in another address from the Louis Armstrong International Airport, where FEMA had that morning established a field hospital and triage center.

Week 2

Saturday, September 3

According to Brinkley, an estimated 220,000 evacuees from Louisiana are in Texas—120,000 in 97 different shelters and roughly 100,000 in hotels.

By the evening, the Superdome, the Convention Center, and the I-10 overpass are completely evacuated.

Authorities begin distributing FEMA debit cards at the Houston Astrodome but only to evacuees with a confirmed need, namely those presently housed at the Astrodome. The distribution process is roundly criticized as slow and a further example of regulated care.

Sunday, September 4

Rooftop rescues and house to house searches for survivors continue. The Coast Guard reports 17,000 rescues.

Mayor Nagin announces plans to relieve city police officers and to provide counseling and time away from duty after two suicides by officers are reported.

Texas Governor Rick Perry announces that the Texas is at capacity and calls on other states to do their part.

Monday, September 5

Rooftop rescues and house to house searches continue.

The Army Corp of Engineers repairs a breach in the 17th Street Canal.

Officials encourage remaining residents in New Orleans to evacuate in light of the health risks and the lack of services and infrastructure.

Tuesday, September 6

Aaron Brown begins looking at acts of compassion and interviews Duke University students who travelled to the Convention Center in New Orleans on their own to help evacuate residents.

The Centers for Disease Control confirms five deaths from bacterial infection from contaminated floodwaters.

Mayor Nagin declares forced evacuations of residents remaining in the city that are not a part of the recovery efforts.

Wednesday, September 7

Bodies of residents are discovered today at St. Rita's Nursing Home in St. Bernard Parish.

House and Senate leaders announce a bi-partisan committee to investigate the response from government at all levels.

Thursday, September 8

It is revealed that state officials had kept the Red Cross out of the city so as not to interrupt the search and rescue efforts.

Congress approves an additional 51.8 billion for emergency spending.

ABC *Nightline* reports on "Camp Greyhound," a makeshift, temporary holding facility for criminals, and implies that the ongoing policing of petty looting was excessive.

ABC *Nightline* interviews NOPD Chief Eddie Compass to better understand what city police were facing during last week's crisis.

According to CNN, the FBI warns about fraudulent websites and emails accepting Katrina-related donations that have not been investigated.

President Bush issues an executive order suspending the Davis-Bacon Act of 1931 that ensures prevailing wages for workers under federal contracts.

ABC's Ted Koppel interviews officials to try to understand the meaning of Mayor Nagin's declaration of 'martial law.'

Federal government is criticized for failing to answer offers of international assistance.

Friday, September 9

Coast Guard Vice Admiral Thad Allen replaces FEMA director Michael Brown, who is sent back to Washington by Homeland Security Director Michael Chertoff to prepare for future disasters.

The news continues to showcase the work of the private sector through human interest pieces.

Residents in New Orleans plead for the government to leave them alone and express fears of leaving their homes and submitting to government's care.

Rich Lowry in the *National Review* examines FEMA's lack of flexibility and creativity in responding to the storm through reference to the DMV.

Week 3

Saturday, September 10

NBC Nightly News' "In-Depth" segment is devoted to framing international offers of assistance as acts of reciprocity, specifically examining the 'invasion' from Mexico.

Sunday, September 11

ABC News celebrates reciprocal displays of compassion from the nations impacted by the 2004 Tsunami.

The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reports on the experiences of a Georgia volunteer disaster medical team that failed to treat any patients due to FEMA's misinformation and failures to coordinate.

NOPD again confirm that they will not forcibly remove residents from their homes.

Monday, September 12

FEMA director Michael Brown formally announces his resignation.

The findings of a CNN/USA Today/Gallop Poll are released today finding that the opinions of black and white respondents differed greatly on the role of race and class in the response and in determining who should be held responsible for the crisis.

Tuesday, September 13

Aaron Brown debates Brent Bozell of the conservative Media Research Center who criticizes the central news media for 'race-baiting' politicians and for unduly politicizing the response.

Sal and Mable Mangano, owners of St. Rita's Nursing Home, are charged with 34 counts of negligent homicide for failing to evacuate residents prior to the storm.

Mayor Nagin announces plans to reopen parts of the city as early as next week.

Wednesday, September 14

Repopulation of some of the suburbs of New Orleans not impacted by flooding begins. Mayor Nagin announces his multi-stage plan to repopulate New Orleans.

The port of New Orleans reopens.

The Senate votes down a proposal to create an independent bi-partisan committee to investigate the response to Katrina.

Senator Barack Obama redefines willful neglect and active malice as "a general indifference" to the poor in an interview with Anderson Cooper.

The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* warns of individual efforts to prey on the nation's outpouring of goodwill.

One evacuee in Salt Lake City, Utah reportedly feels like a "fly in a bowl of milk."

Erica Hill examines the Mississippi casino industries' compassion toward the community and its employees.

Thursday, September 15

President Bush addresses the nation from Jackson Square in New Orleans outlining plans for the Gulf Coast recovery. In the address, Bush recognized Katrina's racial and class dimensions while at the same time proposing a Gulf Opportunity Zone.

Friday, September 16

President Bush's address is hailed as a bi-partisan compromise and a strong show of compassion and commitment to rebuild.

News coverage begins examining the efforts of Congress to determine how the recovery will be paid for. ABC's Bob Woodruff describes efforts to determine how to pay for Katrina as "a very delicate political problem."

ABC World News Tonight covers disputes over private insurers denying claims attributed to flood damage.

CNN covers the events that transpired at St. Rita's Nursing Home.

According to CNN, roughly 1/3 of an estimated 160,000 barrels of oil is recovered that leaked from storage sites into floodwaters. The total is estimated to be nearly half the volume of the Exxon Valdez spill.

Mallory Factor in the *National Review* outlines the Right's vision of not only an "opportunity zone," but a "liberty zone."

Week 4

Saturday, September 17

Coast Guard Vice Admiral Thad Allen warns against prematurely repopulating areas of the city under Nagin's plan.

Sunday, September 18

CNN's Howard Kurtz moderates a debate over journalists' displays of emotion and their focus on the poor as indicative of a politics.

Adolph Reed Jr., writing for the *Nation*, argues that New Orleans was "undone by neoliberalism."

Kenner Police Chief Nick Congemi accuses city officials of racist neglect of Hispanic residents of a damaged apartment complex.

Monday, September 19

Aaron Brown reveals the horrors of FEMA's 'expectancy room' and the inflexibility and inhumane treatment of patients at FEMA's understaffed field hospital at Louis Armstrong International Airport, calling for a more flexible way of incorporating volunteers.

Anderson Cooper criticizes the return of the real estate market, worrying about "vulture investors."

Mayor Nagin suspends his plans to repopulate New Orleans in light of the approach of Hurricane Rita and criticism from President Bush and Coast Guard Vice Admiral Thad Allen.

Tuesday, September 20

Debates continue today in Congress and in the news over how the recovery will be paid for.

The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* examines the “small-town to small-town bucket brigade,” as a creative approach to provision.

The *New York Times* carries an editorial by John Tierney advocating a business model for the response and recovery. The piece juxtaposed the bureaucratic paralysis and inflexibility of FEMA and the federal government with the flexibility and creative thinking of the private sector exemplified by the case of Wal-Mart.

Fox Report examines what corporations have to gain from contributing to the response and recovery, arguing “a good mind for business begins with a good heart.”

The *New York Times* highlights charges of the bureaucracy, inefficiency, and unaccountability of the American Red Cross.

Wednesday, September 21

ABC World News Tonight does its “Closer Look” segment on how the costs of recovery will be distributed and where federal budget cuts will come from.

Thursday, September 22

Rita continues its approach toward eastern Louisiana.

Aaron Brown examines a story of bad cops who engaged in looting during the crisis of the first week.

Friday, September 23

The *Washington Post* carries a front page article examining what transpired at Lafon Nursing Home.

Rita reaches New Orleans, again breaches levees along the Industrial Canal, and eventually leads to further flooding in the Ninth Ward.

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