The Illusion of Recovery in New Orleans: Displaced, Misplaced, and Replaced

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The Illusion of Recovery in New Orleans: Displaced, Misplaced, and Replaced

Senior Project Submitted To
The Division of Social Studies
Of Bard College

By
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Acknowledgements

This project is dedicated to my family whose love and support have been steadfast and unshakable. I recollect those late night phone calls with my mother about the fatiguing aspects of this project. In return, she would always remind me that I could do anything that I put my mind to. Thank you Samantha Hill, my advisor, for your astonishing contribution as a writer and theorist. Without your guidance and expertise this project would not have been conceivable. I am exceedingly grateful to my professors Michelle Murray, David Register, and Simon Gilhooley whose classes have had a profound impact upon my intellectual growth and ability as a writer. I also want to thank Eric Harrison, Colette Battle, and Grace Morris, three amazing community organizers in New Orleans who introduced me to a world of possibilities and equipped me with the tools to be a change maker in society. Last but certainly not least; this is dedicated to those families that perished in the floodwaters of Katrina. Although you are gone, you will never be forgotten. I say to all those that perished and are displaced from the storm, we shall overcome because we came for more.
## Table of Content

Section I: Hurricane Katrina a Man Made Disaster

Section II: The Rhetoric of George Bush’s Response

Section III: Sovereignty and the Exception

Section IIII: The Rise of Corporate Power

Section V: Retelling the Narrative

Section IV: Eternal Displacement

Section VII: Corporate Optimism Democracy’s Perversion

Section IX: Conclusion

Section X: Appendix
Abstract: How is political rhetoric used during moments of crisis and catastrophe to reify systemic forms of racism? This article investigates how white hegemonic structures used coded language transmission to induced racialization after hurricane Katrina. It seeks to discover how the political rhetoric of recovery played an instrumental role in camouflaging racially biased practices that proliferated an inequitable recovery and rationalized the disposssession and stratification of communities of color in New Orleans.

Introduction

After Hurricane Betsy, Hurricane Katrina was by far the most devastating natural disaster that New Orleans has ever experienced. After making landfall, Katrina’s ravishing winds, relentless rainfall, towering waves, and powerful storm surge obliterated the shores of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. The damage done to the communities of the Gulf South was unfathomable. It was reported that about 1,118 people were confirmed dead in Louisiana alone, and an additional 135 people were reported to be missing or presumed dead. Property damage was estimated at $21 billion and damage to public infrastructure totaled $6.7 billion.¹

Since its inception in 1718, New Orleans has precariously rested between two massive bodies of water, the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain. The French referred to it as “Le Flottant” which literally means the floating land. In order to hold off the waters from the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain, New Orleans launched massive construction projects building levees and floodwalls to protect resident buildings from flooding. Nevertheless, these construction projects would have to be renovated annually to assure that the levees were in top form.

It is widely believed that the damage Hurricane Katrina caused was a result of decades of government negligence to New Orleans Hurricane Protection system. A report published by the army corps of engineers highlighted major flaws of the levee system. In the report it was

revealed that parts of the levee were too low, while some parts were poorly constructed. The real failure came from organizational structures, like FEMA and other Louisiana state government agencies. Although the government was well aware of the levee’s feeble condition, no investments were made to fortify the archaic hurricane protection system. This would ultimately be to the detriment of New Orleans residents who would have pay the consequence of their own government’s negligence.

The government’s blunder in updating the hurricane protection system was linked to its inability to respond swiftly during a state of emergency. The federal and state government was ill prepared to address the needs of residents in New Orleans who were unable to evacuate. Thousands of people sought refuge in the Superdome, which was refashioned into a “shelter of last resort” for those unable to evacuate. As Katrina made landfall, her mighty winds stripped pieces from the roof of the Superdome allowing water to enter. Over the next several days, the Superdome along with the city itself would degenerate into chaos and disorganization. “This was because of limited power, no plumbing, a shredded roof and not nearly enough supplies… to deal with 30,000 evacuees.”

On the streets of New Orleans, human corpses lay lifeless in tranquil waters. As the floodwaters subsided, there began a desperate search for basic necessities like bottled water, food, and clothing. These were resources the people of New Orleans were in dire need of. As the scramble for the resources continued, heavily armed policemen took their position along street corners. The beautiful landscape of New Orleans lay bleak and barren. Drenched bodies were scattered across the New Orleans landscape.

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More than a natural disaster, Hurricane Katrina was a manmade disaster. Considering the fact that the government had refused to renovate its outdated flood protection system, not to mention its inability to respond swiftly during times of crisis, made this very clear. It was a tragedy rooted in government indifference and hesitation. Indeed, there wasn’t anything natural about what transpired during Hurricane Katrina. It was a tragedy exacerbated by the government’s protracted response. Alas, after this catastrophe took place America was posed with a very difficult question: how could we help rebuild a devastated city?

The Narrative

In this section of my paper I incorporate my personal experience with Hurricane Katrina as an attestation. Through this unique localized lens it is my goal to provide you with my narrative in order to tie this in with the larger theoretical framework at hand. Through this narrative, I hope to impress upon you the pangs of watching such a catastrophe unfold.

Being a native of New Orleans, I still remember the day I became aware of an injustice that transpired. It was August 30, 2005, the day after Katrina had made landfall. I, along with a few of my cousins had gone outside on a humid autumn day in Dallas. Unlike many of the families in my neighborhood, we had been fortunate enough to evacuate the city before Hurricane Katrina made landfall. This was in part because my parents saved money for our hurricane emergency fund. These funds were crucial because without them, fleeing the city would have been virtually impossible. Evacuations proved to be costly, taking into consideration gas, lodging, food, and many other unaccounted expenses.

The mayor of New Orleans had issued a mandatory evacuation a week before the hurricane, which had led us to a mid size hotel on the outskirts of Dallas. Although the evacuation proved to be a financial burden, we were extremely grateful to the administrators of
the hotel who had been so generous as to allow us to stay free of charge. It was a beautiful day in Dallas and the hot dry air had ended our time outside abruptly. I, along with my cousins decided to return to our rooms to rehydrate and rest. Our big family had all been placed on the third floor of the hotel. I had about sixteen family members with me at the time and we occupied about five rooms on the third floor.

As I walked down the hallway to return to my room, a very peculiar sensation came over me. This was because of the dead silence in the hotel hallway. It was quite unusual to walk down a silent hallway considering the fact that my family populated more than half the rooms on that particular floor. On a usual day, one could hear voices laughing in hysteria, domino’s being slammed on a table, music blasting from speakers and on calmer nights (which was rare) one could hear chit chat coming from television sets. However, this particular day felt different. As I approached my room, I could see my family members huddled around the television set. Their faces appeared solemn, their eyes horrified, and their jaws heavy. Although I was quite young at that time, it was clear that something terrible had happened. Standing puzzled at the situation, curiosity had sparked within me an insatiable appetite for answers.

Why was my family so gripped by the television? I implored my mother to inform me of the situation, but she too seemed to be fixated on the television. Curious to inform myself of its subject matter, I navigated my way through family members to see the television. What my eyes witnessed on the television set remain vivid images in my mind’s eye. Bodies submerged in tranquil waters, entire neighborhoods ruined, people walking on abandoned highways in search of food. I witnessed the Mississippi river, which gave life to a vibrant and eclectic city drown in its own source of strength. Even now, the devastating images re-emerge within my mind’s eye, igniting an acute feeling of indignation. So many of my people seemed to be forgotten. Soon,
this deep-seated indignation stained the fabrics of my heart, evoking a keen sensation of sorrow and despair.

10 years after Hurricane Katrina devastated the city of New Orleans, media outlets pour into the city for the 10 years anniversary of Katrina, they capture images of bustling streets, vibrant tourist attractions, and jazz bands on the river banks extoll the rebirth of a city once in peril. Politicians proclaim the 10-year anniversary a paradigm of progress. For many onlookers, the anniversary seems to represent a smooth transition away from the disparaging days of Katrina. From the perspective of the media, the 10 year anniversary symbolizes New Orleans’s miraculous transformation and rebirth. Here is how Mitch Landrieu, the current mayor of New Orleans talked about the 10 year anniversary of Katrina, “Now New Orleans is a beacon of light, the capital of what some have called ‘the New South.’”⁴ This New South that Mitch Landrieu speaks of misleads many into making the fallacious assumption that New Orleans is now better off than it was before. Other media sources talked about the 10 year anniversary like this: “How New Orleans recovered from Catastrophe: Ten years after city was left in ruins by Katrina it has been restored to its former glory.”⁵

Politicians, economists, and policymakers hail New Orleans as one of the fastest growing cities in America because of its hastily expanding industry and flourishing economy. The recovery advanced by the media played a role in fostering a sense of optimism and possibility. The reemergence of New Orleans would become a way for the media to propagate the notion of rebirth in New Orleans. Carefully selected images of major tourist attractions paint a caricature

⁵ Wyke, Tom. "Ten years after the city was left in ruins by Hurricane Katrina it has been restored to its former glory." DailyMail.co.uk. Last modified August 28, 2015. Accessed May 2, 2016.
of city that New Orleans has completely recovered from the disaster of yesteryears. The idea of a
city fully restored from the Katrina disaster propels the narrative into a realm of myth. In this
paradigm of restoration and resiliency, has New Orleans actually been able to fully recover from
such a catastrophe?

As the narrative of this recovery materializes, a startling discovery reveals a
disconcerting truth. The dazzling opportunities and compelling sense of optimism that this
narrative evokes do not extend to all local residents of New Orleans. While media outlets
propagate “resiliency” and “recovery,” New Orleans’s bright future fades as one enters areas of
the lower 9th ward, a historically black community where houses remain in a state of
dilapidation. This sunny paradigm of recovery and restoration continues to fade as one watches
the checkered recovery unfold in New Orleans. In predominately black neighborhoods of the 9th
ward, 7th ward, and Treme, houses and community infrastructure remain in a state of
dilapidation. Roads are in terrible condition, and numerous houses remain abandoned. But as one
looks within predominately white neighborhoods like Riverside, the Lower Garden District, and
communities along the Irish community channel, renovated houses stand erect as a symbol of
community revitalization. State of the art community centers and newly paved roads exemplify
the idea of recovery and community renewal.

In spite of the fact that economists and policy-makers praise the economic resurgence in
New Orleans as the object lesson of revival and renewal, statistics reveal that economic
inequality between black and white households increased by as much as 18 percent. For white
residents, New Orleans is a land of limitless opportunity and prosperity. On the contrary, for

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6 Burnley, Malcom. "New Orleans’ New Normal Is Leaving Many Residents Farther Behind."
people of color, falling wages accompanied by lack of decent paying jobs result in increased poverty levels reinforcing a sense of despair and disdain. Reports reveal that whites occupy a staggering 68 percent of the region’s most lucrative jobs. Poverty within communities of color has increased from 44 percent in 2005, to a disheartening 50.5 percent in 2013. These statistics reveal the reality of an inequitable recovery between races. While whites enjoy access to an array of wonderful job opportunities, blacks struggled to gain access to such jobs and opportunities.

The inequity that proliferated after the Katrina disaster was not only restricted to job opportunities. In almost every facet of society, blacks straggled behind their white counter parts. Housing developments in post Katrina New Orleans serve as another example of the inequity that ensured in post Katrina New Orleans.

Public housing became a target of privatization. Katrina created the perfect opportunity for the state government conspiring with corporatists to privatize and subsequently gentrify public housing, the backbone of black communities in New Orleans. As a result of these controversial privatization policies, poor black and working class families were pushed out of their homes and replaced with private contracting developments. “Four of the city's poorest neighborhoods, including the Lower 9th Ward, are communities largely abandoned, with less than half of their pre-storm populations.”

Education also became the target of privatization, which policymakers hailed as the model for education in the United States. Lawmakers collaborating with their business partners

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7 Ibid.
used the catastrophe as an opportunity to dismantle public education and grant private entities full autonomy over public education. This process involved the collusion of business and political forces for the establishment of unmitigated profits. Businesses sought to replace the public model of education with the establishment of a pro business model, which emphasizes the importance of high standardized test that are linked to profit. With public education now in the control of corporate profiteers, the elimination of the majority black teachers union became a necessary step to advancing pro-charter school policies. With the teachers union completely eliminated, these schools would become cash havens for the pro-business class.\textsuperscript{10}

With a charter school system in place that reflected the pro-business model, education in New Orleans would take a tragic turn for the worse in communities of color. In order to assure that schools received optimal scores, a number of charter schools introduced policies excluding students with disabilities and limited English proficiency. Furthermore, many charter schools instituted rigid punitive discipline policies that made a number of black students the target of heinous push out policies. The Southern Poverty Law Center published a civil rights complaint arguing that a vast majority of public schools closed in New Orleans were in poor and working class African American neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{11} These communities experienced disinvestment, over-incarceration, and unemployment. To be clear, Louisiana subjected schools in black communities to higher rate of closures and also failed to provide these communities with educational alternatives once community schools closed. These controversial policies revealed an alternative tale to the dominating narrative of a stronger and more equitable city.

\textsuperscript{11} Southern Poverty Law Center v. Louisiana Department of Education, 1 S. 29 (Fed. Cir. 2014).
Contrary to the dominating narrative of recovery in New Orleans, I argue that the political rhetoric disseminated by politicians and the media played an instrumental role in strategically camouflaging a racially inequitable recovery. It was a recovery in which white pro business policymakers utilized rhetoric to inconspicuously induce racialization within New Orleans. The language that politicians used made it possible to strategically mask controversial policies that displaced people in communities of color.

In this senior project, I carefully examine the rhetoric proliferated around the post-Katrina recovery narrative. I do this by critically examining a number of speeches, interviews, and newspaper articles published after Hurricane Katrina. By doing this, it will reveal the role that rhetoric played in concealing the reality of a corporatized recovery rather than a community based recovery.

Drawing from political theorists like Sheldon Wolin, Carl Schmitt, and Bonnie Honig, I seek to explicate how, during moments of crisis, government practices become undemocratic and highly discretionary. This presents an opportunity to justify totalitarian practices such as the suspension of basic rights like habeas corpus. More importantly, this crisis became an opportunity for corporate forces to exploit the assets of devastated communities, which had an adverse affect on the resurgence of black communities in New Orleans.
I. Hurricane Katrina a Man Made Disaster

We're getting reports and calls that are breaking my heart, from people saying, "I've been in my attic. I can't take it anymore. The water is up to my neck. I don't think I can hold out." And that's happening as we speak.
~Mayor Ray Nagin (2005)

To a number of Americans, Hurricane Katrina was considered and thought of as a natural disaster. This is in part because of how the media talked about it: “We are dealing with one of the worst natural disasters in our nation's history”\(^\text{12}\) By referring to the storm as a natural disaster the language implies that Hurricane Katrina was a disaster that could not have been prevented by any number of precautionary steps. This is an example of how rhetoric misleads our understanding of events and situations. By referring to Hurricane Katrina as a natural disaster, rhetoric leads onlookers to assume that it was an unanticipated event that was going to happen anyway, and that Katrina was fated to happen. By using the softened rhetoric of “natural disaster” it strategically disguises the fact that Hurricane Katrina was far from a natural disaster. There wasn’t anything natural about thousands of people being trapped on their roof without help from the federal government. There was nothing natural about thousands of people being trapped on bridges in the scorching hot sun for days. What transpired in New Orleans did not have to happen if the government would have taken the necessary steps to address this situation. It must be known that Katrina was a man made disaster that politicians redefined as a natural disaster to deflect responsibility.

We now know that Katrina was not only predictable, but that it was anticipated. Prior to Katrina, Louisiana State University Hurricane Center generated multiple computer-simulated

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In an interview conducted by PBS Ivor Heerden, deputy director of the Louisiana State University (LSU) Hurricane Center, he stated that, “Louisiana was a terminally ill patient requiring major surgery, a patient that if it was given a new heart and new lungs and a new liver would live. If it isn't, it was going to die.”\footnote{NOVA. The Man Who Predicted Katrina. \textit{PBS.org}. Last modified November 2, 2005. Accessed March 3, 2016. http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/earth/predicting-katrina.html. Ivor van Heerden, a hurricane expert at Louisiana State University, saw a tragedy coming. After running multiple computer simulated hurricane, it became clear that a major storm would bring about calamity. He warned public officials of the potential calamity that would impact New Orleans, but his warning was completely disregarded by politicians and public officials alike.} Heerden was analogizing the potential threats of a major storm on New Orleans to that of an ill patient. He knew that the only feasibly way for New Orleans to withstand a major storm like Katrina was to invest money into fortifying the feeble levee system. Heerden also knew that if this happened up to 50,000 people could potentially be affected by it.\footnote{Nova. The Man Who Predicted Katrina. PBS.Org. Accessed March 3, 2016} What Heerden found more alarming in the computer model was that the levees constructed to protect New Orleans from floods were an engineering disaster. The computer
model revealed that if New Orleans were to be impacted by a major storm, her floodwalls would fail resulting in severe damage. Cognizant of the looming calamity, Heerden alerted multiple government agencies and the Bush administration, but was ignored. The inevitable event rested upon failing infrastructure, not Mother Nature.

When hurricane Katrina struck, New Orleans’s levee system could not hold against Katrina’s high-speed winds and heavy rainfall. For decades, the federal government had not appropriated funds to fortify Louisiana’s obsolete levee system. Poor leadership and a lack of government agency into these matters resulted in the levees collapsing against the waters of the Mississippi. This left approximately 80 percent of residential neighborhoods underwater.

The government’s unwillingness to address the situation, became evident when the levee system collapsed in New Orleans, the murky waters spewed into local communities submerging houses, cars, and even human bodies. For residents able to escape the flood’s clutches, the roof became a sanctuary from the rising waters. As entire communities were submerged in Katrina’s floodwaters, those unable to escape their houses held their heads above water until they could no more. Across the city thousands of people looked to the skies for help.

In this image a women cries historically after the lost of her close relative. This would become an all too common occurrence during the Katrina disaster. For people outside their homes, trapped in rising water, bridges became their protection. But even there, misery and despair was rife. Food and water became inaccessible leaving thousands hungry and thirsty. The scorching rays from a hot summer day left many of the elderly in critical condition with no signs of assistance coming. Sheets were placed over bodies abandoned for days. Occasionally

\[18\] ibid.
\[19\] ibid.
helicopters would cruise through the skies to drop supplies but even this would not alleviate the horrendous conditions on the ground. A state of desperation and frustration grew worse by the hour. The dire condition that residents of New Orleans found themselves in was directly linked to the government's refusal to invest any money into Louisiana’s feeble levee system.
II. The Rhetoric of George Bush’s Response

Rhetoric is a poor substitute for action, and we have trusted only to rhetoric. If we are really to be a great nation, we must not merely talk; we must act big.
~Theodore Roosevelt

On September 15, 2005 Bush delivers a televised speech on the lawn of Jackson square a historic park in the French Quarter of New Orleans. Camouflage netting was placed over debris to make the streets appear clean. Floodlights illuminate the entire park evoking a sense of grandeur and anticipation for many onlookers. Bush introduces a comprehensive overview of the federal government’s relief efforts in the Gulf Coast region. In addition, he introduces a series of initiatives many believe would put New Orleans on the road to recovery. Bush’s speech was carefully crafted to circumvent public scrutiny, navigating around what would become controversial policies. In his speech, Bush reassured the people of the Gulf Coast that the federal government was doing all that it could to restore what was lost.

However, Bush’s speech was apart of a political maneuver to attributing blame his administrations policies. By promising his audience a thorough investigation, Bush reassures his audience while simultaneously exuding conservative compassion. Bush’s slow response to the disaster sidestepped critiques of his mishandling. “To all those people carrying a burden of lost, I extend the deepest sympathy of our country”20 By offering solace, he dispels the uncertainty and fear looming around his audience. He then hastily transitions from expressing grief to speak about the “golden opportunity” of rebuilding New Orleans. “I offer this pledge of the American people. We will do what it takes, we will stay as long as it takes to help citizens

rebuild their lives.”21 He continues: “It is entrepreneurship that breaks the cycle of poverty and we will take the side of entrepreneurs to lead the economic revival of the Gulf south region.”22 Bush’s offers his condolences to the people, and argues for a private model of entrepreneurship to rebuild New Orleans. He claims that business entrepreneurs who he believes can lead the economic resurgence in New Orleans should foster the recovery. The citizens are left to their grief, while the entrepreneurs, euphemistically disguised as corporations, are enticed to rebuild in New Orleans to carnivorously seize the spoils of devastation. Bush strategically avoids accountability for his administration’s delayed emergency response by painting a romantic caricature of the many possibilities New Orleans would experience in the upcoming years. This prohibited his audience and the media from conducting a thorough investigation into the government’s failed policies of Katrina. For the disaster made it palpable that the government was ill prepared. This resulted in the failure to mount serious rescue operations once the storm struck.

While Bush might have offered genuine sympathy to those victims of the storm, his economic and political policies reflected his true intentions. These intentions were interwoven in the rhetoric he utilized in his speech. This tragedy became an opportunity for corporate elites who Bush referred to as “entrepreneurs” to influence and shape the future economic policies of New Orleans. All though the language of the policies made recovery seem applicable to all, the reality of these policies reflected a different type of recovery.

In this moment of despair, the Bush administration used this as an opportunity to introduce a number of sweeping rollbacks. These rollbacks included the elimination of federal protection for workers and the environment (in the name of hastening the rebuilding efforts).

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21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
This also served as an opportunity for the Bush administration to push the suspension of estate taxes, which would greatly benefit the business class of New Orleans. On that same note, the federal government also used the rebuilding process as a way to justify a number of budget cuts to entitlement programs that aided the poor and working classes of New Orleans. These programs included housing assistance, food stamps, Medicaid, community development grants and energy assistance.

As Bush continues in his speech, his rhetoric become increasingly obscure. “In the rebuilding process, there will be important decisions and many details to resolve, yet we are moving forward according to some clear principles.” The rhetoric that he uses does not refer to anything specific. When he mentions that there are “important decision and details to resolve” it is essential that we conduct an investigation as to what he means by this. If there are important decisions to be made, then what are the content of those decisions? More importantly, because these decisions are of great importance to people of the Gulf South, who wields the power to make these decisions?

What does it mean to move forward according to some ‘clear principles’? The problem with vague rhetoric like this is that it establishes parameters around the way we understand and think about particular situations. George Orwell believed that dead metaphors were symptoms ascribed to the decline of the English language. Certain words and phrases initially designed to evoke visual images become stale and meaningless. As the word connects to the visual image

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25 Ibid.
signified, the word becomes a dead metaphor evoking no visual images. Dead metaphors become euphemistic, and vague. Such empty rhetoric obscures the meaning of harsh political truths and fulfills a specific function in American discourse. “Clear principles” and “moving forward do not communicate anything in a clear and precise manner, but rather allow the audience to project their own subjective understanding onto them. The emptiness of the language becomes a space where one can project one’s own hopeful images.

This makes it easier for crafty rhetoricians to mislead the public into supporting policies contrary to their own interests. Language is used to refashion the way we perceive events. “Moving forward according to some clear principles” has no definite meaning. It does not refer directly to anything specific and it is generally vague. Exactly what direction was the Bush administration moving in and which “clear principles” were they referring to? One might assume that these “clear principles” were benign but were they? There is nothing inherently benevolent about the phrase “clear principles.”

The “many important decisions and details to resolve” as Bush had stated in his speech, had no real connection to poor and working communities in the Gulf South Region. Bush’s plans for recovery was based the philosophy of a conservative research think tank called The Heritage Foundation. It was an organization that favored various forms of deregulation and rollbacks for businesses and industry. In his speech, Bush proposed deregulating various aspects of the economy in order to hasten the recovery process. The rationale of his economic policies was in line with that of the Heritage foundation. He introduced the “Gulf Opportunity Zone” which he proclaimed will get low-income communities back on their feet. But was this “Gulf Opportunity Zone” an opportunity all residents in New Orleans? Contrary to the optimistic language used, the “Gulf Opportunity Zone” had turned out to be an opportunity for the pro
business class. It was a set of initiative enacted by the federal government to turn the city of New Orleans into a gold rush zone for big business. The Gulf opportunity zone allowed for Construction companies, consulting operations, developers, insurance companies, and other “disaster profiteers” to swarm in the region and take advantage of unprecedented tax handouts and the lucrative no-bid contracts set in place.26

Bush even went as far as to use the rhetoric of the civil rights movement stating that we must “rise above the legacy of inequality”. However, as we analyze the impact of the Bush administration’s policies on recovery in New Orleans, research reveal quite different. In fact, the statistics reveal that what took place in New Orleans was actually the inverse. Instead of rising above the legacy of inequality, the policies put in place by the government ironically exacerbated these inequalities. Statistics reveal that the pace of return between black and white races in New Orleans differed greatly. The pace of return among blacks was much slower than that of whites.

In 2011, the city had 118,000 fewer black residents. New Orleans, once more than two-thirds black, is now less than 60 percent black.27 How could one even go about “rising above the legacy of inequality” when African Americans were and still are unable to return to their city to rebuild. According to the Urban League, the income gap between black and white residents has increased by 37 percent since 2005.28 In addition, the median income for African-American

households in New Orleans was $25,000, compared to over $60,000 for white households in 2013. This was far from the dream of rising above the legacy of inequality.

It became clear that people of color were swept between the crevasses of this reconstruction narrative to make way for those who could enact recovery. But, this building was not a rebuilding, and this recovery, as we know now was really a cover up for business enterprise. For poor and working class people of devastated communities, there were no opportunities to rebuild. Instead of the government providing people with resources crucial to the rebuilding process, the government used those resources to appease corporatist. Responsibility this being a man made disaster became of little importance. Public figures expressed their condolences while simultaneously writing out business models for corporation to profit from disaster.

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29 Ibid.
III. Sovereignty and the Exception

Carl Schmitt argues that it is the sovereign who possesses the power to make the exception.

All law is “situational law” The sovereign produces and guarantees the situation in its totality. It has the monopoly over the last decision. Therein resides the essence of the state's sovereignty, which is not defined as a monopoly to coerce or to rule, but as the monopoly to decide.\(^{30}\)

Schmitt argues that during a state of emergency the sovereign has the power to decide the exception. The exception has the capacity to determine what constitutes societal interests, public safety, and order. The exception grants unrestrained authority and presupposes the normative constitutional order. That is to say government possesses the ability to decide on matters outside the sphere of accountability and constitutionality. During moments of crisis, states make judgment about law outside the will of its citizens.\(^{31}\) Through the lens of Schmitt, the exception gains extra legal authority to operate beyond all normative ties in order to assure the preservation of the state. During times of crisis, the democratic values that serve as pillars of our society are disposed of. The government power no longer operates at the discretion of the populists but rather exhibits totalitarian and undemocratic tendencies in the name of self preservation and security.

Hurricane Katrina was not a moment of crisis, it was named a moment of crisis, which required quick and decisive action. Although, it is worth noting, that three days passed before President Bush acted to name it a ‘national disaster.’ Who wielded the power to implement measures aimed at addressing the crisis? More importantly when assessing the course of action taken by the federal and state governments, what does it reveal about democracy in America during times of crisis? In Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law and Democracy, Bonnie Honig argues that

\(^{30}\) Schmitt, Carl. *Political Theology*. Translated by Tracy B. Strong. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. 27
\(^{31}\) Ibid., 47
contemporary society is an era of harsher border restrictions, scarce resources, and armed control of privatized essential services.

She builds on Carl Schmitt’s argument postulating that emergencies have a way of revealing the totalitarian tendencies of democracy in America. This was because during times of crisis, the definitive importance of sovereignty to politics goes missing because emergencies force democracies out of deliberation and into decisionism.\(^\text{32}\) However, she states that, “Emergency politics create the conditions in which ordinary law is legally suspended and sovereign powers operate unchecked by way of decision.” That is to say that legal norms that exist within society no longer have a legally binding force. The government operates with a sense of impunity and is often times despotic and oppressive.

Although she builds on Schmitt's theoretical framework of the sovereign and the exception, she refutes Schmitt’s justification and glorification of decisionism. We can fairly define decisionism in this context as way in which government makes choices. The policies and resolutions adopted by government officials total disregard the democratizing powers of the citizenry. This aspect of decisionism is what really interested Honig. For Honig, there was a fundamental problem with the democratic process during times of crisis. Government influence fortifies becoming more totalizing and intrusive. “In America, emergency politics occasions the creation of new administrative powers and the redistribution of existing governing powers from proceduralized processes to discretionary decisions”\(^\text{33}\). During a state of emergency, the government’s decisionism operates in a highly discretionary, unaccountable, and intruding fashion. The same sort of despotic tendencies took place in New Orleans during the Katrina disaster. Because New Orleans infrastructure was completely obliterated and communications


\(^\text{33}\) Ibid., 56.
were down, the government took it upon itself to make important decisions without following the
democratic procedures necessary before making a decision within any democracy. One example
would be Kathleen Blanco’s “shoot to kill policy”. “Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco warned
rioters and looters that National Guard troops will be ordered to “shoot and kill” in order to end
the rampant violence in the city in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.” Policies such like this
reflect the real problem with government when the democratic process goes missing and
government official operate with impunity.

Such decisionism is inherently undemocratic and completely disregards legal norms. The
state of crisis creates an opportunity for political elites to suspend legal norms and establish
themselves as “responsible agents” who work in the interests of ordinary citizens. Good This is
quite dangerous because during moments of crisis policymaking becomes an improvisation in
which constitutional constraints can be disregarded. Extra legal authority opens up avenues for
government to take extraordinary measures for self-preservation. This in itself reveals that the
governments will prioritize its own self preservation above that of its citizens. Methods like
rendition, detention, and torture could all become feasible options in order to assure security.

Another example would be how during Hurricane Katrina, Louisiana's state and local
courts suspended *habeas corpus* for approximately six months. *Habeas corpus* an essential legal
principle ensures no individual is held in prison without charge was dismissed. Under the
suspension of such law, New Orleans was quickly transformed into a police state. Racial
profiling and arbitrary detainment became all too common methods utilized by authorities.
Officers were granted unrestraint authority to arrest, question, and apprehend anyone they
deemed to be a suspect. With such power in their hands, police officers were susceptible to gross

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http://www.outsidethesbeltway.com/la_governor.warns.troops.will_.

human rights abuses. Some cops armed themselves with their own automatic weapons and behaved like vigilantes. This resulted in tragedies like the Danzgier bridge shooting where 5 police officers shot and killed two African American males who they suspected of engaging in criminal activities.

Elaine Scarry believes that a fully deliberative approach to emergency preparation in advance of a crisis should be ideal course for a liberal democracy. But when examining the methods taken to address crisis, the democratic process collapses in the name of “security and order”. After president Bush declared a state of emergency, he acquired extra legal authority to determine the course of action that the federal and state government was mandated to follow. With such power, it is important for those who possess it to exercise caution and prudence as to avoid undermining the democratic process. However, the extra legal authority that Bush claimed was not used to help displaced people in New Orleans. Katrina became a moment of crisis in which extra legal authority was used to assist corporate elites in exploiting a ravished city for political and financial gains. Good
III. The Rise of Corporate Power

The manufacturing aristocracy, which is growing up under our eyes, is one of the harshest which ever existed in the world... The friends of democracy should keep their eyes anxiously fixed in this direction; for if ever a permanent inequality of conditions and aristocracy again penetrate into the world, it may be predicted that this is the gate by which they will enter. ~Alexis De Tocqueville

American democracy is becoming increasingly hostile and intrusive. Sheldon Wolin coined the term “Inverted totalitarianism,” stating that it differed from the conventional definition of classic totalitarianism. Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Stalinist Russia were examples of classic totalitarian regimes that captured and restructured the power of the state. The power of each of these regimes emanated from their political party who controlled every aspect of society and civic life. In a classic totalitarian society, power resided in the hands political leaders who determine their regime’s policies.

In contrast to this notion of classic totalitarianism, inverted totalitarianism exploits the authority and resources of the state by seeking to merge with other forms of power. “The most pertinent characteristic of an inverted totalitarian system is that it establishes a relationship between traditional government and the system of “private” governance similar to a modern business corporation.” It is an apparatus that typifies the rise of the corporate age. An age in which corporate power is scattered among a number of individuals who establish concentrated forms of power and wield a considerable amount if power over the political process. In an inverted totalitarian system, the private interests of corporate conglomerates operate disassociated from ordinary citizens.

It is a political system proliferated by an abstract yet totalizing power encouraging political disengagement instead of mass mobilization. This political disengagement relies more on the “private” media than on public agencies to disseminate propaganda reinforcing the official version of events.\textsuperscript{37} In such a system those who possess money wield the power to exert their influence over the political process.\textsuperscript{38} Wolin makes it clear that although democracy in the United States seems to be flourishing, it is actually being suppressed in a subtle fashion by corporate entities. Elections are no longer reflections of the people's’ will, but rather the will of corporate establishments. Corporations possess the monetary and political capital to promote economic policies that expand economic rationalization.\textsuperscript{39} This economic rationalization seeks to transform democratic government into a massive corporate enterprise where citizens become commodities in big business government.

Over the past several decades the rise of corporate power has led to the subversion of democracy in America. Rhetoric has been the most important tool that corporations utilize to exert its influences. The concept of “change” is commodity for private enterprise.? Wolin argues that this so called “change” is inextricably linked to exploitation and opportunism. In this world dominated by the corporate futuristic attitude, there is a relentless scourge to capitalize on anything that is deemed exploitable. This includes religion, politics, and even human beings. “Change has become the object of premeditated strategies.”\textsuperscript{40}

Hurricane Katrina became the perfect occasion for these premeditated strategies. The moment of crisis Hurricane Katrina created became an opportunity for corporatists to finagle resources from the public domain. It is only during a moment of crisis that extra legal authority

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 44.  
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 46.  
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 48.  
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 8.
can be used to exploit the resources of a devastated area. Naomi Klein coins this “disaster capitalism.” Instead of providing people with the possibility to acquire their possessions, during times of collective trauma, policies are enacted to proliferate inequitable social and economic practices.\(^4\)

These “rebuilding” efforts denied the city’s poor communities of color the right of return while simultaneously assembling a corporatists and investors. The public education system in New Orleans serves as a perfect example of how corporate entities capitalized on citizens who were convalescing from disaster. As lawmakers scurried around Louisiana State Capitol, this provided the perfect occasion to enact legislation that induced mass corporate privatization of public assets in New Orleans.

Prior to Hurricane Katrina the Orleans Parish school board (OPSB) operated about 128 Public schools in the metropolitan area. But after Katrina struck, the Recovery School District (RSD) assumed control. Eager to implement their versions of reform, policy makers and politicians used Katrina as a window of opportunity to capitalize on the city’s assets. Under the control of the RSD, a number of policies were passed granting corporate entities an array of benefits and advantages to amass a fortune.

The first step to seizing these assets came about with the creation of a new charter school system that they claimed would provide students and parents with “school choice.” Policymakers argued that charter schools would be held at a higher rate of accountability. An array of reports exalted New Orleans’s experiment with education as the object lesson of urban school renewal.

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Klein provides an alternative take on the most pervasive ideology of our time pioneered by Milton Freeman himself. In a world dominated by the expanse of unrestrained capitalism, Klein conducts a comprehensive study of the adverse affects Freeman's brand of capitalism has on the political, social, and economic landscape. She argues that corporations use catastrophe as an opportunity to implement shock treatment. Shock treatment was simply privatization of public industry.
Charter school operators declared “school choice” and “autonomy” to be the foundation because it provided educators and parents with the “freedom to innovate”, and the “freedom of choices”\(^{42}\)

As we investigate the reality of the language used by “educational entrepreneurs”, we expose the incongruity that exists between what is purported and the reality of these policies.

A few days after this report was published, the Bush administration championed the proposal believing that it would serve as an effective remedy to the “roots of racial discrimination in New Orleans’s education” In the state capital, lawmakers promptly attempted to appoint Rod Paige as superintendent of education. Rod Paige served as secretary of education under the Bush administration and was anxious to push the agenda of privatization forward. However, due to an insufficient number of votes, Paige could not be appointed superintendent of education in New Orleans.\(^{43}\) Nevertheless, the push to implement this plan ensued.

The Louisiana Legislature created the Recovery school district in 2003 with the aim of improving public schools in New Orleans that were considered failures. After hurricane Katrina, it then became an instrument to implement a more clandestine corporate agenda, which was to convert most public schools in New Orleans to charter schools. This was done in part by redefining what constituted a failing school in order to make it easier for the state to take over these public schools.

In November of 2005, Kathleen Blanco the governor of Louisiana at the time, summoned a special legislative session in the state capital. At this session, her intentions were

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In this article Buras examines educational policy formation in New Orleans. She argues that policy actors at the federal, state, and local level have contributed to a process of privatization and an inequitable redistribution of resources while action under the banner of "Conscious capitalism". She disputes the market based reforms in education and advocate for reforms rooted in a more democratic and critically conscious tradition.

\(^{43}\) Buras., 300.
clear, the Louisiana legislature passed Act 35 which enabled the state Recovery School District to take over 107 of 128 public schools in New Orleans. “She also signed Executive Orders 58 and 79 eliminating provisions of charter school law that would necessitate the votes and consent of faculty, staff and parents before converting public schools into charter schools.”

The way in which the so-called education reforms were enacted by law is by all means unconstitutional. While the people of New Orleans were displaced, the dominant interests of corporate profiteers took center stage. The teacher’s union which consisted primarily of African American’s who fought for many years for adequate funding and better pay had been completely eliminated. Teachers who taught in New Orleans public schools for decades found themselves unwanted and excluded from “education reform”.

Pioneers of “charter school reform” claim that such policies would reduce the achievement gap while increasing educational opportunities for children of color. But in reality, every child was not afforded this educational opportunity. Through cloaking themselves in benign rhetoric policy makers made it possible for white entrepreneurs to seize control of public assets without the public detection. Public education in black communities has been transformed into highly profitable, exclusionary test prep mills. In reality “charter school reform” helped to reify an exclusionary educational apparatus that reinforced inequity among communities of color within the political economy of New Orleans.

Since the inception of the corporate reform movement, there has been an unceasing search to privatize institutions within the public domain. As the public undergoes privatization, it becomes less transparent and clandestine. The public domain was designed to function as an extension of the local community’s political life. It allowed the citizenry to inspect and critique

44 Buras., 308.
45 Wolin, Sheldon S. Democracy Incorporated. 44
public systems, which promoted transparency in government on the state and local level. Since
the introduction of privatization, community engagement has slowly dwindled. Privatization has
hindered the public’s ability to participate in the democratic process. With this lack of
transparency and civic engagement in government, how can we assure that those in power are
being held accountable?
V. Retelling The Narrative

They flew down here one time two days after the event was over with TV cameras, AP reporters, all kind of goddamn -- excuse my French everybody in America, but I am pissed. It’s politics and they are out here spinning for the cameras while people are dying.

~ Ray Nagin (2005)

As New Orleans lay inundated in waters of the Mississippi, onlookers watch in dismay as the media reveal images of a tragedy unwinding. Thousands of black and brown faces scour barren streets for resources. Across the city, families plod through waist high water staggered at the sheer destruction of their neighborhood and city. Those few who were miraculously able to construct makeshift boats, gently paddled through the still waters in search of shelter. Helicopters conduct extensive rescue missions circling the city in search of trapped families. As the tragedy continues unfolding, media outlets reveal poignant images of distraught faces plodding through wreckage and debris. These images all have one thing in common; they depict images of dead black bodies. Images and footage of misery and wretchedness on the television makes it clear to the American public that Hurricane Katrina had a catastrophic impact on the black communities.

The pangs of misery witnessed by so many would begin stirring the waters of America’s conscious. For it was one thing to witness such a disaster elsewhere in the world. But, to see thousands of Americans struggling to survive in horrendous conditions within their own country was disconcerting. Images reveal black faces stretched to the blue skies in search for help. Hurricane Katrina had become a didactic narrative that revealed violence and misery inflicted upon poor black bodies.

It was clear that this disaster had more of a catastrophic impact on communities of color than on their white counter parts. Hurricane Katrina exposed the deep systemic depravity
ingrained in America’s institutions since its inception. This systemic depravity consisted of a fundamental indifference toward black bodies and black lives. The fact and the matter was that the majority of lifeless bodies floating in the floodwaters were black bodies.

As the waters from the Mississippi receded, America began focusing on recovery while simultaneously ignoring whom the disaster impacted the most. The possibility to address institutional indifference towards communities of color withered away. The racialized traumatic experiences of Katrina victims were no longer an essential part of the narrative. America’s memory of the narrative surrounding Hurricane Katrina ignored the collective indifference toward black bodies. The language that the media used to construct the narrative reflected America’s system of power. If a natural disaster such as Katrina were to transpire in wealthy white suburbia would these events have transpired differently? The language used to tell the narrative revealed a system of power that value white lives over black lives.


In this image African American residents of New Orleans are referred to as refugees. “The word "refugee" implies that displaced storm victims, many of whom have been black, are
second-class citizens — or not even Americans”. The word refugee has to it a social stigma that alienates the black body from the world around it. A refugee has no home or protection from his or her government. They are alien to the land they inhabit and are treated as such. On the contrary when images of white bodies are revealed they are referred to as residents like in the image below.

Images such as this one reveal the true nature of American psyche. To be white is to be a “resident” of a community ravished by disaster. To be black is to be a “refugee” with no space to claim as home.

As the narrative continued, the media shifted its focus on the blunders of the Bush administration. Policy makers quarreled over jurisdiction and sought to protect themselves from

47 Firefighters deliver residents they had rescued to the levee near the corner of New Orleans and Filmore avenues.
public reprisals. Instead of focusing their attention on a collective solution to address the failures of government policies on every level, it became a game of political scapegoating and circumventing accountability. Democrats anxious to exploit the foibles of Bush’s delayed response and failed policies launched an aggressive media campaign criticizing the administrations response. As the quarrels continued, thousands of people lay stranded and destitute in New Orleans.

In response to the relentless onslaughts by left leaning liberal, the Washington establishment carefully devised a public relations campaign in attempt to protect the Bush administration's approval rating. Chief white house deputy, Karl Rove used his expertise in public relations to help turn Hurricane Katrina into an opportunity to reinvigorate the conservative revolution assembled by the Reagan establishment. If executed correctly, this public relations campaign would effectively divert the public’s attention away from the racialized suffering of Katrina and focus on the so-called “golden opportunity”.

This “golden opportunity” coined by Jack Kemp provides Congress and state legislatures the opportunity to implement big ideas that could transform America in the first decade of the 21st century. It was an opportunity that the Bush administration and its conservative partners professed would help the city of New Orleans “rise above the legacy of inequality”. Political rhetoric played a crucial role in retelling the narrative.

In his address to the nation, Bush states that the United States relief effort was “an unprecedented response to an unprecedented crisis which demonstrates the compassion and resolve of our nation” William Lutz would identify this as an example of inflated language.

Inflated language makes things and events appeared grand and impactful. By using inflated language like “unprecedented response” it exaggerates the government's role in responding to the crisis. Can we candidly accept the claim that the government's response to this crisis was “unprecedented”? In addition, can we accept the fallacy that Katrina was an “unprecedented crisis” when we know that the federal government was warned of an encroaching calamity?

Contrary to Bush’s rhetorical fallacies, it would be fair to argue that “unprecedented” was an overblown characterization of the federal government’s response to crisis. After the levees collapsed, New Orleans was abandoned for days. During this four-day period, thousands of people drowned waiting for help while the federal and state government squabble over jurisdiction. As the people of New Orleans struggled to survive, it became clear that the Bush administration's failure to respond promptly and decisively to Hurricane Katrina was to blame. In order to avoid accountability, the White House strategically evaded questions, obscured facts and ultimately shifted the blame on state and local governments.

Bush’s stated, “The crisis has created tremendous problems that have strained state and local capabilities which resulted in an unacceptable response”. The implication of this is that the state and local government are to blame for the fiasco. However, reports revealed that Washington had already granted FEMA authority to mobilize, and provide at its discretion, equipment and resources necessary to alleviate the impacts of the emergency. The responsibility of inaction cannot solely be placed on the state and local government. However, this was a political maneuver used by Bush to save his own reputation. All in all, the only thing

“unprecedented” about the Bush administration's response was its aggressive measures to curb the political damage inflicted upon its reputation.
IV. Eternal Displacement

After the waters receded, the reconstruction process began. New Orleans residents, who were able to return, assessed the damages inflicted upon their possessions. The damages were incomprehensible and the prospects of rebuilding appeared bleak. But, there was a dim light of hope that glimmered amid the destruction. In their mind’s ear, they vividly recall the promises made by the Bush administration, “When communities are rebuilt, they must be even better and stronger than before the storm. We want evacuees to come home, for the best of reasons – because they have a real chance at a better life in a place they love.” This statement would become a beacon of hope for New Orleans residents scattered throughout the country.

Despite the fact that most people lost their possessions, the opportunity to return and rebuild a better life eased much uncertainty and fostered a sense of anticipation. Unfortunately,

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51 Leonard Thomas, 23, cries after a SWAT police team burst into the flooded home where he and his family were living in New Orleans.
Bush’s promises would not extend beyond his rhetoric. The promises of more resilient communities, bountiful opportunities, and better lives withered away.

As the recovery process materialized, an inconsistency arose between promises made by the Bush administration and actions taken. The promises of a vibrant city filled with opportunity had merely been a faulty idealization in Bush’s mind. In reality, residents who were economically disadvantaged and colored were not given the sunny opportunities to participate in recovery but, rather forced to reside on the periphery of recovery as passive spectators.

For people of color, New Orleans was not the land of “golden opportunity” it was barren and sterile. There were no opportunities for poor people of color to rebuild their lives bigger and better. This is because communities of color were not granted access to the recovery process in New Orleans. Contrary to popular belief, the narrative of “recovery” has been inequitable since its inception. Reports reveal that whites in New Orleans were benefiting the most from this recovery. Not only are they earning far more income, they were also more likely to be employed and work in better paying jobs than black residents.  

The narrative of “recovery” and “resilience” seemed to promise displaced American citizens the chance to return and overcome the tragedy of disaster. However, recovery seemed to cast a shadow over the people who ironically were affected the most by Hurricane Katrina, black people.

After Hurricane Katrina blacks were “shut out by a vast veil”. This vast veil systematically excluded communities of color from opportunities promised by the Bush administration. Indeed, the guarantee of a robust city with lucrative jobs and affordable housing

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for displaced citizens had a romantic allure. However, these economic opportunities would only be provided to predominately white wealthy communities. This discouraging fact became the untold story of “recovery” in New Orleans. As some benefited from the recovery initiatives others were erased from the narratives. Inequality and discrimination became the foundation upon which New Orleans would be constructed.

“When communities are rebuilt they should be even stronger and more resilient than before”\textsuperscript{54}. These were Bush’s words in his televised address to the nation. From 2005 to 2013, the median household income for blacks in New Orleans rose just over 7\% to $25,100. Meanwhile, median incomes for whites climbed 23\% to a staggering $60,553.\textsuperscript{55} Was this a “recovery” that people of New Orleans envisioned? Although median incomes rose for blacks and whites, increase was disproportionate. A meager 7\% increase for blacks juxtaposed to a staggering 23\% for white. It revealed that recovery was in fact disproportionate. Can we accept the notion that communities are stronger and more resilient when the income levels after Katrina are still unequal? The only communities that seem to be profiting from reconstruction are white communities.

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans public housing developments were the epitome of socio-economic segregation. The city’s black population occupied a cluster of low-income housing units. After Katrina struck. This was an opportunity to reconstruct housing developments that were segregated along racial lines for decades. Many believed that as new housing developments were constructed, the racial divide would be abolished once and for all. However, this was not the case. Contrary to Bush’s claims that “when houses are rebuilt many

\textsuperscript{54} Hurricane Katrina Aftermath Presidential Address.” C-SPAN.org. September 17, 2005.
families should own not rent their houses” an association of racial justice groups revealed in a report that there are only 2,000 public housing units available in New Orleans compared to 12,270 units before the storm.

Hurricane Katrina became the perfect pretext to not only destroy housing developments but to privatize public housing in New Orleans. The Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) claimed that abolishing the housing developments and rebuilding was much cheaper. HANO maintained that they were doing all they could rebuild better housing for displaced peoples who lived in the housing developments. Despite the promise of better housing for displaced peoples, these promises would not materialize. Instead, public housing developments that served as the backbone of New Orleans black poor and working class were placed in the hand of private developers.

In an effort to “clean up” public housing, the New Orleans city council voted unanimously to abolish major housing complexes. Furthermore, New Orleans city council worked extensively with HANO to replace public developments with mixed income residences styled after the classic 19th century architecture in New Orleans. Arnie Fielkow, president of the New Orleans council referred to this as “an opportunity to make home a place that all New Orleanians can point to with pride. Every citizen deserves a safe and affordable place to raise a family”.

These “Public housing Redevelopments” that Fielkow supports with enthusiasm would soon deny displaced people the right of return. Housing developments like the St. Bernard

56 Hurricane Katrina Aftermath Presidential Address." C-SPAN.org
and Desire housing projects that were communities of color for decades were abolished. This resulted in the permanent displacements of New Orleans residents.

In reality the so-called push to “clean up” public housing was really a push to reconstruct communities of color in a whiter image. Hurricane Katrina provided the Housing Authority of New Orleans the opportunity to scrap public housing populated by people of color in order to implement what they crafty referred to as “neighborhood revitalization”⁶⁰. By using “neighborhood revitalization”, HANO cunningly disguised their racially exclusionary policies in the rhetoric they use. Across New Orleans major housing developments were demolished to clear space for private housing developments.

The mixed-income housing developments constructed after Katrina accommodated only a small percentage of displaced people of color. For others who sought to return, the post Katrina rent for low-income workers would prove to be too steep. “After 80 percent of the city flooded in

⁵⁹ NOPD officers pepper spray the mob rushing and breaking the security gate as the New Orleans City Council prepares to discuss demolition of four housing developments across the city.

⁶⁰ Reckdahl, Katy 3.
2005, rents skyrocketed. They remain between 150 and 200 percent higher than before the storm, when half of the city’s apartments rented for $500.”61 Higher rent prices and ever increasing utilities were two obstacles that kept displace individuals from returning. As the so-called recovery unfolds, these policies left behind a legacy of permanent displacement and gentrification.

61 Ibid., 4
VII. Corporate Optimism Democracy’s Perversion

“Then someone else said it was the classic binary between the rich and the poor, between the haves and the have nots, between the whites and the blacks, in the difficulty of all of that.”

~Citizen

The story of recovery would certainly become a matter of perspective. For poor black people it is a story of government neglect and abandonment. On the contrary recovery is story of dazzling opportunity and entrepreneurship for wealthy white capitalist. While Bush professed in his speech “it is entrepreneurship that breaks the cycle of poverty and we will take the side of entrepreneurs to lead the economic revival of the Gulf South Region” what exactly does he mean? Is he using entrepreneurship as a rhetorical guise to disguise something more sinister?

The “economic revival” that Bush refers to was supposed to provide jobs and opportunity to all displaced people. However these opportunities to rebuild were restricted to contractors and developers politically connected and anxious to cash in on the Katrina disaster. Recovery in post Katrina New Orleans would become a tale of kickbacks and back door deals. The government implemented biased policies that strongly favored the wealthier class to the poor working class.

“More than 80 percent of the $1.5 billion in contracts signed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency alone were awarded without bidding or with limited competition, government records show, provoking concerns among auditors and government officials about the potential for favoritism or abuse”.

As the recovery unfolded in New Orleans, contractors with lofty political connections acquired lucrative contracts. One example was Kellogg, Brown & Root (KBR) an American

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63 Transcript: Bush’s Katrina Speech." Think Progress
engineering and construction company was contracted by the Department of Defense to repair facilities in New Orleans and other parts of the Gulf South. Over a span of about one year, KBR had received contracts worth up to $170 million worth of contracts to repair damaged facilities in the Gulf South.\textsuperscript{65} This was no coincidence; the Bush administration had a number of inside connections with KBR. Joseph Allbaugh served as a close advisor and companion of Bush during his years as Governor in Texas. Six months prior to Katrina, Allbaugh was registered as lobbyist for KBR.\textsuperscript{66} KBR was a subsidiary of the Houston based company Halliburton which was once led by former vice president Dick Cheney. It was no surprise that KBR were the first to receive lucrative no-bid contracts.

As reconstruction in New Orleans carried on, the federal government continued to hand out lucrative contracts to corporations like Shaw group, an engineering, construction, and maintenance company with political ties to the Bush administration. FEMA suspended normal bidding rules in order to award the Shaw Group two contracts that totaled stunning $100million dollars.\textsuperscript{67} This was precisely because Allbaugh also lobbied for The Shaw Group, which is owned the Louisiana Democratic Party. With such close political connections to multiple corporations, the Bush administration used reconstruction in New Orleans as a chance to align the pockets of their financiers. Recovery in New Orleans was not used to rebuild the lives of displaced individuals. Billions of dollars was awarded to companies with political connections, and a substantial portion of that lost to greed, incompetence, and fraud.

\textsuperscript{65} Casella, Jean, and James Ridgeway. "How Conservatives, Contractors, and Developers Cashed In On Katrina." motherjones.com.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 3
To insure that companies in region could maximize their profits Bush used the state of emergency as an excuse to suspend the Davis-Baron Act that requires federal contractors to pay the regions prevailing wages.\textsuperscript{68} By suspending this law that protects workers from being exploited by corporate greed, contractors could now hire workers and pay them significantly lower wages in order to save money. Unfortunately it would not end here. Considering the fact that contractors could now pay workers lower wages, Americans would not accept jobs that pay below minimum wage. The department of labor signed a memorandum stipulating to contracting agencies that companies receiving new contracts would not be required to adhere to affirmative action requirements.\textsuperscript{69} This created an opportunity for contractors to discriminate against women, minorities, and individuals with disabilities.

In order to assure that companies had enough workers to repair New Orlean’s ruined infrastructure, The Department of Homeland Security suspended sanctions on employers in the region who hire workers without proof of citizenship, a gesture made it legally possible for contractors exploited migrant labor in order to make profit. Thousands migrant workers would become subjected to exploitation. These migrant workers would work in grueling conditions for despicable wages. All of these things would take place with out the consent of the citizenry. While many displace people sought to reestablish their lives, the federal government was using this as an opportunity for corporations to cash in on Katrina.

\textsuperscript{69} Wilcher, Shirley J. "Equal Opportunity Laws Should Not Be Suspended in Hurricane Katrina Crisis." In Motion Magazine, October 13, 2005
IX. Conclusion

As the ten-year anniversary of Katrina marks the start of a new era in New Orleans, it is evident that the recovery proliferated by politicians and policymakers have been inequitable. This so called “recovery” was naught but a fallacious myth disguised in benign rhetoric. For communities of color, this recovery seemed to be a second great storm because of the adverse affects federal and state policy had on these communities. As economist and media outlets praised New Orleans for its unprecedented recovery and unforeseen robust economic growth, black communities remain hidden and excluded from this narrative of recovery. Indeed, after the Hurricane Katrina black communities are more disenfranchised than ever. Public education, which serves as the backbone of the black community, has been placed within the hands of corporate profiteers who have no real connection or understanding of communal needs these communities.

In addition, the jobs and dazzling opportunities that were made available to white communities were not afforded to black communities. Public housing that has been home to thousands of African Americans have been bulldozed and replaced with private housing developments that accommodated only for those with the financial capital. As the legacy of recovery moves forward, we must continue to shed light on the injustices and insist on a collective transition away from discriminatory policies, and unjust practices that inhibit the possibility of an equitable disaster recovery and impede the development of communities of color. We must admit that the future of New Orleans cannot be built the misfortune of black communities. This requires that we publicly recognize that recovery in New Orleans has in fact been a myth and that there must be action taken to fight for equality and justice.
America Where Were You?

America, dear sweet America,

Where were you?

For those poverty-stricken bodies unable to evacuate,

Where were you?

When the waters of the Mississippi breached the levees

Where were you?

While thousands of families were trapped in their homes,

Where were you?

While black bodies float lifeless through the flooded streets of New Orleans,

Where were you?

When white vigilantes shot countless blacks,

Where were you?

While thousands of bronze faces remained trapped in misery,
Where were you?

When bullets punctured black bodies at Danziger Bridge,
Where were you?

While dehydrated babies lay lifeless across their mother’s lap in the scorching hot sun,
Where were you?

While the elderly, poor, disable, mentally ill wallow in misery,
America, where were you,
Where are you?
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