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COVERING (UP?) KATRINA:

DISCURSIVE AMBIVALENCE IN COVERAGE OF HURRICANE KATRINA

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Note: This essay derives from our panel at the 2007 CEA Conference in New Orleans. The purpose of the panel was to analyze the discourse surrounding Hurricane Katrina, interrogating the rhetorical operations that foregrounded some aspects of the tragedies involved, pulling in old stereotypes to take the place of concrete material analysis and relying on a dialectic of hypervisibility (New Orleans) and invisibility (other affected populations, for example, victims in Mississippi) in order to contain the disaster within known and comfortable, even if racist and classist, discursive boundaries. An analysis of the rhetorics involved in the shaping of the Katrina narrative informs us equally about media coverage and cultural identity, and can be utilized to not only encourage analytical competence and cultural literacy in the English classroom, but also to foster a sense of social responsibility and engagement in students.

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Long before Katrina, the South functioned in the social imaginary to contain racism and poverty, and the Mason-Dixon acts then in the national imagination as a buffer to safeguard the nation from the taint of such undemocratic realities. With the advent of the Reagan era, neoliberal (paradoxically, *neoconservative* in U.S. parlance) ideologies, which dovetailed neatly with racism and classism, took firm hold and began to shape the dominant discourse, public policy, and the national imaginary. A sort of perversion of social liberalism by neoliberal ideologies operating in the social realm, social neoliberalism is a way of packaging the economic principles of free market turbo-capitalism in a wrapping of “personal responsibility,” which is attractive across the political spectrum and translates best through vocabularies of accountability and meritocracy, often leaning heavily toward a rhetoric of victim-blaming. Seen through such a frame, the poor are blamed for living in dangerous neighborhoods and for failing to evacuate them when ordered to do so. Writing in 1999 in *Ecclesia in America*, Pope John Paul II defined the hold that neoliberalism was gaining on the cultural imagination of the Americas, particularly North America, and its social consequences:

More and more, in many countries of America, a system known as "neoliberalism" prevails; based on a purely economic conception of the human person....At times this system has become the ideological justification for certain attitudes and behavior in the social and political spheres leading to the neglect of the weaker members of society. Indeed, the poor are becoming ever more numerous, victims of specific policies and structures which are often unjust. [1]

The uniform overlay of social neoliberalism on public discourse as reflected in mainstream media results in a "tightly controlled visual landscape" (Giroux 172) in which people living in poverty in the U.S. most often emerge as antagonists in the broad narrative of contemporary American life. Narrative can't exist without antagonism and conflict, good guys and bad guys, a sense of "us vs. them."

A central image that emerged in Ronald Reagan's discourse and has hung on in the social imaginary with remarkable persistence was "the welfare queen." This fictive character, an irresponsible black woman purportedly living in Chicago, was developed by Reagan over a period of about five years and mentioned consistently during his 1976 campaign for President. These tall tales "are legendary for legitimating allegedly popular stereotypes that equate welfare and race" (Schram and Neisser 117). The well-known image of the welfare queen, like that of the "strapping young buck buying T-bone steaks" [2] at a time when regular working-class Americans could barely afford hamburger merged racism with classism, capitalizing on a racialized neoliberal frame to criminalize poverty itself, and in particular people of color living in poverty. While Hurricane Katrina's devastating appearance on the physical landscape of the Gulf Coast held the potential to disrupt the visual and narrative landscape created in the post-Reagan U.S., and to open up difficult, long-overdue discussions about race and class in the U.S. in short order, the dominant discourse soon reverted to familiar patterns. [3]

It is not our intention here to debate or interpret the "facts" but rather to analyze the ways in which the "facts" have been represented. We agree with Harris and Carbado that "facts are important—indeed crucial—since so much of public opinion is based on misinformation...[but] do not believe that facts speak for themselves" (90). Rather, foundational to our thinking about this subject is the recognition that facts are presented and received through interpretational structures (frames or schemas), and that the framing of cultural narratives in discourse has ideological underpinnings as well as material consequences. As students work to achieve literacy and critical voice in the English classroom, the foregrounding of the frames shaping the Katrina narrative makes visible and meaningful the social and cultural realities this tragedy reveals. Analyzing the discourse around Katrina might well politicize the space of the classroom in ways that could prove uncomfortable, but the discursive framing of Katrina and the multiple tragedies that unfolded in her wake is political, too. Further, to work toward literacy and the development of an authentic critical voice *should* involve some discomfort as we adjust to new angles of vision and work to accommodate complexity.

Katrina provides "simultaneously a radical *narrative* moment in the elaboration of global hierarchies of life and death and a radical *political* moment" (Rodriguez 148, emphasis his), and so affords unique opportunities for those of us who share an understanding that the space of the English classroom, the writing classroom in particular, is one in which to foster, among other things, political, cultural and civic literacies in tandem with critical voice. Analysis of the Katrina narrative is both pedagogically effective and socially responsible, a way to engender a radical literacy that might become a basis for change and social transformation, empowering students toward critical voice, rewarding them with a sense of agency and deeper engagement with the world beyond the classroom.

Primary among the rhetorical operations shaping the Katrina narrative is the dialectic of invisibility and visibility, which displaced and erased Mississippi while rendering New Orleans hypervisible. Cameras quickly turned away from the tragic spectacle of Mississippi to focus almost solely on New Orleans, which emerged in the discourse as a most "un-American" city, populated by drug dealers and criminals, people who inexplicably refused to leave. A symptom not only of a national preoccupation with visual spectacle and the reliance on easy dichotomies, the omission of coverage on Mississippi indicates a larger issue of the state's place in the national identity.

Mississippi occupies a unique space in the national imagination. It is frequently cited as a place of economic depression, with high rates of illiteracy and general social backwardness, rivaling West Virginia and Arkansas for last place in a variety of state rankings. Mississippi is often remembered for civil rights abominations represented in the murders of Medgar Evers, Emmett Till, and Chaney-Goodman-Schwerner; or in James Meredith's contentious admission to the University of Mississippi; or in the 2001 vote to retain the state flag, with its corner design of the

Confederate Battle Flag. In this way, Mississippi functions as a repository for national shame, isolating and holding many of the U.S.'s most regrettable characteristics: racism, violence, poverty, and ignorance.

This generalized view of Mississippi reflects Castoriadis's theory of the social imaginary, the collections of institutions, traditions, and myth that “renders possible any relation of object and image” (Thompson 664), based on the Lacanian notion of the connection between the real and the imaginary residing in the specular image. Moreover, Lacan's imaginary connotes idealization and narcissism as the imago represents the “Ideal-I” (Lacan 2). The specular image—or rather, the dearth of images of Mississippi—put forth by the media during Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath portray the nation's reluctance to identify its “Ideal-I” with Mississippi. While media coverage of the storm reveled in images and tales from New Orleans, the Mississippi Gulf Coast was all but forgotten, rendered invisible by the media's rhetorical operations.

Many major news outlets seemed to ignore Mississippi entirely, focusing their lengthy pieces on New Orleans, but in addition to this surface invisibility, Mississippi is erased from the Katrina narrative through a variety of rhetorical operations that conflate Katrina with New Orleans. For instance, an article in *Rolling Stone* about the telethon for Hurricane Katrina survivors, “McGraw Leads Katrina Aid” (8/31/05), says that the telethon “will feature appearances by musicians and celebrities with local ties to the areas damaged by Katrina.” However, the only celebrities mentioned are Tim McGraw, Harry Connick, Jr., and Wynton Marsalis, all of whom are linked to New Orleans and are pointedly referred to in the article's opening line as “Louisiana natives.” Although McGraw's wife, country singer Faith Hill, a Mississippi native, also performed, she is not mentioned, nor is Mississippi. The final paragraph of the three-paragraph article provides a quotation from New Orleans mayor, Ray Nagin, and a reference to Louisiana governor, Kathleen Blanco, further foregrounding New Orleans and enhancing the sense that Katrina and New Orleans are basically synonymous. Countless examples like this one demonstrate the ways in which the dominant discourse subtly reinforces the idea that Katrina was a tragedy for New Orleans specifically. Through such rhetorical operations, “Gulf Coast region” becomes synonymous with New Orleans.

Stan Tiner's front page editorial in South Mississippi's paper, the *Sun Herald*, printed on December 14 of 2005, expresses dissatisfaction with the media coverage of Mississippi during Katrina. He writes: “The telling of Katrina by national media has created the illusion of the hurricane's impact on our Coast as something of a footnote.” Tiner criticizes the media on two counts: 1) “as it relates to journalism's obligations to cover human beings whose conditions are as dire as those that exist here,” and 2) as the coverage will influence political actions, specifically in terms of Congressional aid. He closes the piece with a request to all media outlets: “Please, tell our story. Hear the voice of our people and tell it far and wide.” The *Sun Herald* is, to date, the only medium in which consistent coverage of Katrina's effect on the Mississippi Gulf Coast is published.

In the weeks following Katrina's landfall, the *New York Times* published two articles pointing out that Mississippi was left out of the storm story, although they do not follow up with stories focused on Mississippi in their later coverage, nor is this story about Mississippi's absence from the discourse itself a story about Mississippi. To note the absence of Mississippi from mainstream media coverage does not in fact enhance the visibility of Mississippi as subject, but rather merely points to its invisibility without then moving to render the stories of Mississippi into discourse. In “Coastal Cities of Mississippi In the Shadows”, Campbell Robertson wrote:

If the levees had held in New Orleans, the destruction wrought on the Mississippi Gulf Coast by Hurricane Katrina would have been the most astonishing storm story of a generation. Whole towns have been laid flat, thousands of houses washed away and, statewide, the storm has been blamed for the deaths of 211 people, a toll far higher than those from Hurricanes Andrew, Hugo, and Ivan. But as it is, Mississippi—like the Pentagon on September 11, 2001—is coping with an almost unimaginable catastrophe, largely overshadowed in the news media's attention and the national consciousness, in this case by the disaster in New Orleans.

Two weeks later, Sewell Chan wrote “Portrait of Mississippi Victims: Safety of Home Was a Mirage,” in which he documented the projected destruction for Mississippi: “As the detritus from the storm is cleared, the death toll could grow. The Army Corps of Engineers estimates that the hurricane left 18 million to 20 million cubic yards of debris in Mississippi alone, the equivalent of 200 football fields piled 50 feet high, and that it would take eight months to clear the

roadways.”

While one account focuses on Mississippi as a problematic absence, and the other takes Mississippi as its subject, the bulk of the discourse that develops the Katrina narrative, through its rhetorical operations as well as through more obvious linkages created by titles, headlines, ledes and focal subjects, positions New Orleans as the central setting of the narrative.

While a few local media outlets such as WWL and WLOX did broadcast footage from coastal towns in Mississippi, the most prevalent image shown on national television was of a wrecked casino splintered across a stretch of road. Perhaps that is one reason why Mississippi was rendered invisible—while New Orleans' tourist industry secures for the city a nostalgic place in the social imaginary and capitalizes on the city's history to hold in the foreground the idea of New Orleans as an international rather than a southern city, the Mississippi Coast is a vacation spot most often frequented by southerners, who self-deprecatingly call it the “redneck Riviera.” Although towns like Biloxi, Gulfport, and Pascagoula used to entice tourists with beaches, seafood and quaint imagery of bygone days, more recently their attraction has manifested in the floating riverboat casinos that now obscure the coastal vista and provide the predominant identifying image of Mississippi 's devastation.

This image of Mississippi-as-shattered-casino certainly dovetails with traditionally Marxist theories of the spectacle. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord identifies the spectacle as “the sole agent and effect of the culture of advanced capitalism” (Warner 9). If the Mississippi Gulf Coast 's capital resided entirely in the casino trade, it is no wonder that New Orleans—itsself a kind of commodified city—received the lion's share of media attention. However, the spectacle extends beyond capitalism: “The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people mediated by images” (Debord 2). Therefore, the spectacle represents a kind of passivity engineered through specular commodification, in which viewers identify with the image as the image becomes commodified and thereby more ingrained in the social imaginary. According to Andrew Ross, in *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*: “the power of the ‘spectacle’ depends upon its success in addressing and intersecting with deeply felt everyday needs and anxieties, and its articulation of an incomplete circuit of desire is one in which we recognize ourselves and which we therefore want to complete by acknowledging its power” (qtd. in Warner 735). The lack of images, or spectacle, for the Gulf Coast might then also be accounted for in the resistance of the observer to identify with Mississippi.

Aside from capitalist concerns or the resistance of identification, another reason for the lack of attention given Mississippi by mainstream media is a perceived lack of drama in the images of its devastation. Michael Newsom, for the McClatchy Newspapers via blackamericanweb.com, noted: “Mississippi 's Hurricane Katrina story fell victim to the media's craving for the ‘sexy’ story and to the national public's hunger for dramatic footage of rescues from rising levee waters rather than the destruction of a coastline.” Certainly many of the images associated with the hurricane's effect on New Orleans—stranded families on rooftops handing babies to personnel in rescue helicopters; the chaotic scene at the Superdome with its disheveled mobs milling listlessly; National Guard troops wearing riot gear and armed with rifles rolling down the streets in tanks—are profoundly dramatic indeed. Beyond the drama, though, these were images that fit the racialized neoliberal frame through which we so often look. The dominant stream of images (re)presented us with what we expected to see: the (predominantly black) poor awaiting rescue, literally waiting for a hand up (into helicopters, boats, military vehicles, etc.); the degraded conditions of those herded into and held at the Superdome; the militarization of the city in response to the supposed and rumored criminality of those who were too poor to escape the flooding city. Such coverage exemplifies Erving Goffman's definition of the media's use of the frame in his 1974 book *Frame Analysis* to create a narrative of social reality, shaping images and facts to transmit meaning.

One new media source that, through its relative diversity and immediacy sidestepped the homogenizing of the visual landscape of the tragedy and so was able to tell Mississippi's story was the Internet. In photographs, articles, blogs, bulletin boards, and interviews, a multitude of web sites documented Mississippi's experience. In an article for the USC Center on Public Diplomacy, Shawn Powers noted that

[T]he crisis may mark the first of its kind in that Internet technologies have been the critical medium for information dissemination in the aftermath of Katrina. As much of the chief communications and media infrastructure crumbled, media organizations began to rely on the Internet to continue to report the news. Moreover, the Internet provided citizens with a new communication medium that facilitated exchanges of information without having to rely on

traditional media sources. The result has been an unprecedented amount of detailed information and candidness that is widely accessible throughout the world.

These sites offer eyewitness accounts, a variety of images, links to news stories, and access to relief for victims of Katrina.

Not only was the inconceivable destruction Mississippi suffered omitted from most national media, so too was its recovery. While various media outlets reported on Katrina relief for New Orleans by celebrities like Rosie O'Donnell, Sandra Bullock, the Celebrity Poker Tour, Comic Relief 2006, Nicolas Cage, P. Diddy, George Clooney, Oprah Winfrey, John Travolta, and innumerable others, only a few celebrities have mentioned or visited Mississippi. Almost one year after landfall (7/17/06), *People* magazine documented a relief visit to Mississippi by Tim McGraw and Faith Hill (herself a Mississippi native); six months prior, the magazine published a piece about tennis star Anna Kournikova (1/9/06) visiting the Mississippi Coast. In the article, she is quoted as saying: "Mississippi seems to have been lost in all of the chaos surrounding New Orleans, but I can tell you that the people of the Mississippi Gulf Coast have not lost their spirit. They have rallied around each other to bring back their communities stronger than ever." But aside from these notables, few others have taken note.

Kournikova's description recalls that of President George W. Bush, when he visited the ravaged Coast. On September 2, 2005, the President took a walking tour of Biloxi, after which he made remarks and answered questions. He said: "You know, there's a lot of sadness, of course, but there's also a spirit here in Mississippi that is uplifting." In March of 2007, he returned to Biloxi and said, "I can remember the looks on your faces when I first came down here during the incredible destruction—right after the destruction of Katrina. You know, there was something about the spirit of Mississippi, though, that made it clear to me that there was no doubt that progress was going to be made...And I've come back again because I'm inspired every time I come here to see progress and the spirit alive." A few moments later, he added, "And it's important for the check writers, the taxpayers of the United States, to know that progress is being made with their money and that the people of Mississippi appreciate the fact that the country came to help when they needed help. It's a neighborly thing to do."

Those statements—both about Mississippi's "spirit" and its mandate for gratitude—have been abetted by other public officials, too. In an August 2006 interview with the *National Journal*, Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour was asked why, given that geographically Mississippi suffered more widespread damage than Louisiana, Mississippi was recovering more quickly. Barbour's response sounds much like President Bush's previous statement: "First and foremost is the spirit of our people. Our people weren't looking for someone to blame; they weren't whining, complaining. Our people are not into victimhood. They began doing immediately what needed to be done, and that's been their spirit throughout." There is an obvious comparison being made here, indicated by the repetition of "our people," as if to set "our" clearly apart from some Other, some "them" or "their." It is not a stretch to read here a thinly-veiled criticism of Louisiana, New Orleans, and particularly Mayor Nagin's response to Katrina; Barbour has been quoted elsewhere as calling the New Orleans aid package "very excessive." Also clearly in play in such remarks is the racialized neoliberal frame that enables easy invocation of the welfare queen and gangsta stereotypes. Later in the interview Nagin comes up more explicitly as a contrast to Barbour, a former lobbyist and Chair of the National Republican Committee, in terms of political savvy and connections. In another article for the *National Journal*, Kellie Lunney notes "While Mississippi benefits from good political standing in Washington, state and local leaders are careful not to appear needy; instead, they are eager to cultivate Mississippi's can-do attitude." The political rhetoric and media rhetoric cohere to erase Mississippi's need, instead focusing on its meritorious "spirit": it seems that, just as the majority of the country resists identifying with Mississippi, Mississippi resists identification with New Orleans, and utilizes a distinctly neoliberal vocabulary and rhetoric in which to do so.

While Nagin, Senator Mary Landrieu, and other officials pointed out the failure of the federal government to both protect and rescue its citizens in New Orleans and demanded adequate recompense for the disaster, the Mississippi delegation adopts a more humble posture. Their federal assistance was agreed to out of the public eye, without voluble recrimination for the delay in aid. Their stories, when presented, are those of individual acts of courage or of communities pulling together, stories neatly packaged in a neoliberal rhetoric of meritocracy. Although Dr. Ben Marble, an ER doctor from Mississippi, did confront Vice President Dick Cheney at a news conference, criticizing the administration's response with the succinct phrase "Go fuck yourself, Mr. Cheney" (an ironic nod to Cheney's own comment to Senator Patrick Leahy on the Senate floor) and thereby earned one of a very few spots about Mississippi

in Spike Lee's four-hour documentary *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, the majority of the publicized accounts of Mississippi recovery have instead reflected gratitude (qtd. in Bialik).

One of the ways in which Mississippians have expressed that gratitude is in the opportunity to rebuild coastal cities anew. Since Katrina, Mississippi's motto has been "Building Back Better Than Ever" (Lunney, "A Tale"). Former Gulfport Mayor Brent Warr has said of rebuilding his town, "We have the opportunity to make it an absolutely unique place. God has come in and wiped the slate clean for us" (qtd. in Robertson). During the President's visit to Biloxi four days after the storm, he said, "But the people have got to understand that out of this rubble is going to come a new Biloxi, Mississippi. It's hard to envision it right now. When you're standing amidst all that rubble, it's hard to think about a new city." And, despite the current crisis with insurance companies, cost-prohibitive revised building specs, and inflated property values, most reports from Mississippi's coastal towns continue to emit optimism.

It seems that Mississippi is trying to construct a new space in the social imaginary. Instead of representing America's shameful qualities like racism and ignorance, Mississippi's public face is hopeful, gracious, grateful, humble, and its public voice bespeaks that all-American can-do attitude. The positive image of its gratitude and humility, though, seems married to Mississippi's negative image, or at least is just as one-sided as its negative image. That is, just as Mississippi is not the nation's lynching tree, neither is it the magnolia. All too often in the attempt to separate from negative portrayals of ignorant rednecks and subjugated blacks, the pendulum swings wide in the other direction. For instance, in a lengthy article in the *New Yorker*, Peter J. Boyer positions Mississippi's Katrina disaster historically, contrasting his own experience as a Gulfport teen who lived through Hurricane Camille in 1969 and within the broader context of the Coast's cultural formation from the time when Biloxi was the capital of French Louisiana. In his effort to tell Mississippi's story, he uses phrases like "on the coast of Faulkner's Mississippi," "the coast's moonlight-and-magnolias veneer," and entitled the article "Gone With the Surge." Although Boyer does try to faithfully portray Hurricane Katrina's effect on the Gulf Coast, his willingness to ride the pendulum into the idealized image of Mississippi renders his article problematic.

Amid all of the confusion following Hurricane Katrina's landfall on August 29, 2005, one fact remains consistently clear: no one wants to talk about Mississippi. Whether because of its shameful place in the social imaginary; its failure to qualify as spectacle for economic, identification, or dramatic reasons; its subsequent posture of humble gratitude or the fact that its invisibility provides a space in which New Orleans, more easily contained by the dominant frames, can dominate, the devastation suffered by the Mississippi Gulf Coast has been all but omitted from the media spotlight. While occasional articles vacillate between the negative and positive images of the state, the real problem is that the *real* Mississippi continues to be invisible.

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While it is certainly true that invisibility creates conditions for material harm and the perpetuation of stereotypes, so too is hypervisibility a deleterious rhetorical operator with multiple pernicious uses. The hypervisibility of the black poor in post-Katrina coverage of New Orleans' stigmatized victims played on stereotypes of black criminality and made a spectacle of suffering that was increasingly interpreted through racist and racializing schemas that gave us to know that what we were seeing were predictable images of animalism and depravity among ghettoized blacks. The September 7, 2005 banner on the website of the Jewish Task Force was among the most clear: "Black Criminals Murder, Rape, Rob And Rampage In New Orleans." The site goes on to say: "The New Orleans Superdome, intended as a refuge from Hurricane Katrina, became a terrifying scene of *black* murder, rape and robbery. The unbelievable cruelty, savagery and sadism that characterizes *black* criminal culture was on full display in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina" (emphasis ours).

Other invocations of the stereotype were more subtle. A good (and well-known) example of this is the photos that appeared on Yahoo News on September 1, 2005. One image depicts a young black man towing a garbage bag and the other depicts a young white couple both wearing backpacks and towing a small white grocery bag, all wading through chest-high waters in the storm's aftermath. The caption under the first image reads: "A young man walks through chest-deep flood water after looting a grocery store in New Orleans," while the caption under the second image reads: "Two residents wade through chest deep waters after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store after Hurricane Katrina came through the area." Cheryl Harris and Devon Carbado open their insightful article, "Loot or Find: Fact or Frame?" with an analysis of these images and the debate they caused, as well as the debates that should have taken place around them.

“Hurricane Katrina broke through the visual blackout of poverty and the pernicious ideology of color-blindness to reveal the government’s role in fostering the dire conditions of largely poor African-Americans, who were bearing the hardships incurred by the wrath of the indifference and violence at work in the racist, neoliberal state” (Giroux 188), and in so doing, makes clear that the racist or racialized frame operates in tandem with another, which serves to demonize the poor and functions through neoliberal vocabularies that seek to sidestep social responsibility and democracy by elevating “the market” to the status of a supernatural power, the offspring of Manifest Destiny and inheritor of many of its projects. Filtered through a social imaginary shaped by a racialized neoliberal frame, the images and stories coming out of New Orleans were increasingly likely to function as evidence that the poor create their own misfortune and then try to hoodwink good Americans into feeling sorry for them. Robert Tracinski, writing for Fox News on September 5, 2006, best sums up this frame in his characterization of the Katrina survivors as “people wallowing in squalor while demanding that someone else come to help them” (“The Unlearned Lesson of Hurricane Katrina”). And of course, who can forget Barbara Bush’s comments while touring Houston relief centers on September 5, 2005 when she stated on NPR’s *Marketplace*, “What I’m hearing, which is sort of scary, is they all want to stay in Texas. Everyone is so overwhelmed by the hospitality. And so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this [there was a slight chuckle here]—well, this is working very well for them”. [4]

Her statement confirmed what conservatives have been telling us since the Reagan era: the poor desire nothing so much as to live off the kindness and generosity of others, which is undeserved, and, furthermore, breeds dependency and depravity. Clearly, if you welcome such people into your world, they might just stay, and this, well this is a frightening possibility. Though there was some outcry over her remarks, it quickly became evident—through the shifts away from coverage focused on the suffering survivors to coverage that foregrounded the militarization of New Orleans, stories of murder and mayhem not only in New Orleans but also wrought by “refugees” (refugee: a person without country, a foreigner or alien seeking refuge in a homeland that is not his or her own; one who flees; a wanderer) in the communities that kindly took them in—that Barbara Bush’s comments were indicative of an interpretive frame that was far from unusual and in fact, would come to hold sway over the mainstream media and much of the viewing public as empathy or at least sympathy gave way to the more standard “every man for himself” approach.

Members of the media and viewers alike experience the discursively rendered object through interpretational structures that “consciously or unconsciously shape what we see and how we see it” (Harris and Carbado 91). Writing in the *Harvard Law Review* in 2005, in an article titled “Trojan Horses of Races,” Jerry King describes the formulation this way: “Like well-accepted theories that guide our interpretation of data, schemas incline us to interpret data in ways that are consistent with our biases” (qtd. in Harris and Carbado 91). So, as we make sense of an event, we take account of and simultaneously ignore facts that do not fit the frame, and sometimes even supply ones that are missing (Harris and Carbado 91), which might account for why so many reputable publications momentarily tossed aside basic journalistic principles and methods and began reporting things that never happened, stories that were later shown to have no basis in fact and were in fact only rumors or urban legends, a phenomenon discussed in a variety of sources and first analyzed by Susan Rosenblatt and James Rainey in their September 27, 2005 article for the *Los Angeles Times*.

Survivors, community leaders, and experts on poverty, diaspora, trauma, and displacement somehow fell outside the narrow tunnel of the media’s vision. Instead of focusing on making audible the voices that might “echo historical narratives that frame and shape the meanings of the current trauma” (James 158), by the time the one year anniversary rolled around, Fox News, through the vehicle of Neil Cavuto’s *Your World*, was offering us “expert” commentary on Katrina recovery from fitness guru Richard Simmons and boxing promoter Don King, who encouraged viewers to “Stop Blaming Pres. Bush for Hurricane Katrina!” [5] Even when survivor stories were featured and the details of horrific ordeals recounted, the narratives were presented in fragments and not bound by the contextualizing analyses of structural violence, systemic poverty and the ongoing struggles of some Americans to root themselves in materially secure spaces, which would have anchored these stories in more useful analytic frames. Such analysis was left to academics and intellectuals, or to activists and collectives publishing through small presses, books unlikely to be found except by those who were looking, their content unlikely to filter into public discourse and the social imaginary.

Increasingly in mainstream media, the subjects of the coverage were “victims” of the Katrina victims. Stories proliferated about the demoralized local police, the harried National Guard, the tired vigilantes policing Gretna to ensure that no blacks came across the bridge during the exodus from the flooding (this latter, little reported phenomenon is well documented by Jed Horne, metro editor for the *Times-Picayune* whose coverage of Katrina earned a Pulitzer Prize). Later, tales of tired cities that had graciously received the “refugees” and beleaguered officials, such as the mayor of

Houston as he called for federal funds to help defray the cost of crime-fighting in Southwest Houston, an area that absorbed many of the 150,000-200,000 Katrina evacuees to Houston, came to dominate the media stream.

Fox News and conservative pundits predictably made much of stories about the criminality of New Orleans evacuees [6], their discussions referencing earlier comments that the dead of New Orleans deserved what they got. [7] *Newsweek* explained that Houston was suffering from “compassion fatigue,” while *Time* magazine offered “The Cruel Effects of Hurricane Season” featuring an article titled “Katrina's Latest Casualty” which came with the tag line, “When it comes to violent crime, New Orleans' gain may be Houston's loss.” But even in sources not known for allegiance to neoliberal ideology, stories about Houston's problems in the wake of having opened itself to Katrina evacuees offered ambivalent and confusing coverage. The title of an article in *The Washington Post* on February 5, 2006 echoes Barbara Bush's sentiments: “After Welcoming Evacuees, Houston Handles Spike in Crime,” illustrating the punishment that befalls good people who try to help the evacuees. After several paragraphs that infer or assert that Houston's rise in crime is directly related to the evacuee population itself, we read this deeply buried qualification: “...officials are careful not to blame Houston's recent rise in violent crime solely on Katrina evacuees, *saying such statistics were rising last year before the hurricane*. They point to what they call the majority of law-abiding Louisianans now living in the city and say the *crime rate per thousand for the evacuee population is not greater than it was among Houstonians before the influx of Katrina survivors*” (emphasis ours). This brief material analysis (undercut by the phrase “officials are careful not to blame,” which can clearly be read as a qualification of the forthcoming statement, as if the officials are merely rationalizing or offering excuses in order to avoid giving offense) of important underlying structural issues relative to the sudden introduction of a large population into a static infrastructure is offered [8]. But after this brief attempt at analytical intervention, we're back to business as usual, *vis a vis* a poignant quotation from Houston Police Chief Harold Hurtt: “We should not be penalized for opening up our city to folks who lost their homes...we are just trying to help...” Thus the article ends on the same note on which it began, riffing on Barbara Bush's insightful gaffe, and demonstrating the dominance and transparency of the racialized neoliberal frame, which shaped the rhetoric of the Katrina narrative as well as viewers' interpretation of the coverage.

It's clear that in the weeks and months following Katrina's devastation, the resurrection of this frame enabled us all to stop feeling sorry for “those people” and get on with our lives. This frame operates to the detriment of Katrina victims and ultimately, to the detriment of us all, as the catastrophe was not only a lost opportunity for critical reflection on crucial issues but in the end can be seen to have served to shore up dangerous ideologies as the framed versions of post-Katrina “realities” settled into the national imaginary not as pictures of avoidable suffering and a call for increased social responsibility, civic engagement and commitment to democratic ideals, but as proof of the fact that some people deserve to die. [9] This is the frame defined by Henry Giroux as “the new biopolitics of disposability”:

...in which entire populations marginalized by race and class are now considered redundant, an unnecessary burden on state coffers and consigned to fend for themselves. This new biopolitics is marked by deeply existential and material questions regarding who is going to die and who is going to live, and represents an insidious set of forces that have given up on the sanctity of human life for those populations rendered “at risk” by global neoliberal economies, and as Katrina makes clear works in diverse ways to render some groups as disposable and privileges others. (172)

Clearly, the frame of biopolitical disposability is partially constructed of neoliberal vocabularies and social neoliberalism's conceptual devices and represents a danger to democratic ideals, but Giroux's formulations point perhaps to another schema that often operates seamlessly and unremarked in public discourse. Cultural essentialism provides us with a portrait of “real America” and enables a form of cultural imperialism, which can also be seen to operate in the rhetoric surrounding Hurricane Katrina.

Culturally essentialist notions of U.S. culture are based on largely fictitious “norms”: “Americans” are predominantly white, upper-middle class, heterosexual and living in nuclear (even if blended) family contexts. These essentializing views of culture become hegemonic through their repetition in media and those who fall outside the norm can then be seen as “un-American.” Throughout the coverage of Katrina, the “uniqueness” of New Orleans culture was made hypervisible: its heritage was unique, its music, its food, its history—New Orleans was a “unique cultural gumbo,” a city with an international flavor. In tandem came the disbelief, expressed in domestic and international coverage, that this (the spectacle of poverty that was revealed in the aftermath, not the hurricane itself) could happen in America.

As the catastrophe and its aftermath(s) were approached through the frame of cultural essentialism, we came to know that the suffering we saw in New Orleans was somehow un-American; it was less easy to deploy this frame to contain the suffering in Mississippi, suggesting one of the reasons for Mississippi's invisibility. Survivors were called refugees, and rightly objected to the term. Well-intentioned articles comparing Katrina survivors to international migrants proliferated, as when [Audrey Singer](#) and Katharine M. Donato reported: "Some of Katrina's survivors are similar to international migrants who typically have some resources and voluntarily move in search of better economic opportunities abroad...But Hurricane Katrina also displaced the poorest of the poor, who more resemble international refugees forced to flee in times of war, strife, and natural disasters." David Dante Troutt offers a useful analysis of this and related issues in "Many Thousands, Gone Again." His article suggests another angle on the aftermath: the permanent displacement of the black community in New Orleans as a desirable outcome of the disaster. Most telling, though, was the consistent and frequent comparison between New Orleans and an undefined Third World. [10] This rhetoric was not limited to the immediate aftermath, but continues in force. At the one year anniversary, for example, Jeff Koinange's report for CNN reflected on "Katrina: When New Orleans went from developed world to Third World," and many others followed suit.

The use of cultural essentialism as a rhetorical operator that renders New Orleans as a Third World and an un-American space serves to advance a kind of cultural imperialism that is in keeping with the schemas discussed above. We cannot ignore "the degree to which cultural imperialism often proceeds by means of an Insistence on Difference, by a projection of Imaginary "differences" that constitute one's Others as Other" (Narayan 83) or the degree to which the imperialist project, like racism, classism, social neoliberalism and the biopolitics of disposability undermine democracy.

As educators, we have a responsibility to pursue the issues Hurricane Katrina exposed, making use of Katrina as both subject matter and springboard. In addition to the uses that might be made of the Katrina narrative in the English classroom, such as development of literacies, and fostering engagement and critical voice, related fields and in fact the academic professions in general might benefit from taking a closer look at Katrina and the issues exposed. For instance, individuals, community groups, universities, nonprofit organizations, and established news outlets made extensive use of the Internet to broadcast the storm and its aftermath, showing how the new electronic media differs from traditional print and televised sources, both in the impetus and the range of information. As Douglas Kellner points out in *Media Spectacle*, "New multimedia, which synthesize forms of radio, film, TV news and entertainment, and the mushrooming domain of cyberspace become extravaganzas of technoculture, generating expanding sites of information and entertainment, while intensifying the spectacle form of media culture" (1). The multitude of blogs, bulletin boards, articles, interviews, and photographs available via the web each represent a particular point of view, use specific rhetorical strategies, and therefore are supremely useful as source material in media studies. Analyzing the framing of those points of view and their attendant rhetorical operations could prove to be productive in any course examining the role and function of media, and also useful in the English classroom to open discussions of multimodal text production and the rhetorics of new media.

The field of cultural studies would also benefit from the media portrayal of Katrina. As this article has shown, the South's place in the social imaginary remains a repository of national shame. Portrayed either as invisible, as with Mississippi, or hypervisible, as with New Orleans, the South is objectified both by race and class. In fact, the national mythos of regions has always tended to conflate race and class: the wholly-white middle-class agrarian community of the Midwest; multi-ethnic groups ranging across classes in cities on the east and west coasts; and the antebellum vision of white aristocrats and black servants in the South. Since Mississippi's white poor do not fit into the mythos, they were ignored. And, as New Orleans's black poor were so victimized by the storm, they had to be vilified in the service of the national mythos via hyper-coverage of their supposed criminality.

Finally, another valuable lesson we might take away from Katrina is the value of collaboration and community, as well as the dangers of territoriality and divisive internal politics. The Katrina story might best be approached analytically, conversationally, and pedagogically through a frame that contextualizes and asserts the principles of global social responsibility and empowers students, through acquisition of literacy and critical voice, to see themselves as actors on the global stage rather than as members of a passive audience. As we watched local and federal agencies fumble around, passing the buck and bungling operations in large part because of a 'failure to communicate' and a failure of vision that would have placed interagency collaboration at the forefront, we might think about the ways in which we operate in similar "vertical conceptual silos" (Bitto 29), discipline-specific in our research, isolated in our classroom practice, many of us moving through campuses that house fragmented communities, increasingly corporatized and pushing toward competition as the norm, devaluing collaboration and interdisciplinarity except at the level of lip-service.

We might see in the botched response to Katrina the failure of such models and turn an eye toward the strong response of community organizers and collectives in the post-Katrina Coast as not only heroes of a moment in time, but as models for our own practice and approach to our profession, inside and outside our classrooms.

Notes

- [1] For an interesting analysis of this speech and its impact, see Michael Therrien's article on the website of the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty : <<http://www.acton.org/research/pubs/papers/neoliberalism.html>>. [[back to text](#)]
- [2] The counterpart to the welfare queen in Reagan's discourse on welfare was this "strapping young buck," first mentioned in a 1976 campaign speech in Fort Lauderdale, which is discussed in a number of publications, even in articles supportive of Reagan and his ideals. See, for example, *Time.com's* "They've Got a Little List" <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,922113,00.html>>. The text of the speech has proven remarkably difficult to locate. [[back to text](#)]
- [3] ...as reflected in dominant mainstream media outlets. We focused primarily on CNN, Fox News, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Los Angeles Times*, seeing them as representative. [[back to text](#)]
- [4] American Public Media's *Marketplace* website includes video, audio and raw audio of the senior Bush's September 5 visit to Houston, all of which include the comments cited here. <<http://marketplace.publicradio.org/shows/2005/09/05/PM200509051.html>>. [[back to text](#)]
- [5] This was the caption stamped on screen during King's interview. [[back to text](#)]
- [6] A search on "Katrina Fox News" or "Houston crime Katrina" will yield hundreds of articles. [[back to text](#)]
- [7] Many conservatives went with the "reap what you sow" line of causation (bad things happen to bad people) while some members of the Religious Right posited supernatural causation (wrath of God for abortion, feminism, homosexuality, the war in Iraq, complicity in "driving the Jews out of Gaza," secularism, the sexual revolution, etc. Wikipedia provides a useful, though only partially documented, overview at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alternative_theories_regarding_Hurricane_Katrina#Assertions_of_supernatural_causation>. Note that many wrath of God explanations focus on New Orleans as the target, dismissing the inconvenient fact of the hurricane's devastation in other areas. Columbia Christians for Life provided the most unusual argument: "The image of the hurricane ... with its eye already ashore at 12:32 p.m. Monday, August 29, looks like a fetus (unborn human baby) facing to the left (west) in the womb, in the early weeks of gestation (approx. 6 weeks)...Even the orange color of the image is reminiscent of a commonly used pro-life picture of early prenatal development:" (God's punishment for abortion, if you can't read between the lines...) [[back to text](#)]
- [8] "...the issue facing the city, officials said, is that Houston's 2 million population grew by about 10 percent virtually overnight, straining all key city services such as schools, hospitals, emergency services and, particularly, public safety. The addition of the evacuee population has dropped the ratio of police officers per thousand Houstonians to 1.9, compared with 2.3 before Katrina and with the national average of 2.8." [[back to text](#)]
- [9] The danger of allowing for the interpretation of events through the transparent frame of social neoliberalism is made clear in Giroux's argument: "Underneath neoliberalism's corporate ethic and market-based fundamentalism, the idea of democracy is disappearing and with it the spaces in which democracy is produced and nurtured. Democratic values, identities, and social relations along with public spaces, the common good, and the obligations of civic responsibility are slowly being overtaken by a market-based notion of freedom and civic indifference in which it becomes more difficult to translate private woes into social issues and collective action or to insist on a language of the public good" (187). [[back to text](#)]
- [10] This brief summary of references to the Third World was offered by the *Los Angeles Times* on Sept. 7, 2005: in the terse words of the *New York Times'* David Carr, "it was left to reporters embedded in the mayhem to let Americans know that a Third World country had suddenly appeared on the Gulf Coast." *USA Today* was one of the many media outlets to break the bad news, remarking in a horrified editorial that the scene in New Orleans resembled that in " Third

World refugee camps." On CNN, producer Michael Heard confirmed it: Interstate 10 in New Orleans was "very Third World," with people wandering around "like nomads" and streets filled with water that "just looks unhealthy." By week's end, *U.S. News & World Report* was commenting that "as the Third World images of death and devastation reeled across the nation's TV screens," Americans were stirred to "an almost palpable sense of anger." On Fox News, anchor Shepard Smith lamented that things just aren't going to be the same anymore: We can "remove the dead, repair the levee, pump out the water and move on," but we'll be "forever scarred by Third World horrors unthinkable in this nation until now." <<http://www.commondreams.org/views05/0907-24.htm>>. [[back to text](#)]

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