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Why Katrina's Victims Aren't *Refugees*: Musings on a "Dirty" Word

ABSTRACT   In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, a controversy emerged in the U.S. public sphere over the use of the word *refugee* to characterize the displaced residents of New Orleans. In this article, I explore the significance of the concept of "the refugee" for U.S. citizens, and I discuss what the failure to find an appropriate term to describe stranded New Orleanians reveals about the experience of poverty. I argue that the conceptual void uncovered by the crisis reflects the larger social void in which poor New Orleanians have long been confined and I examine the role of public discourse in defining and helping justify the inequalities uncovered by Katrina. [Keywords: Katrina refugees, semantics of identity, poverty, New Orleans]

> Much of routinized misery is invisible; much that is made visible is not ordinary or routine.
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> —Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock,
> Introduction to *Social Suffering*

A CATEGORICAL VOID

On the evening of August 31, 2005, I sat with my family in the musty motel room in eastern Tennessee where we had landed on our way to Lancaster, PA—the town that would become our temporary home away from home. We watched CNN anchor Aaron Brown confess with uncharacteristic sensitivity to being uneasy with the designation of Hurricane Katrina's displaced victims as *refugees*. The word, he felt, was unsuitable to describe the plight of people who had been (or would soon be) forced to evacuate their towns and neighborhoods prior to or in the days following the storm: They had left their homes, not their country. And yet, by his own admission, there appeared to be no adequate substitute that would convey with enough intensity both the nightmarish experience so many New Orleanians had gone through in the wake of Katrina and the dire predicament survivors now faced as they prepared to start life anew away from the ravaged Gulf Coast.

At the time, Brown's hesitancy to use the word *refugee* struck me as decidedly odd. We had just gone through a harrowing evacuation of our home city, New Orleans, and had no idea whether we would ever be able to return there or whether we would even have a house to return to. My three daughters were worried about their pets, which we had been forced to leave behind, and about what life would be like at a new school. My husband wondered if there would be anything to salvage of his business, and I fretted about my books, my data, and my files sitting in my Tulane office. All my friends and colleagues, neighbors, and acquaintances were in a similar predicament. Although we had evaded the horrendous ordeal of other Katrina survivors who had weathered the storm huddled in their homes, in the Superdome, or in the infamous Convention Center—we had evacuated the city the day before Katrina hit—I felt very much like a refugee: homeless, aimless, and with little more than a handful of clothes in the way of material possessions. Strengthening this impression were the supportive e-mail messages I had received from my parents and aunts—all Alsatians who as children had been forced to abandon their homes precipitously in the wake of Germany's occupation of France in 1940. As refugees in their own land, they had endured fear, hunger, privation, and grief, yet they had survived. As I faced the pain of leaving everything behind and fleeing to a safer place, they assured me that I, too, would survive this trying experience.

As the world watched with riveting concern the unfolding of a humanitarian crisis of gigantic proportions, a debate, however, soon ensued as to whether or not the term *refugee* was appropriate in the current context. Not everyone, I found out, thought that it was a noble word (see Freeman 2005). It stripped the victims of their dignity, some argued. On the contrary, others countered, it was a particularly suitable term because it hinted at the horrific

conditions that many of Katrina's survivors had eventually escaped. The word *refugee,* as this war on words suggests, carries a heavy semantic load. In an effort to understand why the word *refugee* struck such a discordant note in certain circles, I explore in this article the interpretatively rich universe of "refugeeness" through a brief examination of the arguments that surfaced in the U.S. public sphere at that time.

The discomfort that so many people in the United States reportedly felt at hearing (or reading about) fellow U.S. citizens being called "refugees" was revealing of their self-image. An image of power, prosperity, and self-sufficiency had been proudly projected onto national and international scenes as testimony to the vitality of the "American dream"; all of this was now under threat, thanks to Katrina. Through the inequalities it exposed, the disaster severely undermined the notion of a self-sufficient and successful citizenry as well as the illusory comfort that this was a nation that took care of "its own." Prompted by the searing images of despair and destitution thrust at them, U.S. citizens living outside of the affected area were compelled for a moment to confront issues of poverty that had virtually disappeared from public debate in recent years.

No one denied, of course, that little could have been done to blunt the fury of the storm. Natural disasters nonetheless have a way of uncovering the cracks in seemingly functional systems. As the nation stood transfixed by the depth of New Orleans's open wounds, there was dawning outrage over the realization that no steps had been taken to prevent what appeared to have been a preventable social tragedy. There was also widespread puzzlement—and disbelief—as people tried to come to terms with the enormity of the situation. Katrina was a calamity of unprecedented magnitude. Despite well-publicized predictions that a major hurricane hitting New Orleans would likely wipe out much of the city, the country had been caught unaware. There was no conceptual blueprint for how to address the situation. With no memory to fall back on, no model to rely on, everyone struggled with even the most basic ways to describe what had happened to the city of New Orleans and to its stranded residents. In this context, the controversy over the word *refugee* was more than a matter of political correctness. It revealed a chasm between conceptual and experiential realities that no amount of emergency management could bridge.

The categorical void that emerged around displaced New Orleanians who chastised the media for branding them as refugees spoke of another preexisting void, which massive institutional failings had insidiously helped create in the city's dilapidated neighborhoods. Trapped as they were by social and financial limitations, those who lived in that void had been unable to heed the warnings to evacuate ahead of the storm. Many of them had assumed—as they had in the past—that they would safely ride out the storm in the Superdome or in their homes. Instead, however, they were forced to face fetid, desperate conditions in shelters of last resort as New Orleans became engulfed in floodwaters and access to lifelines broke down. The unprecedented nature of the disaster, it soon became poignantly obvious, compounded the storm's devastating impact on the inner city by amplifying the inertia and incompetence of relief agencies. Yet, as Susan Cutter (2005) notes, the revelations of ineffective response to Katrina's devastation are not just about the failures in emergency response that took place at various levels of the emergency management system. They are also about failures of the social support systems aimed at helping the poor in the United States—in this case, the mostly invisible inner-city poor. Ironically, it was because of their invisibility that the most basic needs of impoverished residents had escaped attention. As images of people stranded in misery and squalor flashed across the nation's television screens, U.S. viewers were forced to conclude that the poor of New Orleans had been "left behind" long before the storm hit the city.

By literally destroying the barriers that had kept them out of sight—and therefore out of mind—Katrina thrust the woes of New Orleans's dispossessed into plain view (Sandalow 2005). If it spurred some soul searching, the vision of such dire poverty did not lead to categorical rethinking—about refugees, for instance. Because the concept of the "refugee" summoned a sense of vulnerability that contradicted everything the United States—and its citizens—supposedly stood for, it was soon dropped in favor of some allegedly more suitable designations.[1] While the country busied itself tending to the needs of thousands of displaced New Orleanians, the conceptual void remained—a hint that perhaps what had originally hindered the administration's grasp of the nature of the emergency continued to cloud newly emerging debates on the plight of the U.S. poor.

Part of the blame for why U.S. citizens were not prompted to search deeper into the origins of the vulnerabilities uncovered by Katrina must be attributed to the media. Through their "appropriation of suffering" (Kleinman and Kleinman 1997), they played a central role in shaping the language that came to characterize the disaster and its victims. Sarah Kaufman (2005) justifiably notes that the devastation produced by the hurricane could have brought attention to the social roots of violence and poverty, but that instead the public was presented with labels and images that often criminalized the poverty of the victims. In describing the plight of hapless and homeless New Orleans residents, the media thus stigmatized the very people whose miserable conditions they were drawing attention to. By referring to stranded residents as "refugees," for instance, journalists effectively misidentified them: Many so-called refugees felt they were being singled out on the basis of an invalid criterion. In this article, I show how this tendency to label Katrina victims as "refugees" was part of a racialized discourse that, through its emphasis on responsibility and accountability, surreptitiously excluded poor New Orleans

residents from its public, thereby helping to "naturaliz[e] social inequality" (Briggs 2003b:311).

"REFUGEES" VERSUS CITIZENS: CATEGORICAL DEBATES

In the weeks following the storm, tens of thousands of New Orleans residents, once trapped in a drowned city, were bused or flown to safer shores while earlier evacuees, faced with televised images of widespread devastation, struggled to take stock of their situation. At this time, the word *refugee* was bandied about loosely by reporters, politicians, and media commentators. CNN's Jeff Koinange, reporting from New Orleans on September 3, had already compared the situation on the ground to that of a "refugee camp" in a Third World country. Later, other newscasters routinely spoke of "refugees" when referring to Katrina survivors wearing donated clothes, sleeping on the floors of overpopulated shelters, and struggling to connect with family members scattered across the country. With little money, no home to return to, and nowhere to go, New Orleans residents who carried the scraps of their lives in plastic trash bags did look like refugees—at least, to those around the globe who indirectly witnessed their ordeal.

To many of the storm victims themselves, however, the word *refugee* proved unacceptable. "I can't stand people calling me a refugee," one evacuated New Orleans resident complained, "I am an American and I love America" (*CBS News* 2005).[2] Indeed, as was evidenced by the wave of protests that soon flooded media outlets, many U.S. citizens—especially those in the black community—found the term demeaning when applied to their compatriots. Judy Rogers, an African American social worker from Harlem, thus, argued that the term was "inappropriate, divisive, even racist when applied to American citizens" (Bernstein 2005:31). Civil right activist Al Sharpton publicly protested that "they are not refugees. They are citizens of the United States" (Pesca 2005). And survivors themselves angrily insisted whenever given an opportunity that they were law-abiding taxpayers, not refugees. "The image I have in my mind is people in a Third World country, the babies in Africa that have all the flies and are starving to death," Tyrone McKnight explained while resting outside a Baton Rouge shelter, where 5,000 displaced New Orleanians were being housed (Pierre and Farhi 2005). "That's not me. I'm a law-abiding citizen who's working every day and paying taxes" (Pierre and Farhi 2005). Ultimately, such adamant denials would not have been so poignant had they not been uttered by people who had just been stripped of everything. After watching their lives and everything they had worked for being washed away overnight, language had become their sole means of self-affirmation—the only device that remained to regain control over the definition of frail selfhoods.

Aside from what they reveal about the politics of race and the semantics of citizenship, these indignant responses to the characterization of flood victims as refugees are significant in and of themselves. For one thing, they remind us that, even in the direst of circumstances, categorical distinctions—and how they are used to classify people—matter. Indeed, it is perhaps when one's world has been turned upside down—when basic social markers have been symbolically and literally swept away by a tide of historic dimensions—that it matters most to cling to some shred of identity to preserve some semblance of dignity. From a structuralist perspective, refugees belong neither here nor there. Instead, they lie "betwixt and between" (Turner 1967). As such, they constitute an aberration; they are an expression of liminality, a zone of pollution (Douglas 1966; Malkki 1995). Because it challenges "time-honored distinctions between nationals and foreigners" (Arendt 1973:286), their transitional status becomes a source of metaphorical "dirt" and, therefore, danger.

Being classified as "refugees" in the aftermath of Katrina amounted to being "stripped of the specificity of culture, place, and history" (Malkki 1995:12). This was an intolerable affront for these New Orleanians, both black and white, many of whom had long taken pride in having never called any other city home but New Orleans—a place with a history and culture all its own. Although Katrina victims were refugees in the sense that they had fled from a deadly threat and were seeking refuge in a safer elsewhere, they did not occupy the interstitial position refugees conventionally occupy in the system of nation states; this point was asserted by critics such as Rogers and Sharpton. They were neither nationless nor stateless. Even if, in their tattered and stinking clothes, they epitomized "refugeeness" in all its dark and negative connotations, they loudly insisted that they were entitled to the same privileges and could claim the same rights as any other U.S. citizen. Calling them refugees at a time when they more than ever needed to belong took away their citizenship, and by implication, their right to be part of the national order of things. Aside from compounding their sense of loss, such a discursive move was, for reasons I shall explore further below, widely perceived as essentially discriminatory.

"REFUGEENESS," RACE, AND POVERTY

Ironically enough, despite the generous assistance offered by communities throughout the country, many Katrina victims, experts claimed, would have been better off applying for refugee status (Bernstein 2005). As refugees, they would have been provided with social services they had been generally denied as simply displaced citizens. Initially it may be difficult to understand why people who had lost everything and who were now part of the largest U.S. diaspora since the Dust Bowl exodus of the 1930s would so adamantly reject the status of refugee, which would automatically entitle them to counseling, housing, schooling, financial grants, employment services, and medical assistance (Bernstein 2005). It is useful to further ponder the images that the concept of "the refugee" conjures for U.S. citizens. Unlike World War II survivors for whom there often was pride in having overcome the rigors and trials of being a

refugee, many U.S.-born citizens have never experienced invasion by an alien power and to them "refugeeness" essentially connotes "otherness." It refers to foreigners: people who, because they live in impoverished, war-torn, or undemocratic states, become the victims of famine, violence, and persecution and are forced to seek asylum in other countries. And when they do, they become a "problem" for asylum states and international agencies such as the Red Cross or the UN Refugee Agency. In contrast to "ordinary people," refugees are constituted as "an anomaly requiring specialized correctives and therapeutic interventions" (Malkki 1995:8). The problematic nature of their status in the popular imagination was aptly captured by Representative Diane Watson when she pointed out at a Congressional Black Caucus press conference that "'refugee' calls up to mind people that come from different lands and have to be taken care of" (Piere and Farhi 2005: CO1). Katrina's victims, she contended, were "American citizens" (Pierre and Farhi 2005: CO1). In other words, their U.S. citizenship—and what it entailed in terms of power, civil rights, and access to resources—precluded their ability to become refugees, no matter how dire their circumstances.

When carried to its logical conclusion, Watson's statement also implies that displaced New Orleanians did not "have to be taken care of" after all; yet such a paradox further complicates the debate surrounding the treatment of so-called refugees. Alice Fothergill (2004) notes that an unequal relationship between "helper" and "helped" emerges during humanitarian crises; she has fruitfully explored this subject in her study of women displaced by the 1997 Grand Forks, North Dakota, floods. Through their dependency on others' help, middle-class women from Grand Forks felt further victimized by what Fothergill calls the "stigma of charity" (2004:7). If Katrina victims could not reverse the structural inequality that characterized their relations to rescuers, social workers, and all those who provided basic relief and assistance, they could at least fight to erase the stigma associated with the "refugee" label.

Aside from embodying a special kind of powerlessness, refugees defy categorization. As such, they become doubly foreign. As battered by the storm as they may have been, Katrina's victims loudly rejected the notion that they were "foreigners" or "second-rate citizens" in their own land. They might have lost their homes, their family pictures, and their forms of identification, but they were still citizens, not refugees. Significantly, "real" refugees, who had once been driven from their native homes, opined that the status of refugee carried no offensive connotation (Bernstein 2005); meanwhile, though, exiled New Orleanians' insistence that the word be banned from the Katrina-related vocabulary appeared to take on added urgency. New Orleans, at the height of the panic and chaos that had followed the rupture of the levees, had been another country. Reclaiming one's rightful place in the national order of things, thus paradoxically presupposed asserting one's rootedness in one's native community, while simultaneously denying that, as a law-abiding U.S. citizen, one's identity could be defined

by the mass-mediated images of anarchy, violence, and despair that had personified the flooded city during the post-Katrina crisis. With its blame-the-victim implications, the *refugee* label essentially obfuscated the identity of the rightful native that displaced New Orleanians struggled so hard to hang on to. For some, the term also signaled the finality of their displacement, a situation few were ready to contemplate: Afterall, evacuees are only temporarily displaced. In contrast, the relocation of refugees is lengthier, often permanent: This notion had ominous implications for those who feared they would not be able, or even allowed, to return to their devastated neighborhoods.

According to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, a *refugee* is a person who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country" (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 1951). Although it may be argued, based on such a definition, that former New Orleans residents were not refugees because they had been neither persecuted nor forced to leave their country, the term had nonetheless been used widely in the press to capture the enormity of the human disaster and call attention to the plight of the victims—especially in the days before their evacuation to dry land.[3] In this regard, *internally displaced persons (IDPs),* the expression used by the UN Refugee Agency to describe people who have sought refuge without crossing borders, sounded, by all accounts, too clinical.[4] Similarly, *evacuee* was "too tame a word for victims of this national shame" for Chicago Tribune writer Eric Zorn (Freeman 2005).[5] Only *refugee* had the power to shock U.S. citizens, to humble them with the realization that not only could it happen in the United States but that it had happened.

Further, some argued, New Orleans residents stranded in the city under nightmarish conditions had become refugees not because of the threat of rising water, but because they had been abandoned by their government at a moment of great vulnerability. Ironically, political victimization was the very reason Sharpton rejected the term *refugee* as unsuitable: "They are not refugees wandering somewhere looking for charity. They are victims of neglect and a situation they should have never been put in in the first place" (Pesca 2005). The irony of such a statement was not lost on everyone. After news organizations were deluged with criticisms of their characterization of storm victims as "refugees," many like National Public Radio and the Washington Post opted to restrict or ban altogether the use of the word. Others, however, decided that treating the term as if it had become a slur obfuscated the troubling fact that those who, because they were unable to leave, had weathered the storm in New Orleans were indeed as helpless, anguished, and victimized as other people in other lands who were routinely labeled refugees.[6] From this perspective, when applied to former residents of the beleaguered city, the term

was to be read not as an insult to the victims, but as a reprimand to those who, through neglect or incompetence, had done nothing to prevent the tragedy.

"It is the refugee," Refugee Secretary of the All-Africa Council of Churches Melaku Kifle once noted, "who reveals to us the defective society in which we live. He is a kind of mirror through whose suffering we can see the injustice, the oppression and the maltreatment of the powerless by the powerful" (Malkki 1995:12). Although Kifle alludes to a generic humanity whose universal propensity to either suffer or inflict suffering obscures the specific sociopolitical circumstances that create refugees, he nonetheless hints at the way that the concept of "the refugee" carries within itself an indictment of the powerful. If so many African Americans did not jump at the opportunity to blame government officials for the disaster and reveal, through their depiction of victimized New Orleans residents as refugees, the dark underbelly of U.S. society, it was because doing so, they claimed, also inevitably reinstated the racial divide that Hurricane Katrina had stirred up. In other words, it implied that white, affluent residents who had left the city before the storm were *evacuees,* whereas their African American and generally poorer counterparts who had stayed behind (and who had suffered the most) were *refugees*—and therefore second-class citizens. And many suspected, it was precisely because they were black that they had been left to fend for themselves for so long before emergency services were deployed. As writer Judy Simmons put it,

> Our (that is to say, black) sensibilities are engaged with the labeling probably because of our constant wounding by language. No matter what the label, nothing will erase the sense many of us have that mountains would have been moved much sooner for a white population. We'll never know that for sure, and seeking some kind of redress through imposing a reportorial vocabulary won't alter that situation. [Prince 2005]

If Simmons did not think that "some kind of redress" was worth pursuing, others did—as was evidenced by the maelstrom of protests that hit newsrooms and blog sites in the days that followed the storm. For some, it seems, being called a refugee summoned a lengthy history of racial inequities—often concretized through language—that they desperately wanted to put behind them. Katrina survivors are "American citizens, plus they are the sons and daughters of slaves," Watson noted in her news conference. "Calling them refugees coming from a foreign country does not apply to their status. This shows disdain for them. I'm almost calling this a hate crime" (Pierre and Farhi 2005). Whether to Watson's ears the word brought back the dark days of slavery, the image was a convenient way of reminding everyone that although Africans had landed on U.S. soil as slaves, their descendants had fully earned their place in U.S. society.[7] And anyone who hinted through his or her choice of semantics that it was not so could be accused of racial discrimination or even of a hate crime. The stakes were high, especially for black New Orleans residents who had already lost everything to Katrina and for whom the piney woods

of Arkansas, the rugged mesas of New Mexico, or the mountainous slopes of Colorado to which they had been relocated were indeed another country.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF VULNERABILITY

In the past 20 years, researchers have examined closely the complex relations between environmental changes and human migration in an effort to understand the impact of hazards such as toxic contamination, flooding, or drought on people (El-Hinnawi 1985; Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2002). In the literature spawned by such efforts, those who are forced to abandon their homes because of the threat or impact of an environmental disaster have been designated as *environmental refugees* (El-Hinnawi 1985; Myers 1997). For some researchers, however, the term *environmental refugee* is misleading because it excludes factors (such as political, economic, and social forces) that play a definite role in the displacement of human populations (see Oliver-Smith 2005). In their introduction to *Catastrophe and Culture,* Anthony Oliver-Smith and Susanna Hoffman note that "the conjunction of a human population and a potentially destructive agent does not inevitably produce a disaster: a disaster becomes unavoidable in the context of a historically produced pattern of 'vulnerability' evidenced in the location, infrastructure, socio-political organization, production, and distribution systems, and ideology of a society" (2002:3). From this perspective, certain governmental policies and large-scale economic projects designed to promote growth, development, and industrialization may set in motion processes that increase local populations' vulnerability to hazards—especially for those who, because of socioeconomic circumstances, have no choice but to live in environmentally dangerous areas unfit for human occupation (Oliver-Smith 1996).

On August 29, 2005, New Orleans provided a fitting, if tragic, example of what can happen when environmental forces intersect with a social geography that is the product of decades of poor development strategies, discriminatory policies, and urban decay. Nestled at the confluence of three navigable bodies of water—the Gulf of Mexico, the Mississippi River, and Lake Ponchartrain—the original city was settled on the highest grounds available: a neighborhood known as the Vieux Carré that is seen today as the symbolic core of New Orleans. As the population expanded, swamps were drained, levees were built, and a pumping system was set up to accommodate the city's growing need for space while reducing the risk of flooding and disease (Colten 2000, 2005; Lewis 2003). Through these massive environmental management schemes, wetlands were transformed into flood-prone suburbs that would need increasing protection from a troublesome nature.

Concurrent with the expansion of the city's physical map, "a new social geography was being created as well," writes Cutter (2005:1), and it was a social geography largely defined along ethnic lines. Over the last century, migration from poor rural areas spurred white populations' flight to

the suburbs; this process, in turn, led to the progressive impoverishment of the inner city as jobs opportunities migrated outward, the tax base eroded, and support for infrastructure declined (Lewis 2003). As white numbers declined, the black population in the central city grew at a steady pace. In 2000, blacks outnumbered whites by nearly three to one. In tandem with these population shifts, the once small and fragmented black ghettos of the city started merging into "superghettos" (Lewis 2003:127), in which typically educational levels were low and the crime rate was high. Although most of the city lies below sea level, some the most vulnerable areas were occupied primarily by low-income residents—many of whom had retreated to these less desirable districts when higher-grounded neighborhoods on the riverfront became gentrified. Historically, efforts at erecting defenses against nature and developing the city have had detrimental consequences for low-income and minority populations (Barry 1997) as well as elderly and disabled residents; such consequences were brought into sharp relief by the Katrina disaster. Of the 28 percent of the city's residents who, prior to Katrina, lived below the poverty line, 84 percent were African American; one-fourth of New Orleans's total population was carless and therefore unable to evacuate inland.[8] By laying bare a whole landscape of social inequity, Katrina also exposed its deeply entrenched historical and institutional roots.

LANGUAGE OF EXCLUSION, IMAGES OF INEQUALITY

More so than any previous environmental catastrophe, Hurricane Katrina received round-the-clock coverage by media outlets eager to capitalize on the newsworthiness of what came to be known as the worst natural disaster in U.S. history. Significantly, much of the focus was on the poor who had remained even after Mayor Nagin had ordered a mandatory evacuation of the city. As the situation became more desperate for thousands of stranded residents, the media's emphasis shifted from the damaged levees and the rising waters to the looting, raping, and shooting that were allegedly taking place throughout New Orleans. Eventually, much of that information proved to be grossly misleading (Dwyer and Drew 2005; Rosenblatt and Rainey 2005; Thevenot and Russell 2005). But the damage had been done. Through the media's exaggerated reports of widespread violence and unrest—shots fired became "shooting" or even "urban warfare"—people desperate for help came to be seen more as a threat to social order than as a population in great need (Kaufman 2005). By helping to spread representations of African Americans as vandals who were savagely tearing at the fabric of society, journalists reporting on Katrina ultimately "grant[ed] legitimacy to a distorted racial framework" (Dyson 2006:167) through which blackness and poverty have long been pathologized. Even as they appeared to champion the cause of the underprivileged, the media unwittingly reproduced a racialized discourse that functioned to sustain the status quo by reaffirming the no-

tion that "America" stood for "middle-classness, industrial or postindustrial prosperity" (Dominguez 2005).

In his moving account of how the poor became identified as the vectors of the disease during the 1991 cholera epidemic in Venezuela, Charles Briggs (2003a, 2003b) draws attention to the role of the media in shaping these perceptions. Despite being purportedly aimed at the wider Venezuelan public, a health education campaign publicized by the media ended up further excluding indigenous populations from mainstream—and modern—Venezuelan culture while also rationalizing existing social inequalities. Through the circulation of images that associated cholera with indigenous people (under the pretense of producing information), the media reinforced in the public's consciousness stereotypes of the backward, ignorant, and irresponsible *indigena,* thereby implicitly blaming cholera victims for their own suffering. In examining how the racialized discourse surrounding the Katrina disaster similarly laid out the outlines of a "geography of blame" (Farmer 1992), it is helpful to focus, as Briggs has done, on the conditions that help shape the circulation of public discourse.

Public discourse, Michael Warner (2002:81) notes, is inherently contradictory: Although it purportedly addresses "the public," a definable social totality, through its circulation it automatically "abandons the security of its positive, given audience" to create instead multiple publics. And although it appears to reach every possible audience, public discourse is invariably and inevitably exclusionary, as its production, circulation, and reception are constrained by the conditions, technologies, and ideologies that enable it in the first place. Given these constraints, some publics "are more likely than others to stand in for *the* public, to frame their address as the universal discussion of the people" (Warner 2002:84). Media coverage of Katrina was aimed at the U.S. public—that is, at a white, middle-class, and relatively prosperous public presumed to stand in for the U.S. public. As such, it generally excluded, through its images, its poetics, and its mode of transmission, the very people whose tragic predicament it purported to publicize.

By framing blacks as looters—whereas their white counterparts were simply survivors looking for food—the media excluded them from a dominant culture of civic-minded and allegedly responsible individuals at the same time that they criminalized their strategies for survival. In this discourse of exclusion, there was no space for reports on how poor African Americans fed, helped, and supported each other during the crisis through the use of extended family and community-based networks (Tierney 2006). Nor was there any recognition that "poverty and blackness are very American things" (Dominguez 2005). In their attempt to produce images of suffering for public consumption, the media reduced complex stories to "a core cultural image of victimization" (Kleinman and Kleinman 1997:10) that emphasized the failure, inadequacy, and irresponsibility of the poor.

In news reports, the focus was on disorder and disfunctionality, as well as on the "valiant" efforts by law

enforcement, National Guard, and U.S. military personnel to restore lawfulness. Conveniently, reports of widespread looting enabled embattled state and city officials to blame "out of control" residents for the failure of rescue operations while providing justification for the shifting of future missions to the preservation of property rather than lives. With headlines that warned of "The Looting Instinct"[9] and of "Blacks on New Orleans Looting Rampage,"[10] the media helped the U.S. public associate race and poverty with criminal behavior, thereby also providing a rationale for the punitive measures that were taken to keep disaster victims in check.

For African American survivors forced to experience the indignities of homelessness and dispossession after Katrina, being called a "refugee" was but an instance of a more generalized pattern of "*mis*recognition" (Taylor 1994:25), in which black storm victims were routinely and repeatedly characterized as standing outside the law, the moral order, and the nation. Because of its complex associations with disorder, the victims' membership in a culture of blackness and poverty marked them as social deviants, a stigma they strenuously rejected by insisting all along that they were U.S. citizens. Identities, it is now widely recognized, are in part shaped by the recognition (or lack thereof) that we receive from others. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict real harm through the imposition of deprecating images that confine people to a "reduced and distorted mode of being" (Taylor 1994:25). By adamantly rejecting the refugee status ascribed to them to invoke instead their "Americanness," exiled New Orleanians ultimately reminded us, as Charles Taylor famously put it, that "due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need" (1994:26).

AMERICAN POVERTY EXPOSED

A few days after my family arrived in Pennsylvania, I received a phone call from Dogondoutchi, the small provincial town in southern Niger where I have been conducting ethnographic research for the last 19 years. Having watched with mounting concern brutal scenes of Katrina's devastation on local television, my Dogondoutchi friends were seeking reassurance that I—together with my family—had made it safely out of New Orleans. They wondered how they could help. How ironic, I remember thinking, that people who lived in the poorest country on earth—a country that was then battling the worst famine in 20 years—wanted to help citizens of the world's richest nation. That they did, along with many others from similarly impoverished countries (including those recently devastated by the 2004 tsunami) revealed how dramatically the world's perception of the United States had changed overnight. I had long tried to convince Nigerien friends and acquaintances that poverty was part of life in U.S. inner cities. In vain. The images of frail, desperate New Orleans residents clinging to their rooftops or scavenging for food in their flooded neighborhoods changed all that. Thanks to Katrina, the world

witnessed a destitution of extraordinary depth and breadth in the midst of what many assumed was an evenly prosperous nation: And it was a destitution that had gone largely unnoticed and unaddressed until this point.

In this regard, our failure to find a word that would describe appropriately the dire circumstances of so many Katrina victims without further victimizing them hints at a much larger failure, one that resulted over the years in the virtual disenfranchisement of a whole stratum of the U.S. population. By literally flushing out of their neighborhoods thousands of residents who, for the most part, had never previously crossed New Orleans city limits, the storm shed new (at times, unwelcome) light on the plight of the urban poor. In seeking to escape the deadly flood, many carless and now homeless residents emerged from the shadows where they had been confined by poverty and discrimination. Their sudden visibility was shocking not simply because it highlighted the extent to which the disaster had fallen so distinctly on one side of the racial divide but also because it made it disturbingly clear there was no conceptual apparatus to acknowledge their existence, much less an institutional one with which to address—and eventually redress— their desperate situation. Through what has euphemistically been referred as "the politics of benign neglect," the U.S. poor in New Orleans and elsewhere have been victimized by economic injustice, by substandard housing and deficient educational systems, by environmental threats, and by political invisibility. In this regard, Hurricane Katrina did not cause their vulnerability so much as it made it painfully apparent. Long before the storm laid waste to the Gulf Coast, entire neighborhoods of New Orleans were already in a state of severe decline, ravaged as they were by neglect, poverty, and inequality. And long before they were chased away from their homes by the watery wrath, poor New Orleans residents were already living like refugees in their own land: They were powerless, often invisible, and ultimately forgotten by the very people appointed to serve and protect them.

If the poverty of so many New Orleans residents was suddenly exposed, I have suggested in this article that it is largely because in the aftermath of Katrina social suffering became newsworthy. Images and narratives of human suffering tend to dramatize events, thereby heightening their appeal to the "general" public, and this is why the media rely on them whenever they can. Pressured as they are to fabricate news on the spot for public consumption, journalists inevitably tend to condense complex social processes into dramatic sound bites. Despite often being only distantly related to social reality, the representations they create endure (even after errors or exaggerations are acknowledged): By inviting spontaneous, stereotypic interpretations of that "reality," they ultimately reinforce the prejudices such interpretations mobilize (Champagne 1993). Although close attention to the everyday life of a community would undoubtedly yield valuable insights, most journalists tend to focus on the spectacular precisely because it is exceptional events not ordinary ones that draw

public interest. From this perspective, an "event" is nothing but the product of the media's exploitation of something that is considered, temporarily at least, newsworthy. When this newsworthiness relates to marginalized and previously invisible populations, Patrick Champagne (1993:65) notes, the representations that emerge from the media's glare rarely meet the expectations of these social groups. The poor rarely control the images that the media create of them. They are too culturally and materially impoverished to resist effectively the stigmatizing characterizations of their values, their lifestyles, and their neighborhoods.

Katrina's victims had no power to deflect the cameras' glare on their misery and destitution but they could use that glare to denounce publicly the language of prejudice that had come to define them once again as social misfits. In the process, *refugee* became the "R-word": an ethnic slur that revealed more about the speaker than about the individual at which it was directed. By pointing to the way that the term functioned to exclude them from the rest of the United States, which they felt fully entitled to be part of, dispossessed New Orleans residents reminded us how the seemingly inclusive language of citizenship can at times be used to reinforce the subordination of communities who, because of their ethnic or socioeconomic characteristics, stand outside of mainstream, middle-class culture. They also hinted that their post-Katrina predicament was but another chapter in a long history of discrimination—a history in which the needs of African Americans have been blithely ignored and their prospects for advancement denied. Although it is unlikely that policy makers will heed the lessons of Katrina and focus on redressing the roots of these disparities any time soon, we must hope that renewed attention will be paid to the role of language (and images) in shaping the social impact of disasters. Instead of compounding victims' injuries by reducing complex social dramas to stereotypes of failure, passivity, and irresponsibility—or even criminality—stories of human disasters such as Katrina should help lessen their brutal impact by fostering a critical awareness of the conditions that trigger them in the first place.

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NOTES

1. Similarly, after thousands of people died and tens of thousands were displaced in the wake of the December 1999 floods in coastal Venezuela, President Chávez proposed that the victims, previously referred as *damnificados,* be renamed *dignificados.* Because of its religious roots connoting damnation, *damnificados* was stigmatizing, compounding the shared burden of the flood survivors (Fassin and Vasquez 2005). By highlighting, through his word choice, the dignity of the survivors, Chávez suggested that they had been redeemed—rather than damned—by misfortune.

2. Because the overwhelming majority of its residents are African Americans, it is easy to forget that New Orleans is home as well to substantial Latino, Native American, Vietnamese, and Filipino communities. The general absence of reports on the fate of these communities only confirms their relative invisibility in U.S. society.

3. This in no way implies that local, state, or federal officials should be absolved of responsibility. I am alluding here to the fact that "benign" neglect (and perhaps poor engineering design)—not the intentional blowing up of levees by the authorities for the purpose of destroying black neighborhoods and forcing black surviving residents out of the city, as some rumors have it—appears to be the cause of the levees failure.

4. By the same token for some, *survivor* had too cheerful a ring, whereas the term *victim* was problematic because it did not differentiate between those who had made it and those who had not.

5. *Evacuees* was inadequate, friends told me, because it suggested that people had been safely and effectively evacuated by governing officials rather than that New Orleans residents had left on their own and of their own volition. In other words, using *evacuees* hinted at a competence that had been totally lacking.

6. As Chicago Tribune writer Eric Zorn wrote, "The term 'refugees' better keeps our eye on the ball; more starkly reminds us with each use that these afflicted citizens need long-term refuge and that their plight is similar in many respects to those from other lands who come here with nothing, not even choices" (2005).

7. Echoing Watson's comments, Jesse Jackson at the height of the crisis described the New Orleans Convention Center, where tens of thousands lived in crowded, squalid conditions, as "the hull of a slaveship" (Duke and Wiltz 2005).

8. For more on the complex relations between social inequities and disaster vulnerability that unfolded during Katrina, see Cutter (2005) and Tierney (2006).

9. See the *Boston Globe,* September 4, 2005: E11.

10. See National Vanguard, August 30, 2005. Electronic document, http://www.nationalvanguard.org/story.php?id=5895, accessed November 05, 2005.

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