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Katrina: Contemporary Screams of Agony
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Guest Commentator

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There are no words to express what we have witnessed in news accounts out of Louisiana and Mississippi. Overused terms such as revulsion, horror, terror and outrage just don't compensate. The combined federal abandonment and neglecting to death of perhaps tens of thousands of mostly Black people in hurricane Katrina's affected regions and the failure of a mostly White dominated media to accurately and fairly report their truths in its aftermath have been absolutely stunning.

If we are alert, we're mesmerized by especially Kanye West who called up the wisdom and consciousness to speak up and out about the failure of this administration to act as swiftly and decisively as they did in the Terri Schiavo case. We can feel very free to be grateful to Mr. West for his *authentic courage* while others mouthed finely articulate, irritatingly comforting, sugar-coated remarks that excuse the President and all his men from having not acted quickly and decisively.

Some White and also some Black self-hating, devotedly-impatient-and-critical-of-other-Black-folk readers should know that no hurricane strength, below sea level foundation, massive flooding, or refusal of some residents to leave their homes and lost family members can account for the suffering and loss of life we are witnessing. The punishment doesn't fit the crime. The accountability for the enormity of this catastrophe goes directly to colossally deficient state and federal planning for an entire population of people – a duty and responsibility that is an established, recognized, documented governmental standard of conduct.

Most of us in possession of historical contextuality are not amazed by this desertion and resulting media propaganda – which serve one another so well. We remind ourselves that the suffering, dying and dead in these areas were neglected long before there was a Katrina. The venerable Julian Bond recently referred to poverty-stricken Black folk in the South as “just as disenfranchised as ever.” As recently as August 2005 the Black Congressional Caucus conducted a bus tour of Mississippi to “highlight the growing list of disparities that plague the African American community, focusing on disparities in healthcare, retirement security and affordable housing.” They surely know as most do, that much of the North and most of the South including New Orleans was built exclusively by the hand and back of enslaved Black African folk of recent ancestry, and that they are therefore protecting a national treasure.

Steven Lerner writes in Diamond: A Struggle for Environmental Justice in Louisiana's Chemical Corridor

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(2004), for years before their ultimately successful activism, Louisiana residents “lived in ‘Cancer Alley’ a Shell Corporation sponsored “inescapable acrid, metallic smell – a ‘toxic bouquet’ of pollution – and a mysterious chemical fog that seeped into their houses.”

Juxtaposed with the predominant number of Historically Black Colleges based in the South is the humongous 41% of all U.S. poverty and 40% of all people in the U.S. without a high school education living in the South – mostly along the “Black Belt.” (*The Southern Black Belt: A National Perspective*, Wimberly and Morris)

We embroider together our knowledge of historical conditions with the present and are staggered by the devastating screams of mass hunger and thirst and the sounds of torture we hear from unbearable numbers of Black people. We are keenly aware of the psychological impact of living alongside the dying and dead (as our foremothers and fathers did on slave ships), and the sheer magnitude of our collective loss. We know how the psychosocial development of Black children in the region are being affected every day, and how that will affect us all as a people. We try to imagine how brotha’s and sistah’s with HIV/AIDS, diabetes and cancers must be suffering with no medication and medical care.

We wonder why horrible rapes of foreign women on their own soil by American “liberating” troops are not as enthusiastically reported as are the shocking rapes perpetrated by the emotionally and socio-economically destitute of New Orleans. We are appalled by reports describing White folks “as American citizens finding goods for their needs” while referencing Black folk *who are finding goods for their needs* as “looters” and “out of control refugees.” We question where the White thieves are, who we know are functioning throughout the area. And, we know the same cable “news” personnel who have presented excellent grounds for disbarment from professional credibility will likely be awarded for journalistic excellence for, among other things, downgrading Black citizen status.

As I watch the Caucus illuminate the experience of those on the ground, I see less in their words, but more in their eyes and in my own that perpetual reflection of how deeply we are bound together as a people – whether some of us like it or not. The souls of my people and the efforts of my ancestors are etched in my consciousness as I contemplate what is happening. My state of being is drained to a slump. I draw upon the rich, distinguished voices of our past for consolation. Among many less famous people like my Grandmothers, I think of Malcolm X before his message was moderated. I hear what a Dr. King might say in a staunch, unmitigated message to the country – his voice filled with exhaustion and layers of valid resentment. I envision Harriet Tubman, who did more to transport people of African descent from the South *on foot* than a technologically and economically advanced government was able to do with cruise liners, planes, trains, a national fleet of busses, governmental trucks, vans and cars at its disposal. I think of DuBois. I turn to his masterpiece, *The Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903.

In it, Dr. W.E.B. Dubois’ soul speaks to us, describing the “legal and tenant farming system in the south as only slightly removed from slavery” – and referring to a “national neglect.” Almost as if referring to the so-called “religious” right, he refers directly to a “sanctifier of the most hateful frauds,” and the misuse of Christianity “under which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds...had found protection.”

As if speaking to a federal hierarchy void of conscious Black public servants, DuBois offers an all too gentle hope that Black folk would serve as “co-workers in the kingdom of culture,” that we might use our, “best powers,” and, “latent genius.” His spirit seems to know that had some Black, brilliant and conscious souls been calling the federal shots with the exact same knowledge in hand, evacuations of hurricane affected areas would have been swift and immense *before* the storm.

As if speaking directly to the major cable “news” stations, Dubois, in 1903, speaks to the “personal disrespect and mockery, the ridicule and systematic humiliation, the distortion of fact and wanton license of fancy, the cynical ignoring of the better and the boisterous welcoming of the worse, the all-pervading desire to inculcate

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disdain for everything Black.” (capitalization of Black mine).

As if referencing the dexterity and tenacity of Black survivors of Louisiana and Mississippi and to the Black underclass haters, Dr. Dubois writes, “We often forget that each unit in the mass is a throbbing human soul.” However much that life may be poverty stricken, he laments, Black southerners “love and hate,” “toil and tire,” “laugh and weep bitter tears” and look “in vague and awful longing at the grim horizon” of their lives. “These Black thousands,” he writes, “work continuously and faithfully for a return, and under circumstances that would call forth equal voluntary effort from few *if any* other modern laboring class.”

And finally, as if writing to those who would eagerly stroll past the true conditions disenfranchised Black people face, Dubois writes,

“We seldom study the condition...” of Black people, “honestly and carefully.” “It is so much easier to assume that we know it all...or perhaps, having already reached conclusions in our own minds, *we are loth to have them disturbed by facts.*” (Italics mine)

The facts are we’re witnessing the ravages of living in a racist (sexist, and homophobic) society wherein Black lives are consistently treated less valuably than White life. Most White people simply don’t move as quickly, think as lucidly, contemplate as masterfully, or speak as prophetically regarding *specifically* Black life. Though there is plenty of room to be critical of some White’s, FEMA and the federal government as a whole – and I am – this is for those of *us* who would reduce the force of reality as if devouring a bag of chips for comfort or drinking several cocktails toward intoxication. Many more of us Black folk need to interrupt our own illusions to comprehend that ever-present racism as it hovers all around us clawing away at our past and potential successes. Look, so you can see it evidenced all around you – even through your aloofness and privilege – look. Your seeing, dear reader *and your mindfulness* might have you intelligently contribute to a plan for our collective survival as solid as our individual household plans for escaping natural disasters. Arguably one of the most brilliant, prolific thinkers of the early 1900’s, a Black intellectual superstar, Dr. W.E.B. Dubois saw himself as “bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of them that live within the Veil...” We should afford ourselves and our own people no less indulgence in our lifetime. *Terry Howcott is a Master of Social Work, Lecturer, Activist, and Writer. She resides in Detroit, MI and can be reached at Terrylynnh@yahoo.com.*