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***Brighter Prospects?
Ms. Bush and White America's
Rhetoric of Limited Alternatives
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Guest Commentator***

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Most of us are by now familiar with Barbara Bush's assessment of the situation of poor evacuees from New Orleans transported to the Astrodome in Houston. Noting on American Public Media's radio program *Marketplace* that "so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway," the former first lady concluded, with a slight giggle, that their displacement from their homes "is working very well for them." In other words, according to Bush, because there are only two options for the poor, mostly African-American evacuees – poverty in New Orleans or life as an displaced person in the Astrodome – they should be content with, even grateful for, their changed circumstances.

Bush's remarks are, as many commentators have remarked, arrogant, classist, and racist. They are also nothing new. The sentiment she voices – what we might call the rhetoric of limited alternatives – has historically marred white Americans' discourse about African Americans. As it recurs, we discover whites' entrenched, troubling assumptions about black Americans and their place in the nation.

Consider, for example, the arguments of white members of the American Colonization Society (ACS) in the late 1820s. Founded in 1816, the ACS, whose predominantly white members included prominent politicians, slaveholders, and so-called reformers, proposed that African Americans should be encouraged to emigrate to a colony in Africa. Not surprisingly, most free blacks were vehemently opposed to the ACS for a variety of reasons: they wished to stay in the United States; they suspected that the removal of free people of color from the nation would shore up slavery, a belief reinforced by the membership of slaveholders in the organization; and they resented the racist rhetoric of the organization, which often portrayed free blacks as an unproductive or dangerous population who could never coexist peacefully with whites.

Many African Americans also worried that force or coercion might be used to remove them from the United States. John H. Kennedy, the (white) assistant to the ACS corresponding secretary, responded to these concerns in a series of articles he wrote for *Freedom's Journal*, the first African-American newspaper, in 1827. The ACS "compels no one to go," Kennedy pledged to black readers, "it offers no insult to those who

stay, nor after his arrival on the coast of Africa need any one remain, unless he find brighter prospects than those he has abandoned." A white ACS supporter writing under the name "Wilberforce" similarly assured *Freedom's Journal's* readers that the ACS uses "no coercion" toward "free coloured people," although he mused, "The poor slaves will, no doubt prefer Liberia to a slave-ship – or a slave plantation."

Beneath this formulation – Liberia or slavery – lie assumptions to which all too many white Americans ascribe. Whites often present options to people of color based not on what is good or desirable but simply on what is *better than* their current situation. And, of course, it is the oppression and neglect that these white leaders encourage and perpetuate that enable the opportunities to remain limited. If, as Kennedy suggested, there were "brighter prospects" for African Americans in Liberia, it was because he and other ACS supporters refused to offer more than restricted possibilities for them in the United States. As in Barbara Bush's bifurcated formulation, one option looks better than the other only because white leaders actively work against the only moral and positive alternative: to change government policies and racist institutions that foster oppression.

Apologists for slavery similarly relied on a rhetoric of limited alternatives. In the 1839 tract *Abolition a Seditious*, New England pamphleteer Calvin Colton considered whether the "*comparative condition*" of the "slaves in the United States" was "an improvement or deterioration" over the historical situation of "the African race." His estimation was that "that portion of the African race to be found in the United States, are actually better off than they would have been any where else, in all reasonable probability," and thus slaves had no claim to immediate emancipation. Kentucky politician and slaveholder Henry Clay noted in an 1847 speech the "philanthropic and consoling reflection, that the moral and physical condition of the African race in the United States, even in a state of slavery, is far better than it would have been if their ancestors had never been brought from their native land." Again, the limited alternatives: slavery or life in Africa. Again, the denial of responsibility for the conditions in Africa to which oppression in America is favorably compared, although Western exploitation and colonialism are their root causes.

More recently, opponents of reparations have marshaled the rhetoric of limited alternatives to silence those who call for restitution for slavery. In a 2001 interview on his television program *The O'Reilly Factor*, Fox News Channel's Bill O'Reilly presented the Reverend Al Dixon, an African-American minister and reparations supporter, with a shocking choice. After Dixon argued that the hardships faced by African Americans should not be compared to the experiences of other immigrants because they "didn't come here on [their] own," O'Reilly returned, "[R]everend, you can go back to Africa if you want to. I mean, you could go and repatriate back to the continent or anywhere. Not any country will take U. S. citizens, but African – African countries will." In other words, African Americans have narrow, second-rate options: leave the country or refrain from pressing their claims in the public sphere.

O'Reilly's erroneous choice of words – "go back," "repatriate" (not expatriate) – reveals another aspect of the rhetoric of limited alternatives. Like those who believed in the late 1820s that black Americans would readily abandon America for Liberia or those who defended slavery by proclaiming African Americans should compare their lives to those of Africans rather than those of other Americans, O'Reilly intimated that black Americans are not truly Americans. Barbara Bush did not propose that African Americans do not belong in the United States, but her glib formulation minimized their displacement, suggesting that those evacuated to the Superdome would have no problem with their new situation because they have no "real" homes. Just as many in the media initially referred to the evacuees from New Orleans as "refugees," a term that insinuated that they were foreigners, Bush revealed her view that African Americans are, in effect, without a permanent place in the nation.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, as many have aptly noted, Americans find ourselves faced with the consequences of our nation's racism and classism. The arrogance of the powerful and privileged in the face of the oppression and poverty of people of color is exposed. In her reliance on the rhetoric of limited

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alternatives, Barbara Bush has revealed the nature of the choices white Americans have, throughout our nation's history, offered to African Americans, with varying degrees of coercion, options that at best deny and at worst perpetuate the realities of oppression and racism. Unless we expand these narrow formulations, challenge those who present them, and seek true alternatives, no truly "brighter prospects" can be forthcoming.

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