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Think Piece
Race, Place, and Freedom:
A Katrina Classroom Memoir
by Paul Street

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"One of the most important, though most subtle and elusive, aspects of white supremacy," notes the radical black philosopher Charles W. Mills, "is the barrier it erects to a fair hearing. It is not merely," Mills adds, "that people of color are trying to make a case for the economic and juridico-political injustice of their treatment; it is that they are additionally handicapped in doing so by having to operate within a white discursive field." Within that biased field, Mills observes, "the framework of debate is not neutral: it is biased by dominant white cognitive patterns of structured ignorance, an overt or hidden white normativity so that at the basic factual level, many claims of people of color will just seem absurd, radically incongruent with the sanitized picture white people have of U.S. history." It doesn't help, Mills adds, that "the physical segregation of white and nonwhite populations" creates "a segregation of experience" that reinforces "radically divergent pictures of the world. Typically white and typically black realities – in terms of everyday experience with government bureaucracies, the police, and the job market, housing, and so forth – are simply not the same."

After reading this passage from Mills' provocative book *From Class to Race: Essays in White Marxism and Black Radicalism* (New York, NY: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003) the other day, I flashed back to my most depressing classroom experience ever. It took place in the tragic aftermath of what I sometimes call "Tropical Storm and Societal Failure Katrina." Only days before, the nation had been treated to a series of graphic televised images displaying poor and black New Orleans residents stuck on the roofs of their flooded homes, begging for assistance. Millions of television viewers saw who got left behind in a toxic watery Hell in one of the nation's great cities after August 28, 2005, when federal emergency officials warned George W. Bush that New Orleans' under-funded levees would be overwhelmed.

Largely at my instigation, an American History survey course I was teaching at Northern Illinois University became engaged in an obviously hyper-racialized tragedy in New Orleans. As the debate proceeded, it became evident that most of my predominantly white and suburban Chicago-area students could grasp no compelling explanation for the terrible scenes on their television than poor blacks' alleged laziness, stupidity, and self-destructiveness.

"What," one incredulous Caucasian student demanded to know, "were they doing there with a level 5 hurricane bearing down?!" "You can't help people who won't help themselves," another white student volunteered. "It's not white people's fault that some people who happened to be white had enough sense to get out of there and other people who happen to be black didn't."



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Upon hearing these lovely opinions, some of the six black students sitting in the lecture hall rolled their eyes. Others in that small group stared at their desks. All of these black students were from segregated Chicago, where three-fourths of blacks live in 22 disproportionately impoverished and depressed neighborhoods that are 90 percent or more black. The broadly prosperous but highly unequal city of Chicago has 77 neighborhoods.

When the first white student spoke, I had just finished arguing that the images from New Orleans were the all-too natural and predictable outcome of numerous venerable structurally and ideologically entrenched problems and disparities of race, class, power, policy, and place. The related and intimately interconnected difficulties I discussed included black residential hyper-segregation, an all-too anti-public transportation system built around the ubiquitous and climate-heating (and thereby hurricane-intensifying) private automobile, endemic economic racism, authoritarian bureaucratic maneuvering (including the marginalizing incorporation of the Federal Emergency Management Agency into the massive new Department of Homeland Security), related to the imperialist "war on terror," white-driven metropolitan housing "sprawl" (significantly responsible for the loss of wetlands that reduce the power of tropical storm surges), and the massive diversion of public resources from investment in social and ecological health (including wetlands preservation, levee maintenance, and poverty reduction programs) to pay for imperial militarism and plutocratic tax cuts.

Along the way, I had quoted from a recent front-page article in the New York Times, where reporter Jason DeParle observed that "race and class were the unspoken markers of who got out and who got stuck" in flooded New Orleans. "What a shocked world saw exposed in New Orleans last week," DeParle said, "wasn't just a broken levee. It was a chasm of race and class at once familiar and startlingly new, laid bare in a setting where they suddenly amounted to matters of life and death. Hydrology joined sociology through the story

line, from the settling of the flood-prone city, where well-to-do white people lived on the high ground, to its frantic abandonment." Since the 1970s, DeParle noted, New Orleans "has become unusually segregated," so that "the white middle-class is all but gone, moved north across Lake Ponchartrain or west to Jefferson Parish – home of [former Ku Klux Klan leader] David Duke" In a society where the atomistic auto trumps public transit, De Parle noted, "evacuation was especially difficult for the more than one third of black New Orleans households that lacked a car."

Katrina's tragic aftermath, I told students, provided a graphic illustration of the skewed and savagely color-coded ways that America's social and spatial arrangements apportion "freedom" – a term that George W. Bush uses frequently but never bothers to define and whose limits and contested and complex meanings he never seems to appreciate.

I related it all to the core idea in the textbook assigned for the class: Eric Foner's *Give Me Liberty! An American History* (2005). "No idea," Foner says in the preface to that text, "is more fundamental to Americans' sense of themselves as individuals and as a nation than freedom. The central term in our political language, freedom – or liberty, with which it is almost always used interchangeably – is deeply embedded in the record of our history and language of everyday life." But "the very universality of the idea of freedom," Foner argues, "can be misleading. Freedom," he counsels, "is not a fixed, timeless category with a single unchanging definition. Indeed, the history of the United States is, in part, a story of debates, disagreements, and struggles over freedom." Furthermore: "over the course of our history, American freedom has been both a mythical ideal – a living truth for millions of Americans, a cruel mockery for others." During their contentious history, Foner tells students, Americans have engaged in repeated epic conflicts over "(1) the meanings of freedom; (2) the social conditions that make freedom possible; and (3) the boundaries of freedom that determine who is entitled to enjoy freedom and who is not." Katrina, I suggested, was an opportune moment to reflect on the living relevance of Foner's analysis, with special reference to boundaries relating to race.

It didn't work. My efforts to get the classroom's white majority to think about the role of systemic racial, residential, socioeconomic and transportation or mobility disadvantages in making escape unlikely and even impossible for many black New Orleans residents were to little avail. The concept of masses of human beings being precariously ensnared in at once sociologically and topographically [deadly] space by authoritarian sociopolitical circumstances related to skin color was simply too alien and bizarre for the majority to entertain.

I had run head-first into a "white discursive" force field composed of "dominant white cognitive patterns of structured ignorance" that made "the claims of people of color" seem "absurd and radically incongruent" with common sense.

When I asked students if they would have broken into a grocery store to survive had they somehow been caught in New Orleans when the levees gave way, a white female student I'll call Rebecca swore she would "never violate property rights under any circumstances." When a black female student expressed disbelief and asked "so what would you have done?" the young white lady stammered, saying "I just would have kept walking." Another black student pressed her: "What about the heat and the thirst and the rumors of supplies at the Convention Center. The sun was beating down. And what about what Professor Street said about people maybe being turned back when they tried to cross bridges into the suburbs?" "Well," the white student said, with tears starting to well up in her eyes, "I don't know, but I just wouldn't have gotten myself in that situation in the first place."

"In other words," the first black student said with unconcealed disgust, "you all wouldn't have been born black and poor in New Orleans." "Bulls Eye," I said to myself, as the class's black students laughed and nodded their heads in knowing approval.

The white majority protested, changing the subject to what struck them as the most relevant part of the story from the Crescent City: the animal recklessness, personal irresponsibility, and general cultural failure of all the black "looters," "killers," and "rapists" running loose in New Orleans because the storm had disabled the thin blue police–state line that keeps savage non–white inner–city residents under proper control. The white students seemed particularly influenced by the media's focus on evacuation hold–outs and the efforts of public authorities to convince evacuation laggards to leave their homes. This media narrative encouraged a marvelous reality inversion, for the real and far more statistically significant story was that most of the trapped New Orleans residents had long been stuck – largely in accord with public authority's policies – on the wrong sides of their nation and metropolitan area's geographical, social, and ecological divides. They had been left behind against their wishes by government's not–so "benign neglect." Later the same week, the white female student visited me in my office to complain bitterly of how she had been victimized in the classroom.

After class, my teaching assistant Jeff (a fellow–leftist and former union organizer) and I headed to a local tavern to drown our memories of the above proceedings in a sea of beer. A 25–year–old white male Katrina evacuee with a thick Cajun accent asked to join our table after overhearing our discussion of the day's classroom occurrences. He had just gotten off a Greyhound Bus. We listened as he told us that he'd seen New Orleans police officers looting numerous retail outlets and verified nascent Internet rumors about inner city residents being turned away by force at suburban bridges.

Reflecting later on the unintended consequences of my effort to use Katrina as a teachable moment in the living history of the nation's troubled class and race relations, it struck me that five years of working in and around the relatively progressive bubble of the black and urban racial justice communities had dulled me to how well the nation's dominant ideological institutions were working in the white–suburban majority.

The brilliant and prolific left sociologist C. Wright Mills once said that the core purpose of meaningful analytical work on social and political affairs was to make relevant connections between individual pain and structural inequality. The point of such work, by Mills' reckoning, was to de–atomize personal difficulty and relate it to broader contextualizing forces of class, race, bureaucracy, and unjust authority.

The dominant authoritarian and corporate neoliberal ideology of our time works in the opposite direction. It tells us to separate the personal from the societal. It expects us to think of ourselves and others as autonomous sole actors – a veritable mass of self–produced Robinson Crusoes (with Crusoe's slave Friday deleted from the formulation), each living on his or her own island of possessive–individualist economic rationality and "personal responsibility." If some of the Crusoes happen to be extravagantly wealthy and powerful while a much larger number of individuals are poor and defenseless, dominant ideology tells us, this is because of characteristics internal to each personally self–made (or self–unmade) and self–responsible (or self–irresponsible) individual. By the standard common–sense conventional wisdom imposed by hegemonic white ideology, America is the land of "equal opportunity" where every individual is free to climb as far as his or her peculiar combination of ability and drive will take them. And if a disproportionate number of people in the privileged category happen to be white and a disproportionate share of the folks in the under–privileged category happen to be black, many whites and some blacks believe in the post–Civil Rights era, that's simply an unfortunate indication that too many blacks lack the personal drive and/or innate ability exemplified by such virtuous and hard–working Americans of African ancestry as Condoleezza Rice, Colin Powell, and Oprah Winfrey. It's proof that large numbers of blacks are personally, culturally, and/or (in the most toxic variant of not–always–so–"New Age" Racism) biologically unfit to individually advance (as a larger share of whites have supposedly done) in a noble, color–blind nation where all of us are equally free to turn our personal islands into either a Gold Coast or a Slum.

At the same time, my misbegotten experiment in shaking up the history classroom reminded me that one of

the many prices racial apartheid imposes on black America is the way it renders so much black experience invisible and unintelligible to the politically dominant (excessively so in a "winner-take-all" electoral system) white majority. Part of the explanation for why so many of my young white students were such easy prey for the victim-blaming and racially vicious "conservative" framing of Katrina is found in their simple physical and experiential ignorance, partly unintentional thanks to residential race apartheid, of what life is like in isolated, all-black neighborhoods like New Orleans' Ninth Ward or Chicago's Riverdale – a South Side neighborhood where more than half the children lived at less than half the government's notoriously inadequate poverty level at the peak of the record-setting economic expansion of the 1990s.

The savage invisibility that racial separatism enforces on black pain and struggle is part of why Martin Luther King warned sternly against the emerging pattern, already well underway in his day, of urban "white flight." "I see nothing in the world," King wrote in 1967, "more dangerous than Negro cities ringed by white suburbs."

Having led predominantly white and suburban students on a handful of "sociological tours" of Chicago's neighborhoods (rich, poor, Latino, black, and white), my sense is that many young Caucasians seem genuinely and only partly intentionally ignorant of racial segregation's extent and what it means for their fellow Americans who happen to have been born poor and black and living in your nearest black inner city or suburban inner-ring ghetto. Many of the Caucasian youth I've taken in and out of inner-city black America are quite progressively influenced by what they see and hear. How long does the positive impact last? How deep does it go? And how much can such temporary border-crossing do to counter the aforementioned white-cognitive wall of indifference and ignorance (both intentional and unintentional)? I really can't say. Still, I do highly recommend the development of programs and activities (e.g. suburban and inner-city school exchange-days) designed both to let white kids learn more about life in the black inner city and to let black youth develop a sharper sense of just how completely they are being ripped off by racial apartheid in the "land of the free."

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