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Delna K. Buhariwalla
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'Race' and Class in the New York Times Coverage of Hurricane Katrina

by

Delna K. Buhariwalla

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through Communication Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts
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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues for the necessity of a class-based analysis in examining the dynamics of 'race' and class as they played out in the *New York Times* media coverage of Hurricane Katrina. The importance of class as a structural relation is emphasized to draw attention to the larger context of the neoliberal capitalism which tailors the way in which 'race' and class are experienced. Using the tools of critical discourse analysis, the way in which issues of 'race' and class were handled in the coverage of Hurricane Katrina is analysed as a way of illustrating theorist Adolf Reed's point that 'class' was the factor which determined who survived and who perished when Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast. The work also argues that neoliberal ideology and dominant class interests continue to shape the reconstruction of New Orleans.

DEDICATION

For my family.

To my mom, Sanober, for your unwavering strength and wisdom.

You continue to inspire and nurture me from miles away.

To my dad, Khurshed, for always holding me up.

You make me want to strive harder and be better.

Finally, to those of you who have become family over the years.

Some of you, I have grown up with, and some have entered my life more recently. Each of you, in your own way, has shown me unconditional love and solidarity. You challenge me to remain honest and give me the courage to imagine. Thank you, so much, for teaching me that faltering was not an option.

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INTRODUCTION

In a recent commentary examining the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the political discourse which it generated, Adolph Reed, Jr., an African-American professor of political science, made the following observations:

The abstract, moralizing patter about how and whether “race matters” or “the role of race” is appealing partly because it doesn't confront the roots of the bipartisan neoliberal policy regime. It's certainly true that George W. Bush and his minions are indifferent to, or contemptuous of, black Americans in general. They're contemptuous of *anyone* who is not part of the ruling class. Although Bush and his pals are no doubt small-minded bigots in many ways, the racial dimension stands out so strikingly in part because race is now the most familiar—and apparently for many progressives the most powerful—language of social justice . . . [but] Class will almost certainly turn out to be a better predictor than race of who was able to evacuate, who drowned, who was left to fester in the Superdome or on overpasses, who is stuck in shelters in Houston or Baton Rouge, or who is randomly dispersed to the four winds. I'm certain that class is also a better predictor than race of whose emotional attachments to place will be factored into plans for reconstructing the city . . . Race is too blunt an analytical tool even when inequality is expressed in glaring racial disparities. Its meanings are too vague (Reed, Jr. 2005 [a], 6, 8).

I have quoted Reed at considerable length since his words seem to address the crux of what I explore in my thesis—namely, the interplay of race and class, and

specifically, the way in which these categories played out in recent media coverage of Hurricane Katrina. Reed's provocative comments invoke debates which have long animated progressive social and political thought. These debates that deal with issues of class versus identity (in this case, 'race') and heterogeneity versus sameness have been couched in various ways and at various levels (philosophical, political, and cultural) but the concept of 'difference' has often been at the heart of such contestations.

In some cases, positions which have valorized difference have tended to displace the concept of class and class analysis from the theoretical and political canvas. While many of these debates have taken place in the realm of theory, the dynamics of difference, specifically 'race' and class and their intersectionality in the case of Hurricane Katrina provide a concrete example for further exploration of these debates and their implications.

I explore the dynamics of 'race' and class with a specific focus on Hurricane Katrina and investigate Reed's claims about the necessity of class analysis. I further attempt to demonstrate that Reed's assertions about the importance of a class perspective are instructive in light of the issues raised by the Katrina tragedy and in terms of their broader implications.

The following questions animate my research: Does the establishment of a class-based analysis necessarily ignore the issue of 'race'? Does the way in which 'race' is invoked in many mainstream media discourses obscure the issue of class? How does the way in which we view the relationship between 'race' and class inform our understanding of a class-analysis? A thorough understanding of these questions necessitates an

investigation of some of the debates within the existing literature that deal with the 'race'-class problematic and which address debates regarding difference 'race'/class and their ramifications for strategies of resistance.

Chapter One reviews some of the theoretical discussions that have been important in shaping the debate about 'race' and class. I explore some of the key issues raised by several theorists regarding the issue of 'race' and class, the dynamic between these categories, and their significance in informing struggles for justice. Neoliberal ideologies and their influence on media coverage are discussed in Chapter Two along with an introduction of New Orleans as a site of struggle. An understanding of the neoliberal agenda is necessary in order to fully grasp the ideological context in which media coverage about Hurricane Katrina (particularly in major mainstream newspapers like The New York Times) is produced. An explicit discussion of the ideas and values (that are upheld by neoliberal thought) makes it easier not only to detect different elements of this ideological framework, it also confronts the false perception that these ideas cannot be changed—that they are natural. And this realization—that change is, in fact, possible and that there is nothing 'natural' about injustice—is a crucial building block in any struggle for social justice.

I provide a brief overview of the political economy of New Orleans to reveal the socio-economic conditions of the area at the time of Hurricane Katrina's arrival. Chapter Three introduces a description of the methodological approach, Critical Discourse Analysis, used in my analysis and explains why this approach is pertinent to my study. It discusses some key concepts including framing, omission, context model, etc. that are used in the analysis. This chapter also contains my examination of the media coverage of

Hurricane Katrina in the NY Times and a discussion of reconstruction efforts that took place in post-Katrina New Orleans to illustrate their adherence to neoliberal capitalist structures. For the purposes of clarity, I have divided the analysis into subsections that correspond to the major themes discussed in the theoretical discussions in Chapter One. The concluding chapter re-emphasizes the importance of a class-based approach in light of the preceding discussions.

CHAPTER I

Based on several sources I have consulted, many (cf. Reed, 2005 [a]; Meyerson, 2000; San Juan, 2002) have suggested that greater attention should be paid to the category of class in discussions of social justice. However, as Reed points out “race is now the most familiar—and apparently for many progressives the most powerful—language of social justice” (6). Himani Bannerji echoes this claim when she notes that “identity” is now used as an *adjective* for several political projects and that it has put the idea of “experience in the center stage of politics” (1995, 17). For Bannerji and Reed, it is clear that the language used to communicate and negotiate ideas of social justice prioritizes issues of ‘identity’ and ‘difference’ (Bannerji, 1995; Reed, 2005 [a]). Consequently, the discourse of social justice proceeds devoid of any substantive discussions of class or class-analysis.

Describing the problematic relation that movements based on identity have with the ‘Left’, Eric Hobsbawm urges the Left to reject a politics of identity that argues for exclusive concern with one’s own group and which contends that one’s particular group can effectively solve its problems in isolation (1996, 39). He points out that the 1960’s saw the emergence of the “most obvious form of identity politics—but not the only one—namely ethnicity” (39). During that period, identity politics began to assume center stage in the political arena, shifting the focus from class to identity and difference as the principle factor around which to organize for change.

The postmodern valorization of difference views difference as absolute, and as such, takes difference to an extreme limit where it becomes an *impediment* to a collective struggle for justice. This discourse which valorizes difference must be viewed critically

so that we can move beyond the mere celebration of difference to a point where we are able to create the conditions of our own choosing in which these differences are allowed to flourish. Furthermore, many of the theorists that I discuss below make the argument that though specificities are important and must be acknowledged, it is crucially important to advance an idea of commonality across these specificities. Contrary to postmodern thought, one does not occur at the expense of the other. Honouring specificities does *not* immediately mean that the idea of commonality needs to be abandoned. The shift from class to identity, or, the move from a Marxist approach centered on class relations to postmodern politics of difference is explored below.

1.1 Marxism and Post-Marxism: 'Race' and Class

One of the chief reasons often cited for the shift away from class is the rejection of the “totalizing” and “essentialist” claims *presumably* associated with a class-based approach (San Juan, 2003). This rejection of totalizing claims ushers in a politics that privileges the specificity of identity and difference. For a more detailed understanding of this shift, it is helpful to consider the work of scholars who have identified the late 1960s as a pivotal and influential moment in “leftist” social theory and politics which paved the way for the consequent shift towards postmodern and post-Marxist thought with its glorification of identity and difference. As postmodernism waged its war on totality, it ushered in a politics that privileged the concept of difference over sameness.

Barbara Epstein observes how postmodernism quickly became equated with the intellectual Left (1997, 3). She traces the historical development of postmodernism back to the political events of May 1968, particularly those which took place in France, and marks the French Communist party's alliance with the authorities and its betrayal of the

student movement as a turning point which led to a sense of disillusionment among many on the French Left. This, she suggests, led to the almost wholesale abandonment of Marxism among French intellectuals which subsequently shaped the development of postmodernism through to its entry into North America in the 1970's and early 1980's. Epstein points out that at the time, the appeal of postmodernism had something to do with the “cultural and political currents with which it was associated” (1997, 12).

She describes the work of the French postmodern heavyweight, Michel Foucault, as providing the grounds for “shifting the focus of radical analyses away from macrostructures such as the economy and the state, and toward daily life, ideology, social relations and culture” and explains that Foucault's view of the state as a repressive power and his alliance with marginalized groups “made sense at a time when radical struggles were being led by groups peripheral to mainstream culture and power relations” (1997, 11). A key point to note is that postmodern theories attempted to speak to the aspects of experience that were more relevant to daily life and which other theories (i.e. Marxism) presumably did not address.

Epstein clarifies that even within an academic world which seemed to embrace the instability of postmodernism, there were a few academics that were apprehensive about its fascination with “processes of flux, fragmentation, the disenchantment and draining of meaning from social life” (1997, 21). She cites a well known work, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* that basically argues that there is no “automatic connection between class and politics, or between the working class and socialism” (21). But she adds that the absence of an “automatic connection” does not mean that there is no connection *at all* between the two and Epstein urges her

readers to remain critical of Laclau and Mouffe's extreme "social constructionist position" (26). While it is important to acknowledge that some of the critiques of Marxism regarding its treatment of difference were justified, this is still not a sufficient reason for the wholesale rejection of Marxism as is advocated by postmodernism (Harvey, 2000).

The postmodern understanding of Marxism assumes that "class" is an essentialist concept. This *incorrect* understanding of class enables post-Marxists of various stripes to characterize Marxism as an outdated approach that cannot fully grasp and/or appreciate the concept of difference. Postmodern thought assumes that humans are mere objects of discourse; that there is no shared *agency* among humans that can unite them in struggle. McLaren reminds us that any theory which undermines the "very notion of human agency and capacities of self-reflection, self-determination and self-making" (McLaren cited in Scatamburlo-D'Annibale, 2006, 31) by advancing the idea that humans are "little more than entities which float aimlessly in a sea of ever-proliferating signifiers" (Scatamburlo-D'Annibale, 2006, 31) is ultimately destructive because it dissolves the potential for humans to engage in political action.

Rejecting a class based approach meant, for postmodernists, throwing the *entire* concept of sameness out the window and privileging specific differences as a way to resist the *so-called* homogenizing influence of a class-based approach. However, the essentialist understanding of class—which is the basis for the postmodern rejection of a class-based approach—is *not* in accordance with Marxist formulations. Scatamburlo-D'Annibale explains that in efforts to reject the concept of essentialism, postmodern theorists have conflated the idea of "human nature" with "human attributes" that include

qualities such as “affective responses, capacities for abstract thought, the capacities to experience joy, pain, etc, and the capacity for self-reflection” (2006, 30). For Marxist theorists that I have considered in my work (Meyerson, 2000; Young, 2006; San Juan, 2003), issues of difference are *always and already implicated* in a Marxist approach. Thus, one might question why postmodernism, with its fixation on the politics of difference, would take away from difference the very factor that difference needs to develop freely—an acknowledgement of the human essence of self-determination.

Jeff Noonan addresses this point in his discussion of the politics of difference and critical humanism (2003). If humans are not agents that have the capacity to exert control over our circumstances and to create history; if, as postmodernism asserts, we are awash in a sea of differences and products of external influences over which we exert no control—what is the point of freedom? What could we possibly fight for? And, more importantly, if we are not active subjects, *how* could we wage any type of struggle in the first place? As Noonan points out, “...the oppressed, no matter what their name, assert against the structures of oppression not just their name but their capacity *to name* themselves” (104). Thus, while the name of a particular group—the identity of the group—is important, it is the expression of this name, the *capacity* to determine this name, that distinguishes humans as a species. Invoking the work of Marx, he points out that what is distinct about humans is our capacity to “determine ourselves and to alter reality” and in the process “transforming external reality, we also, and fundamentally, transform ourselves” (Noonan 2003, 134).

Postmodernists carry their critique to an extreme which, ultimately, defeats their original aim to free differences. The struggle to free differences must presume the ability

to do so—something that is only possible if we acknowledge humans as beings that have the ability to affect change (Noonan, 134). This idea points to a central contradiction in postmodernism—to scream the value of pluralism and, in the same breath, take away the human capacity to develop this pluralism. It would seem that postmodernism encourages critique for the sake of critique. No longer concerned with the actual work of creating a free society, it frolics in the sphere of imagination and play. Epstein reminds us that this playing in imagination is a luxury that not everyone can afford, bringing in a material dimension to a politics that seems to rest on the callous acceptance of its own privilege. Some of us are restricted by limitations that exist right here in our material realities, and it seems ironic that the very voices that can vehemently deny the relevance of material conditions in our lives seem to be those who might not have to worry about the shocking material realities that have become the norm for the majority of the world's population.

Hobsbawm contends that while specificity is important, even necessary in some instances for the success of a particular movement, it must be placed within a larger context in which success of a collective struggle depends on the ability to forge links between these specificities (1996). The early movements of the Left were held together by shared dreams and common aims across the different groups—so that who you were, your identity, did not determine your involvement in the movement (Hobsbawm, 1996, 42).

The Left cannot have identity politics as its base because the project (of the Left) takes into consideration a struggle for the future of all human beings, and not only the advancement of a specific struggle. Meyerson discusses the issue of building a movement on the basis of shared identity of the members versus on the basis of a shared

cause (2000). He argues that a complete rejection of the notion of sameness in favor of specific movements is harmful to the struggle for emancipation because the focus on specificity represents only a “temporal and situational unity that dissolves when there is no more common enemy” (44). Noonan further states that regardless of how specific the struggles are “they always, and must, assert against the oppressor what the oppressor denies”—the capacity for self-determination when the human being realizes a situation as oppressive, that is, when one realizes his/her humanity as a self-determining being (2003,130).

Eagleton argues that “the production of differences must be tied in a fundamental way to a shared human capacity to produce these differences” (122). Difference, according to Eagleton, is a feature of our species-being (1996, 121). But differences cannot develop as long as we are subjected to forms of capitalist exploitation. Eagleton indicts the cultural left in the West as being oblivious to “that power which is the invisible color of daily life itself” so that it would seem as though “...every other form of the oppressive system—state, media, patriarchy, racism, neo-colonialism—can be readily debated, but not the *one which so often sets the long-term agenda for all of these matters*, or is at the very least implicated with them to their roots” (1996, 23). The ‘power’ to which Eagleton refers is, of course, capitalism.

1.2 Culture-Political Economy Divide

There is a crucial point to note in discussions about postmodernism and the way in which it celebrates categories of difference, specifically ‘race’ over class. The tendency of postmodern thought to place primary importance on ‘race’ carries with it the presumption that ‘race’, along with other categories of difference, *can* and do exist

autonomously—as categories that are separated from the idea of class and capitalist social relations. Thus, if postmodernism privileges categories that are associated with culture and simultaneously rejects claims of class analysis, it assumes that the realm of culture is separate from the realm of political economy. But this premise, on which postmodernist thought is structured, is ultimately a *false* one. As Bannerji states, “we have now arrived at the slogan of ‘identity *or* class’ as two mutually exclusive forms of politics” (1995, 19).

Scholars whose work is more geared towards a class analysis have a critical stance against this perceived divide and claim that such a separation between class and identity (i.e. ‘race’) is not indicative of our lived experience and, as such, cannot adequately address the conditions in which this experience occurs. Moreover, several theorists (Reed, 2005 [a]; Meyerson, 2002; Bannerji, 1995; Young, 2006) have argued that a class based analysis would necessarily involve a *simultaneous* struggle against racism and that the cultural and the economic interact and inform each other in a class-based approach. This is important for my study since it informs the relationship between the category of ‘race’—which is typically associated with the cultural realm, and class, which is associated with the economic and material realms.

Meyerson notes that one of the main critiques of a class-based perspective is that it presumably relegates the politics of difference (in this case, the category of ‘race’) to a secondary status and that a class-based analysis undermines the experience and identities of people of colour (2000). He contends that while this is an important claim, ultimately, it is one that is false and misconstrues what it means to hold class as a primary constituent of social relations. Meyerson enthusiastically argues that to posit class as a

primary determining category that structures the way in which we live does *not* undermine issues of ‘race’. The primacy of class necessitates that the economic and the political *must be considered inseparable*; to address one without drawing a relation to the other is to reproduce a false dichotomy that does not allow for a thorough understanding of their dynamic. Such an assertion speaks directly to one of the main critiques of Marxism which claims that it does not consider the concept of difference.

The “‘race’/class problematic” is also discussed in the work of E. San Juan Jr. who notes that “given the historical specificity of U.S. capitalism, class struggle cannot be theorized adequately outside the conjunctures of the racial formation in which it acquires valence” (2002, 33). He states that a classic judgment of a Marxist approach to racism and racial conflict is “summed up in reflex epithets such as ‘economistic,’ ‘reductionist,’ ‘productivist,’ ‘deterministic,’ and cognate terms” (2003, 4). A consideration of this judgment might “dispel the ideological hold of the paradigm supposed to remedy the simplification, the intersection of race, class and gender” but this line of thought “commits the other error of reducing class, and for that matter race and gender, to nominal aspects of personal identity without any clear historical or materialist grounding” and ultimately makes the “solution worse than the problem” (4). It seems that, for San Juan Jr., an analysis of the dynamic between ‘race’ and class where class is reduced to simply another category of identity serves to perpetuate the problem. He advocates for an historical materialist approach, a view which seems to align with Reed’s (2005 [a]) assertion of the necessity of a class perspective as well as Meyerson’s (2000) discussion about the primacy of class.

It is important to note that understanding ‘race’ as a social product does not make

it any less 'real'; it does not invalidate the experience of 'race' or the horrors of racism (Gilroy, 2000). But it does beg a consideration of the deeper structures that condition the way this experience is shaped; and these discussions will remain marginalized as long as the discussion about inequality proceeds only through the language of 'race'.

Scatamburlo-D'Annibale and McLaren's discussion of the concept of experience in relation to difference is worth quoting at length.

... we advance a framework that seeks to make connections between seemingly isolated situations and/or particular experiences by exploring how they are constituted in, and circumscribed by, broader historical and social conditions....Experiential understandings, in and of themselves, are initially suspect because dialectically they constitute a unity of opposites—they are at once unique, specific, and personal but also thoroughly partial, social, and the products of historical forces about which the individuals may know little or nothing. A rich description of immediate experience can be an appropriate and indispensable point of departure, but such an understanding can easily become an isolated difference prison unless it transcends the immediate perceived point of oppression, confronts the social system in which it is rooted, and expands into complex and multifaceted analysis (of forms of social mediation) that is capable of mapping out the general organization of social relations. (Scatamburlo-D'Annibale and McLaren, 2003, 159).

Issues related to identity must be situated within a larger historical and political context (Bannerji, 1995). She cites Marx's work in which he discusses the concept of "a sense of self or being, and the world that being inhabits" (1995) and uses his observations to inform her discussion of identity and class. In advocating for a historical materialist approach, she notes the importance of trying to provide a reflective or dialectical understanding of 'identity' and 'difference' in relation to the historical and social organization of capital and class (18). Such an approach, Bannerji claims, would challenge the assumption that identity and class exist as autonomous categories and develop an understanding of 'class-relations' in which the categories of class and 'race' inform each other; enabling an understanding of social relations in which, "there is no

class without race” (33).

As Scatamburlo-D’Annibale and McLaren state, a historical materialist approach enables an understanding of how “forms of oppression” that are based on “categories of difference” are not autonomous from class relations but “rather constitute the ways in which oppression is lived/experienced” in the context of a class-based system (2003, 158). Further, a historical materialist approach also illuminates the way in which “all forms of oppression function” under the all-encompassing umbrella of capitalism (Scatamburlo-D’Annibale and McLaren, 2003, 158).

In his commentary, Reed clearly suggests that racialized understandings often “obscure the deeper reality that lies beneath the manifest racial disparities” (2005 [a], 6). He paraphrases historian Barbara Fields who points out that the class contradictions of capitalism are regularly expressed through the language of ‘race.’ Fields’ claim echoes the contentions of other theorists including San Juan, Jr. who argues that race too often “conceals the predatory system of class relations” (2002, 59). Thus, a view that the problems faced by African-Americans are *internal* serves to naturalize racism and direct attention away from an analysis of the material conditions that structure these problems.

A politics of identity that focuses only on notions of difference without paying attention to larger structural issues of history and class relations will advance a politics of resistance that will remain ‘within the terms of already existing politics’ (Bannerji, 1995, 36). Identity, she explains, must be understood by integrating ideas of difference and class—identity must be *historicized*. Similarly, class, if it is not to be used only as an abstract analytical tool, must be understood in relation to concrete social relations that concretize forms of difference (34). It is this kind of reflexivity, this association, which

will create “actionable names for a people which are capable of being transformed into a political-cultural identity” (38). Young clarifies that ‘race’ is implicated in the historic and continuous class struggle to determine the ratio of surplus value and represents “not just a cultural or political category as many critics attest to, but it represents an historic apparatus for the production, maintenance, and legitimating of the inequalities of wage-labor” (2006,19). Meyerson echoes Fields in her argument that ‘race’ is not an explanatory category, noting that “race doesn't explain racism” (2000, 24). He maintains that racial oppression as well as class oppression results from processes of class rule in the context of class struggle.

1.3 A Return to a Class-Based Approach

Terry Eagleton points to the power of *capital* as this *invisible color of daily life*, and it is noteworthy that he signals the power of capital as ‘invisible’ (1996). Capital, with its effects being experienced in every realm of human experience, seems to go completely unnoticed. It is *naturalized* even though the obvious effects of this power within the capitalist framework are rampant across society. This was apparent in my analysis of the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina, which immediately pointed out that the evacuation order given prior to the hurricane did not take into consideration the economic realities of those who did not have the ability to evacuate. The inference to “ability” here implies that some residents lacked the *economic* ability to evacuate. An examination of economic ability and access to resources, or lack thereof, in determining the conditions of residents that did not have the ability to evacuate necessitates an examination of larger structural issues that helped to create this reality.

The pervasive effects of poverty profoundly influence what resources the poor

have and do not have access to. Issues such as academic success for children in poor households (New Orleans had a 40 percent illiteracy rate), access to a healthcare system (nearly 18.8 percent of the population in New Orleans did not have any health insurance compared to the national average of 15.5 percent), unstable employment and the *kind* of service sector jobs available to the population. For example, the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans which was surrounded by the Industrial Canal to its West and the Southern Railway railroad and the Florida Avenue Canal to its north is an area which was “symptomatic of the geographical isolation on which concentrated poverty feeds” (Dyson 2006, 10). 36.4 percent of the residents of Lower Ninth lived below the poverty level compared to 27.9 percent overall in Orleans Parish. After Hurricane Betsy in 1965 which left most of the Lower Ninth in water, the neighbourhood declined drastically. In a description that is strikingly similar to the events that followed in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Dyson says that in the aftermath of Betsy, “many residents didn’t receive adequate loans or other financial aid to help rebuild the neighbourhood” and eventually the residents left the neighbourhood and “several commercial and industrial businesses soon followed” (2006, 11).

The link between ‘race’ and class is glaring and not something that can be understood simplistically within the context of institutional racism. Though that link is and must be acknowledged, it is only the start of our discussions, not the end. The roots of class within the capitalist class system which depends on the persistence of this racism must be acknowledged. In asking whether it is race or class that “determines the status of poor blacks,” Dyson (2006) says that any dialogue that seeks to address this issue cannot address one without also addressing the other and examining the intersections and

interactions between the two. There is no doubt that race played a role in Katrina's aftermath for as Dyson points out the effects of concentrated poverty do not "victimize poor whites in the same way as it does poor blacks" (2006, 145). The racial inequities show up in the percentage of poor people that did not have access to cars pre-Katrina: 17 percent of poor whites had no access to cars compared to 53 percent of poor blacks. Dyson points out that it is important to acknowledge the effects of white privilege, or, the way in which whiteness brings with it certain privileges so that the effects of race "make class hurt more" (145).

Joel Wendland contends that it is absolutely necessary to understand how "class" works within a capitalist framework rather than merely including as part of the trinity "race, class, and gender" since the latter formulation tends to reduce class to effects such as income, education, status, and attitudes. This sort of reductive understanding is inadequate as it equates and therefore limits 'class' to one's identity so that class becomes synonymous with income, status, or education (Wendland, 2006).

In *Capital* Vol. III, Marx points to the "non-class factors" that influence the way in which class appears (Wendland, 2006). Thus, there are other non-economic factors that "affect class, how it functions, what effects it has on the individuals living it out" and 'race' is certainly one of these factors. Elaborating on Marx, Wendland states that "certain non-economic factors cause class to operate in different ways under historically specific conditions" so that the lived experience of class is specific to each society. Class must be viewed as an unequal relationship of power through which the capitalist mode of production is maintained and further accelerated. In this light, class can be seen as the "engine of the whole system" (Wendland, 2006).

'Race' is a socio-political construction that is produced out of the "raw materials furnished by class relations, the history of class conflicts, and the vicissitudes of colonial/capitalist expansion and the building of imperial hegemony" (San Juan 2003, 26). It operates dialectically to make distinctions in wage labor "within and outside the metropolitan power" and also functions to reproduce relations of domination that are then made to appear *natural*. Class must be understood as a "conceptual category designating a relationship of exploitation;" it must be understood as *relational* to "class conflict" and the historically specific struggle of groups in society that are divided by unequal property relations (San Juan 2005, 15).

Gregory Meyerson, in his exploration of the dynamics of 'race' and class in relation to the practice of slavery and its racialized dimensions, argues that a strictly racialized understanding of slavery (in terms of the skin color of the slaves) "legitimizes class rule by muting the class question" (2000, 11). He quotes Ted Allen who states that "it was only because 'race' consciousness superseded class consciousness that the continental plantation bourgeoisie was able to achieve and maintain the degree of social control necessary to proceeding with capital accumulation on the basis of chattel bond-labor" (2000,11). These assertions seem to imply that the discourse of 'race', and the language of 'race' which often informs discussions of social justice, serve to cloak the underlying reality of class relations in a capitalist society. Discussions that aim to understand the way in which 'race' operates within modern capitalist society must go further than talking about 'race' in terms of perceived absolute differences to the underlying class dimensions that structure the conditions under which these differences are concretized.

CHAPTER II: NEOLIBERALISM AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF NEW ORLEANS

2.1 The Plight of New Orleans

Several authors have pointed out that the severity of the catastrophe inflicted by Hurricane Katrina was a direct consequence of the failure of the federal and state governments to adequately prepare for a massive disaster. Some have cited ‘racism’ as the cause for *deliberate* indifference, euphemistically referred to as *incompetence*, towards the victims since many of them, but not all, were black. In the days immediately following the hurricane’s arrival, the U.S. as a nation expressed feelings of shock and surprise at the images being broadcasted on television and in newspapers— an intense reaction to the severity of suffering that the victims were facing. The U.S. was confronted, if temporarily, with the sobering truth of extreme poverty—37 million people live in poverty in the United States— that exists in the richest nation in the world (Amalric, 2005).

Surely, the fact that poverty exists is not a revelation to the majority of the U.S. public. Eric Dyson makes a pointedly accurate observation when he says that “it is the exposure of the extremes, not their existence, which stumps our national sense of decency” (Dyson, 2006). Scores of U.S. citizens live in extreme poverty—this knowledge is anything but new. They *had been* living in poverty long before the first winds of Hurricane Katrina stirred. The images we saw in the days following the hurricane were received with shock and disbelief, if not near repulsion. But this sort of reaction only speaks to our complacency and unruffled ignorance of the fact that we help to maintain the system which feeds on the very poverty that left us wide eyed and dumbfounded.

The government did not act in time to protect or save victims and demonstrated horrid incompetence. Charges of institutionalized racism cannot be ignored because there is evidence that they did, to some degree, colour the response to Katrina. But these reasons are inadequate. To attribute the government's response completely to racism would "misunderstand race not as the starting point from which to engage with broader issues but as the end point to which all problems affecting African Americans inevitably lead" (Younge, 2006). It would allow us to ignore the deeper structures of neoliberal ideology that underlie the entrenched inequality in New Orleans—the same ideology that also shapes our apathetic reaction to inequality that persists under the surface of U.S. capitalism. We cannot continue to merely feign surprise at the desperate state of lives in the aftermath of Katrina without also asking questions that take into consideration the desperate state of lives *before* Katrina. We must consider the workings of a system rooted in neoliberal ideology which not only creates the conditions for this desperation to arise, but also relies on this very desperation in order to thrive.

Neoliberalism refers to the "policies and practices whereby a relative handful of private interests are permitted to control as much as possible of social life in order to maximize their personal profit" (Chomsky, 1999). Though neoliberalism is a dominant global economic trend, in the United States particularly, it is characterized by 'free market' policies that encourage consumer choice and private enterprise. It rewards 'personal responsibility' and nourishes the belief in the bootstrap theory which lulls the population into a false perception that with enough hard work and entrepreneurial initiative, even the poorest can rise and enjoy the great luxuries of the capitalist market. Robert McChesney comments that decades of public relations initiatives funded by

private corporations have awarded these neoliberal ideas a “near sacred aura...so that the claims they make rarely require defence” (quoted in Chomsky 1999, 7). The principles of neoliberal ideology that permeate our system are so readily and uncritically accepted that they are called upon to justify anything “from lowering taxes on the wealthy and scrapping environmental regulations to dismantling public education and social welfare programs” (quoted in Chomsky 1999, 7). In short, anything that interferes with the accumulation of capital and increasing profit is subject to eradication as the proponents of the free market advance this system as one which justly allocates the distribution of goods.

Neoliberals advance their system as the *natural order of life* and, as such, advance the notion that there is no alternative since this is the only economic system possible. But when one considers the accelerating global poverty and the hideous conditions that most of the world’s population lives in, the dangers of environmental crisis on several levels, depletion of the world’s resources—all in the interest of feeding the appetite of global capitalism—one must reconsider the “there is no alternative” mantra. There is nothing ‘natural’ about neoliberal capitalism. Gindin elaborates this point:

The forms of private property that evolved in England and became the basis for capitalism began with the forceful expropriation of those who had for centuries considered particular fields and forests their common property. Far from bring “normal”, the process of converting nature and the labor process of human beings into commodities sold on markets was very much a break with previous human history (2003, 16).

Capitalism works to equate the idea of social justice to the “narrower terrain of economic freedom” while presenting itself as the “inevitable way to organize a modern society” (Gindin, 2003). Presenting itself as the *only* alternative, neoliberalism strips our “vocabulary for progressive social change” and works to deflate “critical notions of social

agency to expand the meaning and purpose of democratic public life” in its quest to produce ever-expanding “market identities and market relationships” (Giroux, 2004).

Giroux here wants to draw attention to the point that neoliberalism is a system that works to structure not just the way in which we work, but the way in which we live, so that the free-market capitalism and the structures that support it are of utmost importance (2004).

According to this, all efforts at resisting the inequality of the system would have to be structured *within* the confines of the system, since the rules of the capitalist system instruct us as to what is and what is not possible. In fact, one of the strategies of neoliberal discourse, especially with regards to the mass media, is to place strict confines on the range of acceptable opinion but allow and even encourage debate within that realm. As long as one remembers and adheres to the essential priority of capital accumulation that underlies capitalism, one is free to engage in critique, even dissenting opinion. Thus, while debate and critical inquiry are taking place to maintain the comforting illusion of free thought, they are nonetheless occurring *within the confines* of what the capitalist order deems acceptable and non-threatening. Ultimately, all such discourse serves to reinforce the very underlying principles of neoliberal ideology that debate ought to critique. Any opinion that does not fit within this acceptable framework of dissent, and which might actually pose a threat, is dismissed immediately as nonsensical and illogical as the “naturalness and commonsense appeal” of neoliberalism works to create a “crisis of political and historical imagination” (Giroux, 2005).

Thus, all the means at the disposal of the ruling class will be and are used to maintain this practice. The mass media are one such means of disseminating “systematic propaganda” (Chomsky, 1988), all the while promoting themselves as the defenders of

free speech. At this point, neoliberalism is much more than an economic policy—it permeates our cultural, social, and political landscapes. The neoliberal order structures the meaning of “civil society” by defining it exclusively through “an appeal to market-driven values” which not only “dissolves the bonds of sociality and reciprocity” but also undercuts the importance of social obligations in our lives” (Giroux, 2005).

2.2 New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina

A prominent theme that emerged immediately in several of the articles that I assessed was one that dealt with the economic status of and, thus, the resources available to those that were struck hardest by Hurricane Katrina. To provide some context, I provide a summary of the economic conditions of residents prior to the hurricane. For the purpose of my project, I focus on the state of Louisiana, however, it should be noted that parts of Alabama and Mississippi were also severely affected by Hurricane Katrina.

In the early 1700s to the 1800’s, the ‘sugar boom’ occurring in New Orleans made it the primary slave market for North America (Lavelle and Feagin, 2006). Particularly during the antebellum era, the economy of Louisiana rested on sugar plantations and commercial shipping—industries in which slave labour was essential. Black prisoners were made to work with slave labourers to develop public projects, erect public buildings, build levees, and develop the growing city of New Orleans. Even during the Reconstruction from the 1860s to 1880s, free blacks and black professionals in New Orleans were restricted from economic advancement by “recurring depressions in New Orleans’ economy” and the challenges faced in forming labour unions by black workers (2006, 55).

New Orleans’ white elite have struggled to maintain their dominance in the social

and economic spheres throughout the city's history. After World War II, whites began to migrate from the city of New Orleans to surrounding suburbs. New neighbouring suburbs were built and immediately occupied by "middle-class and working-class whites" (Lavelle & Feagin, 2006). Blacks were restricted from moving into these neighbourhoods not only because of economic limitations but also because of racist, white realtors. Such patterns of white flight from the city to the suburbs resulted in a drastic demographic shift—in 1960, 37 percent of New Orleans was black and, in 2000, blacks constituted 67 percent of the city's population. Children of the ruling class were sent to private schools which created an education system that "functioned as a gatekeeper for admission into the city's ruling elite" (57). When the groundbreaking *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling of 1954 brought integration to the city's public schools, New Orleans' ruling class relocated their children to whiter neighbourhoods or private institutions.

Lavelle and Feagin note that, at the time, 'race' was the "characteristic chosen by whites to differentiate the labour" and that this allowed upper class whites to accumulate increasing amounts of wealth (2006, 53). This is, shamefully but not surprisingly, true even to the present day. Dyson provides an historical backdrop of New Orleans with respect to the city's ethnic diversity. Discussing patterns of mass departure from urban to suburban communities, he notes that "the city endured increasing segregation as suburbanization" made New Orleans "'blacker' and poorer" (2006, 7). The flight from to areas like Jefferson Parish (69.8 percent white, 22.9 percent black), St. Bernard Parish (88.3 percent white, 7.6 percent black), and St. Tammy Parish (87.02 percent white and 9.9 percent black) left the majority of the black, poor population in the inner city and East New Orleans (Dyson 2006, 7).

Drawing from William Sites' book, *Primitive Globalization? State and Locale in Neoliberal Global Engagement*, Stewart Varner discusses the way in which local governments and the "nation-state" become cogs in the global neoliberal economy which leads to their eventual demise. Varner clarifies the role of New Orleans as a global city as a way of illuminating the context which led to the inefficiency of local (and federal) government's response to Katrina. One of neoliberalism's tenets is the push to homogenize "previously unique places" so that they can be easily incorporated into the global economy. Local governments find themselves in a position where they have to choose between securing their "under-funded social programs or attracting job-providing businesses with tax incentives" (Varner 2006, 5). Thus, under the neoliberal regime, the role of government is minimized as its power is handed over to the private sector. Eventually, the structures of the global economy which all but *demand* submissive participation decide the powerlessness of the nation-state as the private sector becomes the sole owner of capital— which, especially in a capitalist economy, translates to power.

Relating this back to New Orleans, Varner explains that prior to World War II, New Orleans was a vital port in the United States which made it a major player in the petroleum industry as well as the petrochemical and fishing industries. After World War II, New Orleans suffered an economic downturn which totalled a loss of 13,500 manufacturing jobs. By 2000, 28 percent of New Orleans was living in poverty (Varner, 2006). The Gulf Coast, and specifically the city of New Orleans, responded to this economic challenge by orienting their economies towards the tourism market which accelerated the shift to privatization. Also, increasing privatization meant that the divide in income between residents grew wider with a large majority of the population working

in lower paying jobs in the tourism service industry. When Hurricane Katrina hit, almost 30 percent of all jobs in New Orleans were service sector jobs which paid an average of \$8.30 per hour with very little employment in the higher-paying industries such as shipping or oil and gas extraction (Lavelle & Feagin, 2006).

As its integration into the global market intensified, New Orleans displayed clear signs of increased gentrification, division of labour depending on market needs, and a greater entrenchment of inequalities along racial lines (Varner 2006). This is a cyclic process in which one element invariably feeds off another. Increased gentrification leads to rapid increases in property values, both commercial and residential. In time, this filters out all the residents who cannot afford the cost of living—a majority of whom come from lower paying service sector jobs—and isolates them in segregated communities of concentrated poverty. Thus the city's socioeconomic geography is systematically structured through its involvement in the global market.

2.3 Hurricane Katrina

Conditions of poverty made life a nightmare for residents of the Gulf Coast, and New Orleans specifically, long before Hurricane Katrina forced us out of our stupor. Louisiana and Mississippi were the poorest states in the nation before the storm with New Orleans having more than 103,000 people living in poverty. New Orleans also had one of the nation's highest percentages of elders with disabilities: New Orleans had 57 percent while the national average was 39.6 percent (Center for American Progress, 2005.) The poverty rate in New Orleans was exceptionally high and the median household incomes of these residents were low (\$35,110) compared to the national average (\$44,684) (U.S. Census Bureau Poverty Report, 2004).

On August 26th, 2005—three days before Hurricane Katrina made landfall in New Orleans—Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco declared a state of emergency for the state of Louisiana. The proclamation cited Hurricane Katrina as an “imminent threat” to the state and residents were urged to evacuate the disaster areas immediately (Office of the Governor, 2005, 2). On the 27th, Blanco wrote to Bush asking him for federal aid saying that “supplementary Federal assistance is necessary to save lives, protect property, public health, and safety” (Dyson, 2006, 56). Several Gulf Coast States also began the process of requesting additional troops from the Pentagon as it became clear that the states were ill-prepared for the hurricane (Office of the Governor, 2005, 1). The next day, Governor Haley Barbour of Mississippi also declared a state of emergency for his state. The emergency declaration was endorsed by the Stafford Act and allowed for federal assistance and funding for relief efforts from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA.)

Hurricane Katrina gained strength and was elevated to a category 5 hurricane on the evening of August 28th, 2005 when Governor Blanco issued another request for disaster relief along with New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin who issued the first ever mandatory evacuation for New Orleans (Russell, 2005).¹ Nagin’s mandatory evacuation order was issued less than 12 hours before the expected landfall (Dyson, 2006).

According to Louisiana’s evacuation plan, those evacuees who did not have access to a means of transportation were to be evacuated using government owned vehicles and those provided by volunteer organizations. Dyson reports that according to the number of vehicles available and the seats available on each available vehicle, it

¹ An interesting point to note is that initially Nagin had hesitated to issue a mandatory evacuation order because of the city’s “potential legal liability for closing hotels and other businesses” (Dyson 2006, 57).

would have taken three trips out of the city to evacuate *all* of the city's 134,000 poor and out of harms way (58). This is astonishing because according to mainstream news reports that reported on the impending hurricane and the state's level of preparedness, the impression we were left with was one of helplessness and impotency in the face of a massive disaster like Katrina. Mainstream news reports focused on the fact that the relief agencies, FEMA's Michael Brown, the Department of Homeland Security, were doing everything possible to prepare for the Hurricane. In fact, for a few days immediately following Katrina, Governor Blanco of Louisiana and other state officials were reported as praising the administrations efforts. Undoubtedly, there was no doubt that Katrina—a category 5 hurricane—would have had horrific effects on the lives of residents regardless of how well evacuations plans were carried out. However, the scale of suffering was *preventable*. There was a way to protect the citizens that did not have the ability to protect themselves. This is a fact that is left out of mainstream media coverage.

On August 28th, President Bush was informed of the impending and *expected* levee failure by the Director of the National Hurricane Center, Dr. Max Mayfield stating that, "We were briefing them way before landfall. It's not like this was a surprise" (Gill, 2005). The Louisiana National Guard requested up to 700 buses from FEMA to aid in the evacuation process, in light of the mandatory evacuation issued by Major Nagin, but only 100 buses were provided. According to the evacuation order, the buses were to pick up people at designated locations and take them to shelters, including the Superdome (Gill, 2005). Data from the 2000 Census on Population and Housing reveals that black households across the nation are less likely to have access to a car than white households. This is even more pronounced in New Orleans where 27 percent of African Americans

lacked access to a car as compared to 5 percent of non-Hispanic whites in the area (Berube, 2005). Given this knowledge, an evacuation order which would have provided transportation for residents who lacked their own means of transport takes on particular significance.

On the morning of August 29th, 2005, Katrina made landfall in New Orleans as a category 4 hurricane. It was almost immediately after Hurricane Katrina made landfall that the levees were breached. Despite repeated requests for disaster relief assistance from Governor Blanco, there was no response from the President regarding relief efforts almost 24 hours after landfall (Gill, 2005). Brown waited for five hours to pass *after* Katrina hit the coast to request the assistance of 1,000 employees from Homeland Security. In those five hours, the hurricane ripped two gigantic holes in the roof of the Superdome exposing the evacuees to its heavy downpour. Despite repeated requests from Nagin, Blanco, and Louisiana Senator Mary Landrieu for military support, the military waited until *two days after* the hurricane arrived to respond. Head of Louisiana State University Hurricane Center, Ivor van Heerden—who, a month prior to the hurricane predicted that if a hurricane were to arrive in New Orleans that the city “could no longer exist” (Gilgoff cited in Dyson, 2006)—says that it was clear that the “powers that be either didn’t recognize how bad the flooding would be” due to a breach in the levee system or “totally misunderstood what the effects would be” (Dyson, 2006).

It is not shocking knowledge that New Orleans—a bowl-shaped city largely below sea level—would begin to fill up with waters overflowing from Lake Pontchartrain following a breach in the levees. Hurricane Katrina left almost 80 percent of the city under water (Dyson, 2006). Still, with words that clearly signal an attitude of deliberate

ignorance and frivolity, Senator David Witter reassuringly claimed that New Orleans was not filling up with water and, after all, “the French Quarter was dry” (Witter quoted in Dyson, 2005, 67). The French Quarter is one of the higher lying areas of New Orleans and, thus, did remain dry. It is also an area that is relatively richer and whiter, and Witter’s statement was an attempt to calm the richer residents of New Orleans that *their* homes and property were safe.

At Nagin’s suggestion, about 25,000 people took refuge in the Superdome. Eventually, the amount of people ballooned to more than twice the initial prediction of 25,000. The situation at the Superdome was “degenerating rapidly for almost 3 days before President Bush ordered a task force to coordinate a federal response” (Gold cited in Dyson, 2006, 71). The city was not prepared for the number of residents that actually ended up at the Superdome looking for refuge; a staggering 100,000 people were packed into the Dome as Katrina began its destruction. Supplies at the Superdome were only sufficient for “15,000 for three days” or “given the number of people gathered, enough to last a day and a half” (Dyson, 2006, 60).

On September 1st, in a nationally broadcasted television interview, Bush uttered what would become words to incite great anger and shock, “I don’t think anyone anticipated the breach of the levees” (Froomkin, 2005, 8). But, as the nation learned from several reports published months after the hurricane, several people *did* anticipate that the levee would be breached. In fact, there was no question about the fact that under the pressure of a category 4 hurricane, the levees *would* give way. Reports from as far back as 1999 had concluded that given the severity of a category 4 storm, a breach in the levees was a certainty. A 2001 Scientific American report warned that without “massive

reengineering of southern Louisiana” which the Bush administration had repeatedly compromised through budget cuts in levee maintenance projects, “New Orleans is a disaster waiting to happen” (Fischetti, 2001, 2). Also in 2001, a FEMA report cited a devastating hurricane in New Orleans as among the “three likeliest disasters” (Blumenthal, 2005, 2) facing the United States, following a terrorist attack on New York City and a major earthquake in San Francisco. In 2002, the Times-Picayune of New Orleans published a five-part series titled *Washing Away* which concluded that it was “only a matter of time before South Louisiana takes a direct hit from a major hurricane” (Gill, 2005). A 2005 docudrama titled “Oil Storm” on FX Network depicted the effects of a category 4 hurricane clobbering New Orleans and life-threatening evacuations to the Superdome and predicted a depleted oil supply as the storm’s economic consequence (Dyson, 2006).

It is impossible that Bush and his administration’s top officials were unaware of the immense suffering that a hurricane would cause—a hurricane that several experts had repeatedly cited as likely. Brown must have known since it was FEMA’s decision to hire a private company to conduct an evacuation drill in 2004 to ascertain the effects of a severe hurricane on the city. The drill conducted showed that the fictitious hurricane—called Hurricane Pam— would cause not only great damage to property and city infrastructure, but that it would necessitate the evacuation of tens of thousands of people who would then need shelter for months after the hurricane struck. But the second part of the drill which dealt with evacuation plans, resolution of problems like protecting the sick and elderly, and plans to provide housing and food for evacuees, was not completed because of budget cuts (Dyson, 2006). This is just one example of reports that were

published and should have been viewed as a clear warning sign that the government's continued budget cuts to levee projects, along with its development of the Louisiana coastal regions, at the cost of destroying wetlands and bayous which act as a the first wall of defence against rising waters, would eventually lay the foundation for a number of preventable deaths and unimaginable suffering. In an effort to convert wetlands to lands ready for industrial use, "since the 1950s engineers have also cut more than 8000 miles (13,000 kilometres) of canals through the marsh for petroleum exploration and ship traffic" (Robert & Bush, 2005).

But Bush wasn't finished with his lies. In the same ABC interview on September 1st, the President responded to offers of financial and humanitarian aid sent from over fifteen countries for Katrina victims. Venezuela offered about \$1 million as hurricane relief aid; Russia offered to send medical supplies, a water-cleaning system, and a rescue helicopter; Germany offered to send a plane full of emergency provisions. But the 'compassionate conservative' Bush replied:

I'm not expecting much from foreign nations because we hadn't asked for it... You know, we would love help, but we're going to take care of our own business. And there's no doubt in my mind that we'll succeed (Bush cited in Brasch, 2005, 42).

Dyson, rightfully, calls the government's lack of response to Hurricane Katrina the "most devastating indictment" of a political philosophy that has undercut the role of its own government. He is referring to the same neoliberal philosophy that has allowed Bush and his administration to profit from tax cuts, to neglect civic infrastructure which made the levees so vulnerable to the hurricane in the first place, and to promote the drive towards privatization at the expense of a weakened social safety net, all the while "advocating Reagan's idea that the government is the enemy of the people" (Dyson,

2006, 70).

CHAPTER III: ANALYSIS OF THE COVERAGE OF HURRICANE KATRINA

3.1 Methodological Approach

The coverage that is analyzed for this project comprises of newspaper articles selected from the New York Times (*NYT*). Though the articles from *NYT* are the focus of my analyses, I also refer to articles that were published in alternative media sources in order to ascertain whether there was a significant difference in the way that ‘class’ and ‘race’ were framed in articles that did not come from a mainstream media source.

I used the *NYT* online database to gather articles that dealt with Hurricane Katrina. I performed two separate searches on the database using the keywords, ‘Hurricane Katrina,’ ‘race,’ and ‘class’. The search was restricted to a three month period from August 20, 2005 to November 20, 2005. Though the hurricane hit New Orleans on August 29th, I looked at articles that were published from August 20th onward, prior to the hurricane, so that the search would include articles that were published as ‘warning signs’ prior to its occurrence. I considered this necessary because of the discussion surrounding questions of prior knowledge about the hurricane that circulated after the hurricane hit on the August 29th. Thus, my search included articles that were published in the *NYT* nine days prior to the arrival of Hurricane Katrina.

Through my assessment of the articles, my aim was to find and analyze articles in the *NYT* that dealt with issues of ‘race’ and/or class in a substantive manner. Thus, it is helpful to foreground my analysis with an explanation as to what I mean by ‘substantive’. Keeping in mind that my articles were taken from the *NYT*, a major mainstream newspaper, I was aware I would be hard pressed to find a critical discussion of class that addressed some of the underlying issues that helped to shape the experience of the

victims of Hurricane Katrina. Still, I was interested to explore *how* issues of class were framed within the media coverage.

The initial search, conducted with “Hurricane Katrina” as the keyword, produced 1961 results including articles from several sections in the *NYT* (Business, Education, etc.). From those articles, I focused only on the “National” and “Front Page” sections and conducted another search within each of those sections using keywords ‘race’ and ‘class’ so as to limit the search to articles in the paper that dealt specifically with issues of ‘race’ and class within the context of Hurricane Katrina. I selected these specific sections (‘National’ and ‘Front Page’) on the basis of a preliminary overview which indicated that the articles that dealt with issues most relevant to my work would be found in these sections. Also, the National and Front Page sections provided a more comprehensive range of articles as compared to other sections which were more specific and exclusive. The second search generated 126 from the “Front Page” and 334 from the “National” sections.

Although my initial search of the media coverage generated 460 articles from the ‘Front Page’ and ‘National’ sections, this number was greatly reduced when I included articles that dealt with ‘race’ and class in a substantial way. I disregarded articles that mentioned ‘race’ and class in passing without any follow-up discussion, as well as articles that mentioned them in a quote or as statistical information. As a result, the final sample of articles from the *NYT* includes 11 articles from the Front Page section and 24 articles from the National section.

3.2 *The New York Times*

The *NYT* Company, with revenues of 3.3 billion in 2006, owns a variety of other

mass media outlets including 2 national, 16 regional newspapers, nine network-affiliated television stations and two New York radio stations.⁴ The company also owns approximately 35 internet websites, including *NYTimes.com*, *Boston.com* and *About.com*. This access to multiple media outlets from one particular source indicates a highly concentrated form of ownership that is typical of neoliberal capitalism—the drive to concentrate power within the control of fewer and fewer owners.

In 1997, the Times published its Proxy Statement which expressed the desire for “an independent newspaper” which strived to be “entirely fearless,” “free of ulterior influence,” and “devoted to the public welfare” (Herman, 1998). One might question whether this devotion to the public caters mainly to a *particular* segment of the public—the newspaper’s elite audience and its advertisers. Herman elaborates that the *NYT* often assumes positions on domestic and international issues, especially U.S. foreign policy, that remain “within the parameters acceptable to business and political elites...(and) it is evident that the owners have failed to escape class interests in defining public welfare and what’s fit to print” (1998). He illustrates the political slant of the *NYT* with a few examples saying that in the early 1990’s, during the debate over the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the paper supported the agreement and encouraged its advertisers as well as its audience by emphasizing the need to make the public aware of the advantages of NAFTA.

In light of this, it is apparent that the *NYT* assumes a very particular position in terms of whose interests it caters to. In the 1990’s, following a recession in advertising, the paper’s focus shifted to more affluent neighbourhoods which meant that areas like the

⁴ This information was obtained from the *NYT* Company Official Website (<http://www.NYTco.com/company.html>) on March 16, 2007.

Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island received far less attention in the media coverage (Herman, 1998).

The *NYT* employs strategies such as “strategic silences, the transmitting of false or misleading information, the failure to provide relevant context, [and] the acceptance and dissemination of myths”—which make one question *who* decides exactly what news is ‘fit to print’ (Herman, 1998). As a mainstream news source that caters primarily to the interests of the ruling class and upholds the values and beliefs of the elite, any analysis of articles published in this paper must be viewed critically. My analysis of the Hurricane Katrina coverage indicates the New York Times loyalty to upholding the principles of the neoliberal ideological program.

3.3 Critical Discourse Analysis

To analyze this coverage, Critical Discourse Analyses (CDA) which is specifically concerned with “language and power” (Wodak, 2001, 1) is the most appropriate analytical tool. This approach enabled me to investigate how the language of the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina helped to construct a version of reality that privileged certain categories (i.e. ‘race’) over others.

Wodak explains that a critical discourse analyses is “essentially about making visible the interconnectedness of things” (2). In the theoretical debates that inform my project, I have discussed this presumed separation between ‘race’ and class and CDA’s focus on intersectionality will directly inform my analysis of the dynamics of race and class as they played out in the coverage of Hurricane Katrina. Some of the work I have consulted discusses the need to articulate these connections in order to formulate a comprehensive understanding of our reality. Ebert notes that we must attempt to connect

the “various seemingly autonomous social practices to one another and to the global economic situation” in an attempt to produce a historical knowledge of the social totality (1996, 7). My analysis of the media coverage, with a focus on how these categories intersect, is an attempt to add depth to an understanding of this perceived divide between class and 'race' as well as the larger context in which these categories exist.

CDA offers several ways in which a text can be critically analyzed to uncover these hidden issues. Huckin discusses the significance of ‘genre’ in analyzing a text and explains that this orientation to the genre of the text helps the analyst to understand how certain statements in the text might serve the interests of the text-producer (2000). A critical view of the text enables analysts to detect what information might have been omitted from discussion. van Dijk indicates that in analyzing a text, what is omitted from discussion is sometimes more important than what is actually included (1993). This focus on omission enabled me to analyze how discussions of class have been obscured through the language of ‘race’.

One of the main elements considered in CDA is the issue of ‘framing.’ A focus on the framing of issues within the coverage shed light on what issues were excluded or marginalized in mainstream media coverage—specifically issues that dealt with class politics. Huckin notes that the analyst must pay attention to perspective, an understanding of how the writer presents or frames the information in the text (2000). This focus on framing enabled a deeper understanding of how issues of race and class were presented in the coverage and provided a conceptual basis from which I approached the analysis. Also, van Dijk's discussion of the strategies of news discourse production, where he outlines how topics that are considered ‘newsworthy’ are generally framed within the

format of the article, informs my analysis (1985, 69).

3.4 Analyzing Media Coverage as Discourse

CDA approaches media coverage with an understanding that “media messages are a specific type of text and talk” and that a critical discourse analysis of a news article cannot be limited to a textual analysis. The analysis must also attempt to situate the news within a larger socio-cultural and political context (van Dijk, 1991). The myth of neutrality associated with media coverage is deconstructed through a critical analysis of news media. There is an emphasis on neutrality or objective reporting when it comes to media coverage; journalists are required to strive for objectivity in their reporting. This understanding leads to the false perception that the article as reported by the ‘objective’ journalist is devoid of external interests. A critical discourse analysis presumes that external interests are always and already present in the production of a news text, and hence, the perception of objectivity in news media is immediately dismantled. There is no question about the presence of external influences; what critical discourse analysis seeks to do is make that influence clear to the reader.

CDA assumes that the ‘messages’ that are contained within the news, especially in mainstream media, reflect the larger social context in which the news is produced and are part of a complex web of social relationships. Van Dijk notes that a critical discourse analysis of the news, though not part of “linguistics proper,” is focused on investigating “the ideological and political dimensions of media messages” (1991). As such, an analysis of the news must be articulated in relation to the larger context of social relationships in which it is created. For instance, on August 30th, 2005, the day after Katrina struck, a pair of images with corresponding captions were circulated on the

Internet. In the first image, a black man was holding foodstuff in his arms as he waded through the floods; the second, a white man and woman holding foodstuff in their arms who were also wading through flood waters. Both photographs were from Associated Press and both displayed victims of the hurricane with food items in waist deep waters. The difference was that in the picture where the victim was a black man, the caption read, “A young man walks through chest deep flood waters after *looting* a grocery store in New Orleans on August 30th, 2005” while the caption of the photograph where the couple were white read, “Two residents wade through chest-deep waters after *finding* bread and soda from a local grocery store after Hurricane Katrina came through the area in New Orleans, Louisiana” (Dyson 2006, 164). The way in which these captions were framed, the choice of ‘looting’ versus ‘finding’ for hurricane victims who differed in no apparent way except their skin color, was an illuminating example of how language either supports or disables the existing framework of racial references.

Of particular importance to my analysis is the concept of the *context model*, as discussed by van Dijk, which “controls what information from the event model will be found communicatively relevant for inclusion in the text” and served as way to relate the specific discourse to larger social and political structures by understanding the relationship of the text to ideology. The context model provided an understanding of how the specific text can contribute to the legitimization and reproduction of a particular ideology. CDA's focus on framing and omission as tools of analysis was useful in my investigation to ascertain whether ‘race’ and racialized understandings presented by the media obscured or made invisible the underlying structures of class and neoliberal ideology as Reed (2005 [a]) had suggested.

3.5 An Analysis of *The New York Times* Coverage: Katrina, 'Race,' and Class

Even before Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast on August 29th, 2005, there were articles published in the *New York Times* that indicated that a hurricane of this magnitude posed a great threat to the levee system which was in place to protect the low-lying city of New Orleans as well as other areas in its path. Mayor Nagin stated in an interview just one day prior to the arrival of Hurricane Katrina that he *did* expect a breach in the levees, not as a possibility but a probability, when the storm arrived (Bumiller, 2005).

In the days following Hurricane Katrina, there was a flood of articles that fuelled the debate of whether the administration had been forewarned of the vulnerability in the levee system and flood walls in the wake of a natural disaster. Also during the first few days after the hurricane (August 30th to September 2nd), articles discussed the stoppage of oil and gas production due to the hurricane, predicted insurance estimates for property damage, rising oil prices due to discontinued production in the Gulf of Mexico (Romero, 2005), and the effects on the market and stock values (Andrews, 2005).

In an article titled “The Energy Industries; Another Storm Casualty: Oil Prices” (Romero, 2005) it is disturbing that the tragic loss of human life is compared to the shortage of oil. This phrasing which frames the issue of oil prices in the same category—a casualty of Hurricane Katrina—is indicative of how the paper prioritizes issues of importance. In this case, the issue of oil and natural gas production being impeded or stopped as a result of the storm was presented as an issue which was as important as the loss of human life. However, where the destruction of oil and natural gas production can be considered an ‘expected’ loss, that is, one that could not have been prevented due to

practical and technical reasons (oil rigs and gas plants cannot be ‘evacuated’ to safer locations), the destruction of human lives cannot be considered an ‘expected’ loss. It could have and should have been prevented. To frame both issues in the same light, as Romero (2005) does, creates a false association and misrepresents the fact that some of the losses suffered by the residents of New Orleans were absolutely avoidable.

In my analysis of the *NYT* articles, I noted certain recurring themes that I have used to structure my discussion of the analysis. I chose to do a thematic discussion as the themes that were expressed in the articles were closely related to the theoretical debates that I have previously discussed. Hence, while I refer to a few articles that have been assessed, not all of the articles will be cited in my analysis. The articles are categorized based on: (i) how the language in the articles is framed and proceeds through what Reed calls the *language of ‘race’*; (ii) the perceived divide between issues relegated to the realm of culture (difference) and to the realm of political economy (class); and finally, (iii) Reed’s assertion that class is a better predictor of who suffered the most, and who would have most say in reconstruction efforts.

3.5.1 The Language of ‘Race’

A poll released by the non-partisan Pew Research Center a few weeks after the arrival of Hurricane Katrina revealed “America's deep racial divide” (Bumiller, 2005). Two-thirds of African-Americans said the government's response to the crisis would have been faster if most of the victims had been white, while 77 percent of whites disagreed. The first article that discussed ‘race’ was published in the *NYT* on September 2nd. The article notes that “there has been a growing sense that race and class are the unspoken markers of who got out and who got stuck” referring to the victims of the hurricane and

the immediate relief efforts. The article quotes Rev. Calvin O. Butts III, pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem saying that the victims that were hit the hardest by Hurricane Katrina were “largely poor people. Poor, black people” (Gonzalez, 2005). In New Orleans, a city with 23 percent of residents living below the national poverty line, the timing of the hurricane also played a factor. Those who depended on public assistance checks that are mailed out on the first of the month did not have the funds for gasoline or enough fare for public transportation out of the city (Gonzalez, 2005).

Another quote from the article asks, “Is this what the pioneers of the civil rights movement fought to achieve—a society where many black people are as trapped and isolated by their poverty as they were by segregation laws” (Gonzalez, 2005)? This quote that links the poverty of the victims with the segregation laws of the past is a prime example to show how the discourse of ‘race’ is used to draw barriers between the working class. If in the past, segregation explicitly defined social class through the prism of ‘race,’ then it seems the economic conditions of those who live in extreme poverty played a determining role in who was most severely affected by the Hurricane. This quote also illustrates how economic restrictions are framed in terms of ‘race’.

A point to note in these discussions is that ‘poor’ gets equated with ‘black’ and the discussion is framed in a way that hinders further discussion about this poverty. Once ‘poor’ is equated with ‘black,’ the language of ‘race’ takes priority in the way we think about the victims of the hurricane. This deflection of our attention not only reproduces the tendency to exclusively focus on ‘race’ in our discussions of social justice, but also completely obscures a deeper and more critical investigation of the economic conditions of the victims. It obscures discussions that delve into the structural reasons why certain

regions of the Gulf Coast were more subject to the hurricane's destruction than others and it ignores an analysis of the economic infrastructure of the region.

An article in which officials emphatically cite 'race' and class as markers that decided who perished in the hurricane contains no follow up discussion regarding these markers as they relate to the victims (Shenon, 2005). Most of the article, after the first brief mention of 'race' and class, is devoted to a debate on whether FEMA had previously warned the government about the vulnerability of the Gulf Coast. The article is framed in a way that leaves the reader with a sense of helplessness.

A few days after the arrival of Hurricane Katrina, 'race' took center stage in discussions that addressed why the government was slow to respond to the plight of the victims or why sufficient preventative measures were not undertaken by the government prior to the arrival of Hurricane Katrina despite repeated warnings (DeParle, 2005; Purdum, 2005, Shenon, 2005). An article titled "Gulf Coast Isn't the Only Thing Left in Tatters; Bush's Status with Blacks Takes a Hit" cited black leaders, who seemed to have newfound political leverage in the White House post-Hurricane Katrina, saying that the damage inflicted by the hurricane drew the "great divide between 'race' and class in America into the spotlight" (Bumiller, 2005).

Several commentators point exclusively to 'race' as the reason why the government's response was so poor. In the same article that cited Condoleezza Rice's defense of President Bush saying that the President would never leave "people unattended on the basis of 'race'," rap artist Kanye West was cited based on his comment that "George Bush doesn't care about black people" (Broder, 2005 [a]).

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was quoted in another article discussing the

national outrage at recovery efforts in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (Purdum, 2005). Rice vehemently disputed the claim that federal response to the victims of the hurricane was, in any way, a matter of ‘race’ saying that she refused to believe that “Americans would somehow in a color-affected way decide who to help and who not to help—I just don't believe it” (Purdum, 2005). The Secretary's language, “...that *Americans* would...,” leads the reader away from who in fact were the actual decision makers in the recovery efforts. The implicit assumption is that to be American also means to approach a situation like the recovery efforts in New Orleans with fairness and equality. Rice's comments seem to draw from the emotional and moral chords of her audience, but ultimately, in no way, address the discussion of the victims at hand.

Dyson also notes the media's framing of the black poor through the enormous amounts of lies and unverified reports of stealing, violence, and lawlessness that were widely and repeatedly reported in the media. For example, in an article about “lawlessness” in New Orleans in the days immediately after Hurricane Katrina, Dwyer and Drew (2005) report that comments made on September 4th, 2005 by the Police Superintendent of New Orleans were based on “second-hand reports,” rather than actual fact. Still, the article focuses on the “sense of menace” which was believed to be the product of “genuine disorder and violence” as residents were “looting” as soon as the storm passed over the city (Dwyer and Drew, 2005). Another article is dramatically titled “Voices from the Storm; What the Hurricane Didn't Take, the Looters Did” reports on complaints from storeowners who said that they sustained not only damage to their stores, but also “looting” for which they had no insurance (Wilgoren, 2005 [b]).

Dyson quotes the editor of the *Times-Picayune*, Jim Amoss, who attributes this

callous spread of misinformation to a matter of race and class, “If the Dome and Convention Center had harboured large numbers of middle class white people, it would not have been a fertile ground for this kind of rumor-mongering” (2006, 174). In explaining the way in which the media portrayed the Katrina victims, Jordan Flaherty, editor of *Left Turn Magazine*, comments that the media chose to “demonize those left behind” while ignoring the reality of the victims before Katrina which made them impotent in the face of a disaster in the first place. Flaherty further states that:

Images of New Orleans’ hurricane-ravaged population were transformed into black, out-of-control, criminals. As if taking a stereo from a store that will clearly be insured against loss is a greater crime than the governmental neglect and incompetence that did billions of dollars of damage and destroyed a city. This media focus is a tactic, just as the eighties focus on “welfare queens” and “super-predators” obscured the simultaneous and much larger crimes of the Savings and Loan scams and mass layoffs, the hyper-exploited people of New Orleans are being used as a scapegoat to cover up much larger crimes (Flaherty, 2005).

3.5.2 The Culture-Political Economy Divide

In the days immediately following the hurricane, an article reported on the national outrage at the government response to the tragedy. The article states that there “was anger closer to home, too, especially among blacks” (Purdum, 2005). An immediate reading of this statement places ‘blacks’ in the position of the ‘Other’. The way in which this statement is framed, that the anger among blacks was especially intense, is important to note here as an example of how discussions of injustice are carried out through the language of ‘race.’ To be sure, blacks were outraged at the government’s response. But so were Latinos who made up 3 percent of Louisiana’s population, so were Native Americans, so were the Vietnamese and Filipino communities, and so were Whites (Dyson, 2006). And where these victims differ in their racial backgrounds, they all shared

the condition of extreme poverty. The only purpose then of framing this outrage as only ‘black anger’ shows how mainstream media thrives on presenting an injustice along the lines of ‘race,’ so that divisions are strengthened between groups of people in a way that obscures their common state of poverty. This kind of grouping re-establishes a divide along racial lines; it does not say that *poor* people were among the angriest. It cites blacks as being ‘especially’ angry.

One of the few articles that discussed issues of poverty and class status (mentioning ‘class’ more than once or twice throughout the article, and outside of a quote or statistical information) is one that reported on “liberal hopes” in the debate on poverty with regard to possible opportunities to create new programs (Deparle, 2005). The article goes on to cite other factors shaping the debate on poverty claiming that “poor people do not make campaign contributions,” the growing federal deficit which leaves little money for new initiatives, and the administration’s “continuing support for tax cuts, including those aimed at the wealthiest Americans, which further limits spending on social programs” (Deparle, 2005).

It pointed to the contradiction between President Bush words in a September 15th speech from New Orleans where he pledged “not just to cope, but to overcome (the difficulties of victims of the hurricane)” and his earlier actions on September 8th, a week after the hurricane struck, when he suspended the Davis-Bacon Act, a law which does not prohibit federally financed construction jobs from paying wages below the local average (Deparle, 2005; McFadden, 2005). Randall points out that this suspension, justified in the name of cutting costs and accelerating the recovery efforts, will benefit the large corporations the most by expanding their profit margin at the expense of exploited

workers (Randall 2005, [a]). Dyson explains that Bush's suspension of Davis-Bacon had multiple and tiered effects:

First, it increased the already substantial profits of corporations. Second, it made local wage workers even more financially unstable than they were before the storm. Third, it reinforced the harmful consequences of a racially segmented workforce (Dyson 2006, 134).

The point that Dyson brings up is how the administrations policies work systematically to keep the poor— poor. For an administration to be able to justify awarding over \$1.5 billion to a group of four main companies which have already, arguably, been bathing in profit accumulation and not secure even a minimum wage for workers so that New Orleans might be rebuilt by its own residents is a blatantly clear indication that the administration's priorities rest firmly on the structures of neoliberal capitalism. If the President meant, as he said in several public speeches post-Katrina, that his administration was working to help the victims rebuild their lives, it would have helped the victims and the rest of the nation to know that this promise would be fulfilled as long as it did not stand in the way of the administration's first priority— accumulation of capital in the hands of the wealthy elites and corporations.

Hurricane Katrina provided a smokescreen to carry out actions such as the suspension of Davis-Bacon which lawmakers have, in the past, been unable to pass through legislation. Thus, companies are now *legally* allowed to exploit workers— this is a prime example of 'predatory capitalism' at work. Louisiana wages are already 19 percent below the national average and wages in Mississippi are a devastating 28 percent below the national average (Tarpinian, 2005). The reconstruction efforts—which are being carried out in complete accord with neoliberal capitalist expansion—will have nothing but devastating effects on the poor and the working class. In light of this, it is

absolutely essential to advocate for a class-based analysis that can confront the underlying ideological structures of these reconstruction plans.

DeParle's article attempts to show opposing sides of the arguments against Bush's proposed tax cuts; an issue that has long been at the center of debate for this administration (2005). The logic that raising taxes would have a negative impact on the growth of the economy is used as the underlying framework to justify cut taxes. But the article points out that the strategies proposed by the administration—budget cuts that affect social programs put in place for the very people that Bush claims to help—would have a dangerous effect on the lives of citizens, especially lower income victims of the hurricane. This is a clear example of neoliberal capitalism at work. The logic that tax cuts aid economic growth holds true only for the small population of citizens that stand to benefit from tax cuts—but the latter part of this logic is left out of the picture because the tax cuts weigh heavily on the shoulders of the poor. Though tax cuts are presented as universally good for everyone, they only benefit a small, wealthy fraction of the nation's population. Thus, claims that tax cuts benefit everyone only holds true if "everyone" is taken to mean "the small fraction of the nation's population." According to this line of thought, the poor are rendered invisible. Of course, eventually, the negative effects of tax cuts only fall on the shoulders of the poor.

Former President Bill Clinton was quoted as criticizing the economic policies of the Bush administration saying that "this is a matter of public policy. And whether it's race-based or not, if you give your tax cuts to the rich and hope everything works out all right, and poverty goes up and it disproportionately affects black and brown people, that's a consequence of the action made" (Shenon, 2005). The remainder of Shenon's article

focused on disaster relief efforts that Clinton was involved in and his criticisms of the Bush administration's "emergency plan" and the nation's "growing deficit" (2005). There was no follow-up discussion to expand on Clinton's class-oriented comment. This article presents another clear example of how substantive discussions of class are marginalised in the *NYT* coverage.

Shenon's article is also an example of what Chomsky means when he says that critique is confined within acceptable realms (1999). Clinton advanced his critique and drew out the idea that some residents did not have the ability to evacuate (Shenon, 2005). But without a corresponding discussion that challenges—or even brings into the spotlight—larger issues of structure which address why the inability to evacuate existed in the first place, the critique remains at the level of an observation. The critical discussion will remain, as Chomsky states, acceptable and non-threatening (1999). As long as the questions we ask and the critiques we advance remain *within* the existing order of neoliberal capitalism, they only serve to create the comforting illusion that there is indeed 'free-thought' occurring. That is what happens in Shenon's (2005) article: we are left with the alleviating impression that indeed, there are challenging and critical questions being posed to address the plight of the victims.

Would the government have moved faster to secure the safety of hurricane victims had they been white? Dyson says that this must be accompanied by a second question that takes into account "a few of the myriad injuries of the racial contract that has bound American citizens together: did the largely black and poor citizens of the Gulf Coast get left behind because they were black and poor?" (18). Surprisingly, this question is still asked, despite everything that has happened in the aftermath of the Hurricane as

well as the political decisions that have shaped the reconstruction efforts to this date. *Of course* race played a part. To believe that race can be excluded from the discussion at all is simply ludicrous. We have to move beyond this position to ask *what* role it played, and *how*? And we must also be cautious to strike a balance in our discussions between the position that holds that race was the most important factor in determining the fate of the Katrina victims and the position which acknowledges the significance of race but that uses that as a starting point to explore larger issues that address the structures of class and capitalism that feed on the exploitation of race. This balance is what will aid us in our ability to talk about race but do it in a way that it does not become the end point of our debate.

In the case of Wilgoren's (2005 [a]) article, he focuses on a comparison of victims based on economic standing as a way of showing how poor families in New Orleans did not have a safety net to fall back on when the hurricane hit. Gonzalez (2005) asserts that the victims that suffered most because of the hurricane are those that have been marginalized by society. He refers to "race and class" as "unspoken markers" that determined "who got out and who got stuck" (Gonzalez, 2005). But after this initial mention of 'race' and class, there is no follow-up discussion that might provoke thought regarding the systemic nature of poverty in New Orleans before Katrina. The article ends with a statement from the President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Atlanta, Charles Steele Jr., who acknowledged that a majority of those that lived in the neighbourhoods that were most vulnerable to the hurricane were "poor and black" but that the lack of effective response from the Administration came down to a "lack of sensitivity on the part of people in Washington that you need to help poor folks. It's as

simple as that” (Gonzalez, 2005). The tone of the article—especially the concluding quote from Steele—subtly feeds the notion that there is little that can be done to change the condition of the poor by attributing it simply to a lack of sensitivity. Though there is significant mention of the drastic poverty in New Orleans, there is nothing in the article that even suggests that change is a possibility. Gonzalez (2005) paints a dire and accurate picture of the poverty in New Orleans but fails to provoke any further discussion among readers or call them to action by suggesting that there can be an alternative to the condition of poverty that victimised Louisiana residents long before Katrina arrived.

Showcase quotes from selected officials who either defend or attack the Bush Administration with regard to how recovery efforts were handled provide the majority of ‘critical commentary’ regarding issues of class. Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts, who was the Democratic presidential nominee in 2004, said that the inadequate response from the Administration and the desperate condition of victims post-Katrina could be attributed to a “complete avoidance of real problem solving and real governance in favor of spin and ideology” (Nagourney and Hulse, 2005). An article that reports on the criticisms of the government for its response to Katrina is entirely focused on the “charges of racism” lodged by “African-American religious and political leaders” (Broder, 2005[a]). The implication that the criticisms made were those based on the charge of racism seems to limit the discussion of critical commentary to an investigation of the federal government. Poverty of the residents is mentioned once in the article saying that “many blacks” attributed the suffering of the victims who were “left to suffer and die in the floodwaters” to the fact that they were “poor and black” (Broder, 2005[a]).

Thus even when poverty is mentioned, it is done so combined with ‘race’. The focus of this article is that the victims were black, not that they were poor.

3.5.3 ‘Class’ as a Predictor

In the Front Page section, an article that alluded to issues of class most explicitly was one that discussed “the chasm between the haves and have-nots” in New Orleans. It profiles two families, one, the Jackson-Brown family who were living below the poverty line when Hurricane Katrina struck, and the Porretto family who had greater access to resources that they used to evacuate New Orleans before Katrina hit (Wilgoren, 2005 [a]).

The Porrettos lived in the New Orleans suburb of Metairie “where the median income is \$41,265, just below the national average, 87 percent of the 145,000 residents are white, and fewer than 1 in 10 are poor” whereas the Jackson-Brown “clan huddled in a \$350-a-month two-bedroom apartment across from a dilapidated and dangerous housing project” where “69 percent of the city is black, and the median household income is \$31,369” (Wilgoren, 2005 [a]).

The article compares both families’ abilities in the aftermath of the hurricane depending on what services each family had access to. All the members of Mrs. Porretto’s extended family had access to cars which they used to evacuate the disaster areas well before the hurricane hit. Ms. Jackson did not have access to private transportation and without sufficient funds to access public transportation, she “escaped on foot” until she arrived at the Superdome (Wilgoren, 2005[a]). The following paragraphs are important to note:

Mrs. Porretto, 51, has an American Express card that covered her \$564.26 bill at

the Hilton in Lafayette, La., where a cousin who works for AT&T secured a low corporate rate when she booked a block of rooms days before the storm.

Ms. Jackson, 24, does not have a bank account, and her husband, Jerel Brown, spent their last \$25 to buy fish and shrimp from men grilling on the street in the chaos, so now there is nothing in the pockets of his baggy jeans but a crushed pack of Benson & Hedges someone gave him to calm him down.

The Porrettos have cell phones and connections in city government and churches that not only helped them find one of the last available rental properties anywhere around here (125 miles from their hometown of Metairie), but also let them sneak back into their neighbourhood early this weekend to grab televisions and furnishings for their new house.

Mrs. Porretto, a court clerk, and her husband, Joel, a retired police officer, are hardly rich. But as they embark on life in exile, they look like royalty compared with Mr. Brown, Ms. Jackson and their children, wandering to a destination unknown with little more than the clothes they have worn for a week (Wilgoren, 2005[a]).

In this article that outlines how two families from New Orleans have coped in the hurricane's aftermath, it is important to note the difference in terms of how both families are portrayed by looking at the language used to discuss issues of economic standing.

While the Porrettos "embark" on a new life, the Jacksons are "wandering to a destination unknown" (Wilgoren, 2005 [a]). This portrayal is also observed when Wilgoren writes that Ms. Jackson waited in line at the New Orleans airport with her "sickly and hungry children" with her baby "atop a blue plastic bin filled with what they had scrounged from strangers" (Wilgoren, 2005 [a]). The Jackson family, the poorer of the two families featured in this article, "scrounged" whatever they could from strangers as they waited at the New Orleans Airport.

Almost the entire article is devoted to contrasting the states of the two families after the hurricane, and a quote from Senator John Edwards elaborates on the topic of this article saying the poor people "suffered the most from Katrina because they always suffer the most" (Wilgoren, 2005 [a]). This quote is placed closer to the end of the article; presumably as a way to summarize what the text producer intends to show through the

descriptions of both families. The focus on the suffering of victims seems to overwhelm the article to the point where there is minimal attempt to critically address the structural reasons that create what Edwards refers to as “the two Americas” (Wilgoren, 2005 [a]). Had Edwards' quote been used in the very first paragraph, with the contrasting descriptions following, the article might have been viewed differently. The discussion about the condition of poor people in the quote, in that case, would have been the topic of the article. Ultimately, the article only reproduces this divide, if in a more dramatic style. It also reduces what should be viewed as structural flaws within the economic system to a *tale of two families*. The focus on individual families rather than larger issues of systemic inequality serves to maintain the neoliberal emphasis on personal responsibility and “rabid individualism” (Giroux, 2005). Furthermore, in advancing this notion of individualism, Wilgoren’s article reinforces the idea that the government plays a minimal role in ensuring the welfare of its citizens. There was no information in the article that informed readers as to why each family’s economic condition was drastically different before Katrina—why is it that the Porrettos had access to greater resources than the Jackson family in the first place? In the absence of such a discussion, the reader is encouraged to perpetuate yet another neoliberal myth: the Jackson family lived in poverty because they are lazy or simply did not have the individual drive required for upward mobility in the capitalist system.

Wilgoren’s article perpetuates neoliberal ideology in subtle ways, but there were also instances where the class bias and bourgeoisie contempt of the poor comes across in obvious ways. Perhaps the most blatantly expressive comment came from Former First Lady Barbara Bush while she was on a tour of Houston’s Astrodome (*NYT* Staff Writer,

2005). Mrs. Bush suggested that because so many people in the arena “were underprivileged anyway” that the conditions in the Astrodome were essentially “working very well” for them. With the ‘this’ in “so this is working very well for them,” Barbara Bush showcased the age old perception of the poor as lazy; as people who are poor by choice because they simply do not have the motivation to ‘pull themselves up by the bootstraps’. Bush’s statement gave one the perception that the situation that ‘these people’ were in at the Astrodome, though unfortunate, was not really too different from the conditions that they lived in anyway, and were perhaps even better than what they were used to. The brashness of her words made Hurricane Katrina seem like nothing more than a harsh wind accompanied by a few raindrops. Ironically, there were indeed similarities between conditions at the Houston Astrodome and the way in which the poorest of New Orleans’ citizens lived their lives on a daily basis. And, in that case, the complete lack of empathy was glaringly evident in Mrs. Bush’s words because it implied that it was ‘okay’ for the victims of Katrina to be suffering in the Houston Astrodome because they knew no other life anyway. The message was clear: for the poor of the country, suffering is acceptable. This is part of the ideology which encourages us to turn a blind eye to the suffering of the poor; thus we are able to disconnect ourselves from the plight of the poor in a way that they become the invisible ‘Other.’ To forget about the poor is a cruel privilege that those of us who do not live in poverty can (or think we can) afford. We readily acknowledge that poverty exists when we are talking about it in *abstract* terms. However, it is when we are blatantly confronted with the reality of poverty, when it presents itself in a way that demands our attention, we shamefully plead ignorance.

One article titled, “Government Money Will Flow to Gulf Coast, but Will Fundamental Change Follow?” alluded to this issue of the need for ‘fundamental change’ (Purnick, 2005). The article cites actions that could presumably bring about change including reform in the education system of New Orleans, reducing crime in the city, and fighting corruption “in a state that is famous for capital siphons” (Purnick, 2005). Nowhere is poverty or the economic condition of the residents mentioned. The kind of change emphasized in the article is reformist change, which still leaves the underlying structures that perpetuate the problem untouched. The concluding words create a sense of hopelessness in accordance with the belief that the system cannot be changed:

Suspensions run high. And they are exacerbated by considerations of race, class, history, political divides and by the overarching fears of displaced blacks—be they middle-class executives or men and women who lived in little more than shacks—that they will again be left out. Here in the capital, where politics is big business and everyone knows its rough rules, everyone is asking who will decide how New Orleans gets rebuilt and who will assure “transparency” and guarantee oversight of the process. They do not know. Nobody knows. Leaders at all levels of government vow that this time things will be different in Louisiana. “One thing that does not change is government,” Ms. Carter said, and she meant that reassuringly (Purnick, 2005).

Another significant issue that was identified in the coverage was the job crisis in New Orleans considering that most citizens were unable to return (Hauser, 2005). Workers were unable to return for a number of reasons including flood damaged homes, and the inability to arrange for tentative housing in the city due to the lack of access to means of transportation. Considering the long-term implications of this “work-force crisis,” the loss of jobs would inevitably alter the “very demography of New Orleans” as workers without cars would be replaced by those who have access to a vehicle and can commute to work (Hauser, 2005).

In the aftermath of Katrina, as the city’s residents were looking to reoccupy their

neighbourhoods, the city was displaying signs of “a demographic shift so dramatic that some evacuees described it as ‘ethnic cleansing’ (Klein [c] 2005, 6). Many of the evacuees that returned to the drier areas in New Orleans were white while those who did not have a home to return or could not afford the cost of transportation from the shelters to their homes were black. This fact, that most of the returning evacuees were white, was falsely attributed to a matter of “simple geography—a reflection of the fact that wealth in New Orleans buys altitude” (Klein 2005 [c], 6). It is important to note that to call it a “matter of simple geography” reflects the ideology that would have us believe that the ability to return is merely a matter of individual ability or personal circumstances. It hides the fact that those who are returning do so because they *can* return— they had the financial means to return just as they had the financial means to evacuate. Further, Younge clarifies that the inability of the poor to leave points to a lack of “social mobility” rather than a lack of “geographical mobility” (2006). To refer to the demographic shift that occurred, and is still occurring, in New Orleans as “ethnic cleaning” invokes the language of ‘race’ (Klein, 2005 [c]) so that we view the residents that did return and who did not return in terms of their race. While this discussion is necessary so that we do not deny the significance of ‘race,’ the discussion must proceed further to include an analysis of New Orleans’ demographic shift from the perspective of class. This is what Younge implies when he talks about “social mobility”—that we move beyond talking about the return of residents as a geographic matter and recognise the social structures that put some residents in a position where they had the means to return while other residents did not (2006).

In another move to rid New Orleans of its poor population, former residents who

owned homes in the poorest neighbourhoods of the city were slapped with a recent Supreme Court decision, *Kelo vs. City of New London*, which supported the right of city governments to “seize land for private economic development” (Lavelle & Feagin, 2006). In light of such measures, the mantra of the Bring New Orleans Back commission which declares that “the committee wants everyone to return and new people to come” is ludicrous. The strategy of the commission is a charade; a lesson in how to *appear* to support the rights of the poor while strategically putting measures in place that guarantee their suffering. Even if there is significant desire for many evacuees to return to their home, such reconstruction measures taken by the administration will ensure that the poorest of these evacuees have to find a home elsewhere.

Months after Katrina’s arrival, thousands of Section 8⁵ and public housing units were still vacant despite relatively mild flood and wind damage. That housing authorities chose to install a barbed-wire fence around the St. Bernard Housing Development, which was the city’s largest public housing complex, to wall off the property from the public at a staggering cost of \$300,000 to taxpayers instead of allocating those funds to enable residents to return to their homes makes one question the priorities of the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) (Howells, 2006, 8). HANO’s refusal to open up these public housing units infuriated residents who, despite having expressed great desire to return home, were dispersed throughout the country owing to the authority’s refusal to reopen those housing units. According to HANO statistics, about 50,000 people were public housing or Section 8 residents prior to Katrina. As of May 2006, 90 percent of the units were still vacant. Howells attributes this to a subtle attempt at “class and ethnic

⁵ Section 8 (or the Housing Choice Voucher Program) is a U.S. Federal housing program which provides housing assistance to low-income renters and homeowners. This assistance comes in the form of rental subsidies, limiting the monthly rent payment of the recipient (Affordable Housing Online).

cleansing” so the residents of New Orleans who are part of the working class and are “overwhelmingly African-American” do not have the means to return (Howells, 2006, 8).

There were apartments and houses in New Orleans that, while perfectly habitable, were left empty. Even in areas which suffered minor hurricane damage, there are still approximately 11,600 vacant units. In Jefferson Parish alone, there are another 11,500 empty housing units. These units alone would house approximately 60,000-70,000 residents. Thus, if these rental units were made available to displaced residents, over half of the Katrina evacuees would have had access to a living space. While I am not suggesting that the city simply distribute this housing to residents who need it, it is important to note that the presence of empty housing units contradicts the perception of a dire housing shortage in New Orleans that is presented to the public.

Further, as veteran New Orleans community activists point out, opening up these empty living spaces also would have had social and political significance. The availability of homes to live in would have enabled the poor of the city to return and contribute to decisions that were being made regarding reconstruction efforts. Instead, these decisions were made “exclusively” by those who were able to “afford land on high ground” (Klein [c] 2005, 8).

In a speech where President Bush addressed the dire need for housing for Katrina evacuees, he proposed the Urban Homesteading Act under which low-income citizens would be allotted, through a lottery system, federal property on which to build new homes (Klein 2005 [c], 10). But it would take months before these new houses were constructed. More significantly, how many of these low-income residents could afford the mortgage on these houses, even if it was subsidized? This is yet another typical

diversion plan proposed by the Bush Administration. Not only does it fail to address the needs of low income residents; it sets up reconstruction efforts to favour only the higher end of this lower income group. Even in terms of practicality, these plans are futile. It is estimated that New Orleans only has enough land to support up to 1000 residents of this group, from a total of 200,000 evacuees in need of housing. Again, the fact that Bush failed to mention in his speech was the availability of about 2000 vacant apartments that could have potentially offered shelter to the evacuees (Klein 2005[c], 10). The truth of this vacancy was another well guarded fact left largely ignored especially by the mainstream media. Why did the President promote a plan that could have only offered assistance to 1000 evacuees and not mention the availability of housing units that could have offered shelter to a larger number of displaced residents? Klein sheds some light on this issue claiming that the reconstruction efforts that are underway in New Orleans are less concerned with the actual housing crisis than they are concerned with the shift of power and wealth from public to private hands in an effort to construct a “radically privatized ‘ownership society’”(Klein 2005[c], 11).

According to the initial Bush administration agenda, the reconstruction contracts worth \$100 million were to be awarded to four companies which had been previously linked to the government and which have enjoyed a surge in profits— The Shaw Group, Inc., Bechtel Corporation, CH2M Hill Inc., and Fluor Corporation. That these contracts were awarded to the same few companies with previous links to the administration received little, if any, attention in mainstream media reports. The Center for Responsive Politics (2004) reports that each of the companies that were involved in the reconstruction in Iraq and that are now continuing their plunder in New Orleans are major

Republican campaign contributors. CH2M gave close to 70 percent of its \$476,800 in campaign contributions to Republicans, along with Bechtel that gave 68 percent of its funds, and 87 percent of Halliburton's campaign contributions went to Republicans⁶. And now, the campaign officials who they helped into office are returning the favour.

Danielle Brian, director of the Project on Government Oversight, a non-profit group that monitors government expenditures, warns that as was the case in Iraq, the reconstructions in post-Katrina New Orleans would “bring out the greedy and the self-interested. You are likely to see the equivalent of war profiteering—disaster profiteering” (Broder, 2005 [b]). But what Pascual calls ‘reconstruction,’ Shalmali Guttal, a Bangalore-based researcher calls “sophisticated colonialism” (Guttal cited in Klein, 2005 [a]). Guttal justifiably comments that the actions taking place across the globe in the name of reconstruction have nothing to do with actual reconstruction; they have to do with restructuring parts of the global society into a version that is in tune with a pro-capitalist vision. Klein calls this a form of “disaster capitalism” through which the “desperation and fear created by catastrophe” is used to lay the foundation for big business “to engage in radical social and economic engineering” (2005 [a]).

In Klein's interview with New Orleans' top corporate lobbyist, Mark Drennen, who is also the President and CEO of Greater New Orleans Inc., Drennen remarks that the lower lying areas in New Orleans where residents' homes and housing projects were completely destroyed by the flooding were areas that were “dysfunctional to begin with” (Klein [c] 2005, 7). He claimed that the city should embrace what he called “twenty-first century thinking” where the rich and poor, black and white would live “side by side” in

⁶ All donations took place during the 2003-2004 election cycle and were released by the Federal Election Commission on Monday, May 16, 2005 (Center for Responsive Politics, 2005).

“mixed income housing” (Drennen cited in Klein [c] 2005, 9).

There was, and is, intense political pressure in New Orleans directed against the reopening of low-income public housing from those who stand to benefit from privatizing the city’s housing facilities. If successful, it would lay the groundwork for private developers to acquire these properties. A well-known critic of the city’s public housing is Alphonse Jackson, an appointee of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Jackson is an advocate of the mixed-income housing “reform” within the entire city’s traditional public-housing complexes. The implementation process for this mixed-income housing would add years to the waiting period for residents whose lack of housing problems get worse as each day passes. But more significantly, once this initiative is completely implemented into the city’s housing system, it will mean that the total number of low-income public-housing units available in New Orleans will be “drastically and permanently” reduced (Howells, 2006).

While Drennen wanted the city to look towards ‘mixed housing’ developments, he failed to mention that concrete plans to actually build these mixed-income structures were virtually non-existent. He persistently directed attention towards reconstruction plans that did not have a concrete basis in terms of actual construction plans and budgetary decisions. It became increasingly clear in post-Katrina New Orleans that reconstruction efforts were made in the name of privatizing control of resources and a strategic reconstruction of New Orleans according to the visions of the ruling class.

There is a striking resemblance in the way that reconstruction efforts are being handled, and who they are being handled by, in New Orleans and Iraq. Though one region was ravaged by a hurricane and the other by war, both are victims of what Klein

rightly referred to as “predatory capitalism” (Klein 2005 [a]). Not long after Iraq was occupied by U.S. forces, the U.S. formed the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) charged with leading the recovery efforts in Iraq. A consideration of the actions taken by the CPA is similar to the Bring New Orleans Back (BNOB) Commission installed by Mayor Nagin whose members are charged with consulting and leading the recovery efforts in New Orleans. Following strict free-market guidelines, the CPA in Iraq—whose members were mostly Bush supporters sent from Washington— immediately took measures to “fulfill the wish-list of international investors” (Docena, 2005). This wish list included laws that allowed foreign investors to exercise rights over the Iraqi market that were similar to those that the local Iraqis exercise and would allow for allow a full repatriation of profits abroad, a flat tax system, an intellectual property rights system, sale of companies that were previously owned by the state to private investors, and privatization of social services like healthcare, education, and water delivery (Docena, 2005). Having laid the groundwork, government sponsored big business took over. The same companies that played a role in Iraq’s reconstruction business are now leading the reconstruction in New Orleans today: Kellogg, Brown and Root (KBR), a subsidiary of Halliburton which received the most lucrative contracts from the government, Bechtel Corporation, Fluor Corporation, The Shaw Group Inc., and CH2M Hill (Docena, 2005; Dyson, 2006).

Davis sheds some light on the interests of the controlling figures who, according to him, are the ones that really wield the power in the reconstruction process. Though this “de facto ruling krewe” consists of a number of prominent figures in New Orleans-- developers that stand to gain substantial profit from reconstruction contracts, newspaper

editors with direct say in what material will be published and hence what information will shape public opinion, and major Bush supporters—the key player in this group is property developer Joseph Canizaro.

Canizaro heads the Urban Planning Committee in Mayor Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back Commission and has been working hard to sell the idea that poor people being unable to return to the city because of a lack of resources is a fact of reality that cannot be helped. The objective of the commission is to organize a plan to rebuild the city of New Orleans. It was born out of a meeting held soon after Hurricane Katrina in which Mayor Nagin met with several prominent business leaders and political representatives and focused on plans to rebuild New Orleans "with better services and fewer poor people" (Davis 2006, 23). Though the commission consists of seventeen appointed members, Davis notes that the committee chairs including Canizaro (Chair of Urban Planning), Cowen (Chair of Education) and Howard (Chair of Finance) met privately with Mayor Nagin before the commission's weekly meetings to haggle over the "tough issues of race and class" which was reportedly more challenging to do with the entire commission present (Davis 2006, 23).

On Canizaro's recommendation, Nagin invited the Urban Land Institute (ULI) to work in consultation with the commission to come up with reconstruction plans. The Institute is a well-known voice for corporate land developers across the nation. The representatives proposed that a plan in which "low-lying neighbourhoods would be targeted for mass buyouts and future conversion into a greenbelt to protect New Orleans from flooding" (Davis 2006, 25). Another proposal from the ULI is a Crescent City Rebuilding Corporation as a supervisory body with control over the city's finances. Davis

notes that the formation of such a board would weaken the power of the city's representatives and dissolve the rights of locals to influence decisions about their own lives with respect to the reconstruction efforts (Davis 2006).

Yet another ULI plan proposed a “four-month building moratorium on most of New Orleans” and the creation of a powerful new authority that would have used eminent domain “to seize homes in neighbourhoods” that would not be rebuilt (Klein, 2005 [c]). That plan was rejected by angry residents as well as by City Council members, but it received rave reviews from prominent state officials, including HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson and representatives from the Bureau of Government Research. Even in light of the protests from residents, the main change that Nagin agreed to was one that gave greater rights to *homeowners* (Reed Jr., 2006). Thus, what is most important here is not a protection of citizen's rights, or an attempt to promote an equitable process of rebuilding, but in keeping with neoliberal policies, what receives the most protection and importance is ownership of property. This is what decides citizens' worth and what ultimately directs reconstruction plans. Similarly, plans that would boost private interests and corporate investments guide policy decisions. Again, we are reminded that what is of utmost importance is the supremacy of class interests and neoliberal ideology.

Reed Jr. points out that the victory of neoliberalism is “seamlessly compatible with the discourse of racial politics” as the resources in New Orleans, and the Gulf Coast in general, are snatched up through “privatization and racialization” (2006). It is therefore not surprising that a few months later, when Canizaro presented recommendations to the Commission; they bore a striking resemblance to the previously rejected ULI framework. Still, aside from the initial positive response from Mayor Nagin

who applauded Canizaro's plans, the ULI framework did not succeed in going forward. However, it is worth noting what Davis calls "external forces" such as insurance requirements, new flood maps from FEMA, and the "refusal of lenders to refinance mortgages"—all of which greatly influenced which reconstruction plans were implemented and which were not (2006). Thus, even though the blatantly destructive reconstruction plans proposed first by the ULI and then reframed by Canizaro were rejected, there was still a possibility that reconstruction plans which were strikingly different from those proposed by Canizaro and ULI— or, any plan which did not cater to corporate interest— would not have been implemented because it would not have received the appropriate external support.

3.6 Reconstruction of New Orleans: A 'Sophisticated Colonialism'

Republican proposals to reconstruct New Orleans are unapologetic attempts to rebuild New Orleans and the rest of the Gulf Coast with a complete lack of consideration for the poor. They reek of what Klein calls "disaster capitalism" as attempts to capitalize on the destruction left behind by Katrina (Klein, cited in Dyson 2006, 205). Apart from the government's granting of large, no-bid contracts to the construction giants that have been previously linked to the Bush Administration, the proposals made by Republicans also include turning New Orleans into an "economic competitive zone" or a "flat-tax free-enterprise zone" which basically would translate to a minimal benefit for residents, a complete waiving of environmental regulations, and an overall increase of the degree to which corporate elites can exploit the natural as well as human resources left in that area (Dyson 2006, 205). This will, of course, carry on in the name of economic recovery, but, what it will also translate to is an expansion of power and profit for corporations,

increased concentration of property ownership in the hands of real estate developers and private investors, and an overall transfer of power to the hands of the ruling class who will work to secure their own interests rather than the needs and rights of the majority of New Orleans' citizens.

The reconstruction of New Orleans has become a valuable business for reconstruction corporations and it appears that the "world of reconstructors" is hugely interconnected. When Joseph Allbaugh, a close friend of Bush who headed his 2000 presidential campaign, left FEMA in 2003, Michael Brown who previously headed the International Arabian Horse Association assumed the position as Head of FEMA (Engelhardt & Turse, 2005). Allbaugh proceeded to work as a lobbyist and founded three consulting firms, one of which was developed with the specific aim of "assisting clients to evaluate and take advantage of business opportunities in the Middle East following the conclusion of the U.S.-led war in Iraq" (Engelhardt & Turse, 2005). Allbaugh was a leading proponent in awarding companies such as a KBR and Shaw Group the massive reconstruction contracts for work in New Orleans.

The underlying theme of the reconstruction efforts in New Orleans, especially according to plans that aim to transform New Orleans and the rest of the Gulf Coast into a market-friendly playground for capitalist exploitation, is revealed in a statement by Carlos Pascual who heads the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization at the State Department. Though Pascual is referring to countries like Iraq that have been subject to U.S. led occupation and are now in the process of re-building their governments and civic infrastructure under the paternal supervision of the U.S., the basic idea of imperialist 'rebuilding efforts' is similar to the situation in post-Katrina

New Orleans. Pascual proudly comments that his plans for reconstruction involve selling off state-owned enterprises that did not aid in creating a market-oriented economy even at the expense of “tearing apart” the old (Klein, 2005 [a]). Pascual’s office was created in August 2004 with the purpose of preparing “post-conflict” plans in the event that a conflict might arise (Klein, 2005 [a]). The office organizes and manages teams that consist of private corporations, nongovernmental organizations, and think tanks which are assigned the task of developing “‘pre-completed’ contracts to rebuild countries that are not yet broken.” The point to note is the reverence to neoliberal capitalist ideology with which this restructuring process takes place—so that the resulting state will be more oriented to the free-market—is carried out with the knowledge that the “social fabric” of the region will be destroyed (Klein, 2005 [a]). Thus, the expansion of the capitalist free-market system is awarded priority over the lives of human beings, especially those who do not belong to the ruling class. It seems to be of little relevance whether these lives are those Iraqi citizens who have been waging a daily struggle for basic survival even as the U.S. spreads the gospel of democracy in *their* country, or the lives of Katrina survivors who are now entangled in what Giroux calls the “politics of disposability” and are considered “expendable” by their own government (Giroux 2006, para 6).

A few hours after the levees broke in New Orleans, stock prices for Halliburton and Baker Hughes—two giant construction companies and major Bush campaign supporters with previous contract ties to the government—soared (Tarpinian, 2005). A no-bid \$12 million contract to perform emergency repairs at the Gulf Coast naval and marine facilities that had sustained hurricane damage was awarded to Kellogg, Brown and Root Services Inc. (KBR) which has close ties to Vice President Cheney who headed

the company between 1995 and 2000. This is in addition to the \$4.6 million that KBR received for work performed at two other naval facilities in New Orleans. No more than a month after Hurricane Katrina hit the coast; approximately fifteen contracts were awarded for over \$100 million, some of which were over \$500 million. Of the total \$1.5 billion awarded in contracts, more than 80 percent were no-bid contracts or contracts which involved limited competition (Dyson 2006, 131).

Referring to the 2004 Tsunami that devastated Sri Lanka, Klein remarks that the Sri Lankans perceived the post-tsunami reconstruction efforts as “the second tsunami” (Klein, 2005 [b]). The scene that Klein constructs is chillingly similar to what New Orleans is experiencing. She explains:

“There are already signs that New Orleans evacuees could face a similarly brutal second storm. Jimmy Reiss, chairman of the New Orleans Business Council, told Newsweek that he has been brainstorming about how ‘to use this catastrophe as a once-in-an-eon opportunity to change the dynamic.’ The Business Council’s wish list is well-known: low wages, low taxes, more luxury condos and hotels. Before the flood, this highly profitable vision was already displacing thousands of poor African-Americans: While their music and culture was for sale in an increasingly corporatized French Quarter (where only 4.3 percent of residents are black), their housing developments were being torn down. “For white tourists and businesspeople, New Orleans’ reputation is’,” ‘a great place to have a vacation but don’t leave the French Quarter or you’ll get shot, Jordan Flaherty, a New Orleans-based labor organizer told me the day after he left the city by boat. “Now the developers have their big chance to disperse the obstacle to gentrification— poor people” (Klein 2005, [b]).

And if poor people are the obstacle to implementing the plans of the corporate elite, it is no wonder that minimal efforts are being made to augment their return to the city.

Measures taken by the Bush Administration have also ensured a loss of jobs to lower-income local workers and small businesses. Representative Nydia Velazquez, a member of the House Small Business Committee, reveals that the Small Business Administration (SBA) has “allowed large corporations to get \$2 billion in federal

contracts while excluding local minority contractors” (Davis 2006, 12). Klein points out that this obsession “has already come to grip the entire disaster zone, with emergency relief provided by the Red Cross and Wal-Mart and reconstruction contracts handed out to Bechtel, Fluor, Halliburton and Shaw” (11). The profit-making objective is upheld in each of the steps followed by these construction companies as they undertake reconstruction projects so that the worker is paid the lowest wage. For instance, Davis explains that while FEMA has entered into a contract with the Shaw group under which the company is paid \$175 per square foot for tarp installation on storm-damaged roofs, the workers who actually install the tarp earn as little as \$2 per square foot even with the tarps being provided by FEMA (2006, 13).

In keeping with their objective to spread the gospel of privatization, lawmakers met on September 13th at the Heritage Foundation’s headquarters in Washington to discuss reconstruction efforts. The result of the meeting was a document that listed “pro-free-market” ideas as responses to Hurricane Katrina disaster areas. These ideas included the conversion of disaster areas into flat-tax-free-enterprise zones, and making the entire region an “economic competitiveness zone” through comprehensive tax incentives and regulation waivers (Klein 2005[c]; Davis, 2006). Each of these responses to the disaster areas is rooted in the basic interest of expanding the free-market system; treating the disaster regions as zones of opportunity where opportunity means the chance to privatize public policy and concentrate power in the hands of the wealthy. The ideas put forth by these lawmakers are not, as they are presented, attempts to relieve the suffering of the Katrina victims. They are blatant and unapologetic attempts to rebuild New Orleans in a way that the accumulation of profit is the main objective. As such, these proposals—most

of which have already been adopted as law—have little to do with lessening human suffering in New Orleans and everything to do with feeding the lifeblood of the free-market system.

The catastrophic conditions that followed when Katrina made landfall could have been prevented if the country's 'compassionate conservative' President had chosen to exercise his compassion by not slashing hurricane protection funds in previous years. Instead, Bush proceeded in making the most severe cuts in flood and hurricane protection in the history of New Orleans despite the fact that the 2004 hurricane season was predicted to be the worst season in decades (Dyson 2006, 81).

The wind and storm surges that Katrina produced may well have been nature-related, but it is crucial to note that there was nothing natural about the loss of human life that resulted. That was a consequence of policy decisions made by the Bush Administration as it relentlessly plundered the budget assigned to restore and maintain levees in New Orleans and transferred the finances to fund the war in Iraq. Funding for restoration work on the East Bank hurricane levees of New Orleans was cut, for the first time in 37 years, in 2004. Of the \$11 million requested by the Army Corps for work on the Lake Pontchartrain and Vicinity Hurricane Protection project, Bush requested only \$3 million and Congress approved \$5.5 million—the Army Corps received just half of what was initially requested for hurricane protection. The next year, they requested \$22.5 million and, again, Congress approved \$5.7 million (Bleifuss & Cook, 2005). Although such budget cuts stem from the specific policies of the Bush Administration, it is important to keep in mind that they reflect the larger structures of neoliberal ideology that privilege the interest of the ruling classes and private corporations.

The havoc wreaked by Hurricane Katrina cannot be viewed as a natural disaster as much as a “crisis of public policy,” that occurs when the “chickens of neoliberalism--the dangerous fiction that the state is irrelevant, it is a source of problems not a solution to problems—come home to roost” (Zeleva, 2005). According to Zeleva, Katrina helped to expose the “underbelly of neo-liberalism in America, the infrastructure and communities that have been neglected for a generation, sacrificed on the altar of a fundamentalist economic and political ideology that punishes the poor and rewards the rich” (Zeleva, 2005).

It has become becoming increasingly clear that any discussion about the future of New Orleans which does not honour the tenets of neoliberal ideology fades further and further into the background, and that the underlying and ultimate aim of reconstruction will be an effort to confiscate any economic and political power that might have been in the possession of the poor people in New Orleans. What Reed Jr. calls the ‘practical truth’ of the free-market magic was demonstrated, particularly at the federal level, in Brown’s tragic inability to respond with any competence or efficiency to protect Gulf Coast residents against the effects of Katrina. The utter breakdown of any kind of governmental aid to victims illustrated one of the central tenets of neoliberalism, in all its social ugliness—that the government has a minimal role in protecting its most vulnerable citizens.

Assuming that we *do* understand and acknowledge that poverty exists, we cannot be surprised that poor people are hit hardest in a situation where they must depend on material resources to save their lives, resources their poverty bars them from having. So perhaps this revealing quote from Michael Brown, as he explains how a great number of

deaths resulting from Hurricane Katrina were a result of residents' *choice* not to evacuate despite the issued warnings, is not entirely accurate. He stated:

“I don't make judgments about why people *chose not to leave* but, you know, there was a mandatory evacuation of New Orleans. And to find people still there is just heart-wrenching to me because, you know, the mayor did everything he could to get them out of there. So, we've got to figure out some way to convince people that whenever warnings go out it's for their own good. Now, I don't want to second guess why they did that. My job now is to get relief to them. Now is not the time to be blaming. Now is the time to recognize that whether they chose to evacuate or chose not to evacuate, we have to help them” (Brown in CNN Hurricane Report, 2005).

There may well have been people who chose not to leave. But this is hardly the case for thousands of residents for whom this choice that Brown refers to—the choice to ignore evacuation warnings— could not have been made because they did not have the ability to leave. For them, *there was no choice but to stay*. Dyson (2006, 207) discusses this view that the poor that the “black poor got basically what they deserved because they were too stubborn or stupid to leave” which extends or provides an excuse for the federal government's hesitation to fund their recovery. Issuing mandatory evacuation orders as officials in New Orleans did had no consequence because citizens had no private transportation and no means to access private transportation systems. But these questions were, and are, ignored. These questions do not even enter the mindset of those for whom access to transportation is an assumed fact because to be poor in the United States is to be invisible. It is to be *made* invisible.

In the days after Katrina, scenes of horrific suffering amazed us because we were *confronted* with the reality that not only does extreme poverty exist in the U.S., but that we help create this inequality. But it is important to also note that the capitalist system in which and through which we live our lives encourages us to forget these realities. A

system rooted in neoliberalism teaches us that everyone is 'free' to "work in and benefit from" the global economy and its engine of free market capitalism.

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

Reed Jr. argued that class was, and is, essential to understand what happened, and what is still happening, in New Orleans. As long as our discussions about social justice proceed solely through the language of ‘race,’ we reproduce a discourse that privileges specificity in a way that reproduces the distinctions between individuals and groups—but these distinctions are precisely what the dominant class uses against us to impede a collective, class-based struggle.

I have tried to show that the politics of class and the politics of difference cannot and do not exist as exclusive forms of politics. The work of theorists that I have considered in my work speaks to this and illustrates that, contrary to postmodern claims; a class-based approach *does not* necessarily privilege one over the other (Bannerji, 1995; Meyerson, 2002; Young, 2006). To posit the politics of class relations and categories of difference as separate does not allow for an adequate understanding of their dynamic, and as Meyerson (2002) emphasizes, misconstrues what it means to engage in a class-based analysis. In fact, a historical materialist approach illuminates the way in which categories of difference are lived in the context of a class-based system (Scatamburlo-D’Annibale and McLaren, 2003).

In some of the *NYT* articles that were analysed, the language used by the text producer reduced ‘class’ to simply ‘economic standing’ (Deparle, 2005; Nagourney and Hulse, 2005; Purnick, 2005). Within this framework, I noted that ‘class’ and ‘race’ were used as markers to signal the identity of the victims of the hurricane in way that framed class as an “additive relation to other cultural essentialities” (Bannerji, 36). Further, even if class was presented within the context of this ‘race’-class duo in the introductory part

of the article (first or second paragraph), the discussion soon proceeded exclusively through the language of ‘race’ (Gonzalez, 2005, Shenon, 2005). There is a sense that to cite ‘race’ as a reason for inequality holds more power than to discuss systemic poverty. By extension this might imply that racism incites anger that is more potent than anger that comes from discussions of extreme poverty. It was enthusiastically acknowledged that racism is wrong and must be eradicated. But in talking about poverty, most reactions were still rooted in the ‘it’s a fact of life’ mindset propagated by neoliberal ideology.

The focus on ‘race’ as a “lens through which social relations are explored and explained” must be viewed critically because it obscures the “historical and geographical configurations” in which ‘race’ is embedded (Scatamburlo-D’Annibale and McLaren, 2003, 160). To understand ‘race’ as a social construct which gains its “signifying power” from its relationship to capitalist modes of production does not ignore the realities of racial oppression (160). In fact, to understand racial oppression as operating “within the overarching system of class domination and the variable discriminating mechanisms central to capitalism as a system” enables a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of racism which in turn could mobilize effective political action (Scatamburlo-D’Annibale and McLaren, 2003).

According to Marable, blacks occupy the lowest position on the socioeconomic ladder not because they have been excluded from the American system of capitalist development, but because they have been “integrated all too well” (1983, 2). He notes the capitalist development has always occurred on the backs of black workers and consumers saying that “the constant expropriation of surplus value created by Black labor is the heart and soul of underdevelopment” (7). He makes an important point when he says that

all history “conceals a priori superstructure” which supports the advancement of certain classes at the expense of others (7). But here, also, Marable places a considerable amount of importance on social classes distinguished on the basis of racial difference rather than the distribution of capital and labour.

In the media coverage that dealt with the rebuilding of New Orleans, President Bush's actions to suspend rules that would require contracting companies to abide by affirmative action quotas in their hiring of workers received, if only for a short period, significant criticism. Local officials of New Orleans warned that his actions would further worsen the position of black workers and increase the racial divide within the city's working class. Marable contends that while white workers do not benefit from racism prevalent in the hiring practices, the cohesiveness of the working class does decline as a consequence (1983). He points out, though not to similar degrees, both black and white workers suffer at the hands of racist practices in labour. But if this suffering is viewed and discussed only in terms of racial difference, it becomes easier to see how racial divides are produced in the working class. It also deflects attention away from the fact that despite racial differences, the people that suffer at the hands of capitalist exploitation are *members of the working class*.

In an article that appeared in the *Progressive*, Reed (2005 [b]) makes reference to the use of ‘race’ in the coverage of the hurricane and argues that “race—and even racism”—is an inadequate explanation for the patterns of inequality that existed in New Orleans. He holds a strong position that “‘race’ is especially useless as a basis on which to craft a politics that can effectively pursue social justice” on the grounds that the language of race is too vague and indeterminate to describe effectively “how patterns of

injustice and inequality are racialized in a post- Jim Crow world” and that it doesn't achieve any long term result except urging people not to be racist (32). He warns that such a formulation that focuses on identity and race-based explanations to injustice implies that “most whites inevitably and immutably oppose blacks and therefore can't be expected to align with them around common political goals” (32). Any effort to pursue justice for displaced New Orleanians must stress that their “plight is a more extreme, condensed version of the precarious position of millions of Americans today” referring to the increasing cuts on healthcare, affordable housing, increase in unemployment, and limited access to education. A plight, he warns, which will keep increasing once the “bipartisan neoliberal consensus reduces government to a tool of corporations and the investor class alone” (32).

One of the observations that this project brings to light is the connections between seemingly separate actions under neoliberal capitalism. Reports have confirmed that if the required amount of federal funds had been allocated to strengthen and upkeep the levee system in New Orleans, the scale of suffering could have been greatly reduced. But neoliberal ideology encourages the shredding of the public safety net in favour of private interests, and this is exactly what the government adhered to. The Bush administration redirected funds initially allocated to FEMA to protect against natural disasters to the Department of Homeland Security for protection against terrorist attacks. As a result, FEMA and other hurricane protection agencies incurred cutbacks that amounted to approximately \$800 million which would have otherwise been allocated to hurricane protection activities (Brasch, 2005, 21). The Louisiana coastline was destroyed to feed the interests of private developers, oil and natural gas industries, and commercial

agriculture industries. As a result, miles of wetlands that served as natural barriers against severe hurricanes were undermined. In the 2006 budget, the Bush administration “slashed \$71.2 million from the request by the New Orleans district of the Army Corps of Engineers, leaving the Corps with only about 20 percent of its requested budget” (Brasch, 2005, 22). In terms of military assistance which was needed to restore security in the region after Katrina, Louisiana had about 3,700 National Guard soldiers in Iraq. Lt. Col. Pete Schneider of the Louisiana National Guard voiced his concern about the number of soldiers that were being deployed to Iraq saying that “the National Guard needs (those soldiers and) that equipment back home to support the homeland security mission” (Brash, 2005, 22). In fact, about a week after Hurricane Katrina made landfall, the National Guard acknowledged that the war in Iraq was “draining” their ability to respond to the scale of the disaster.

There is no question by now that officials who endorsed these development projects as well as those who endorsed budget cutbacks for levee maintenance projects were fully aware of the implications of their actions. This is where Margaret Thatcher’s bold proclamation, in which she says that the objective of neoliberalism is to change one’s soul, takes on horrific implications. It implies that these officials, being aware of the implications of their actions, did not care to take necessary steps to protect the region’s most vulnerable citizens.

Our apathetic response to poverty is a product of the belief that poor people are responsible for their own plight. It is debatable that we even view systemic poverty as an issue that is an urgent and pervasive problem. The “deeper dynamic of alienating racist relations” (Lavelle and Feagin, 2006) was made clear in Barbara Bush’s comment that

the victims of the hurricane were “underprivileged anyway” and thus the horrid conditions in the Houston arena shelter were a step up from their pre-Katrina lives (*NYT* Staff Writer, 2005). The way in which issues of poverty were discussed in the *NYT* articles indicated this apathy. Articles that discussed poverty—the fact that a majority of residents of New Orleans were devastated by poverty—talked about it as one talks about an ingrown toenail. The attitude seemed to be one that did acknowledge its existence, with deep sympathy and even disapproval, but eventually one that tolerates poverty as one tolerates the part of the house that no one wants to see. Dyson provides a detailed description of the several relief efforts that came in the form of fund-raisers organized by artists, celebrities, and local activists across the nation to show how scores of people, in particular the black elite, rallied around the poor victims of Katrina. But he also reminds that actions of “goodwill and compassion are no replacement for structural change” (152). This must be acknowledged. Acts of goodwill are crucially important to address the immediate suffering that is a daily reality for the poor. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, these acts sometimes made the difference between survival and death for the victims. There is no doubt that these acts were important; but they only confronted the symptoms of the problem, not the cause of the disease. There are larger questions of structure that must be asked and dealt with. We must challenge the mindset that conditions us to believe that poverty is just a fact of life. As long as this ideology pervades the way we think about poverty, and by extension about poor people, we are part of the very problem that we are trying to address. As Dyson and several other writers have expressed, complacency in a matter like this is as dangerous as explicitly expressed hatred of the poor.

There is nothing natural about the social activities that are practiced under the neoliberal capitalist regime—there is nothing natural about poverty or death caused by a profit-oriented government that stood by while its citizens died. Under Bush, but also under previous regimes in the United States, it is the poor who have borne the burden of the rest of the nation's luxuries. The comforting perception of economic prosperity—repeatedly touted in the Clinton years—translates to prosperity for the few on the backs of many. The poor have always paid for the excesses of the rich with their lives because under capitalism there are expected to do so; the class structures under neoliberal capitalism situate those who do not belong to the ruling class in a position so that their suffering is inevitable. Hurricane Katrina brought this fact, if only for a short time, to a startling center-stage position. To believe in the principles of neoliberal capitalism is to believe that the lives of the poor are expendable as long as the few who make up the ruling class live in comfort. Even further, to believe that this expendability is natural—that there is nothing that can be done to resist this practice—is nothing less than deliberate extermination of the poor. There is nothing natural about neoliberalism. We cannot continue believing in this myth and then display surprise when the poor lose their lives because of our ignorance.

The greatest victory for the neoliberal ideological program is profoundly destructive for humanity. In Margaret Thatcher's chilling but accurate words, "Economics are the method, but the object is to change the soul" (cited in Reed Jr., 2006), the main objective of the neoliberal project is to change the soul of humans; to foster a collective, mind-numbing acceptance of neoliberal policies which instruct us to believe in the supremacy of the private sector and individual choice. While several voices

have openly and boldly expressed their disgust at the blatant and wilful disregard for the interests of New Orleans' poor, a national sense of complacency is settling in. Younge observes that despite the feelings of agitation and fury at the inadequate response, without a "movement to harness it or ideology to advance" this anger, it quickly dissipated (2006, 13). For a few weeks, perhaps months, after Katrina, issues of poverty and deeply embedded inequalities were discussed beyond the margins. But these uncomfortable truths soon outlived their welcome on the national agenda. Mainstream media outlets rarely reported on the status of the reconstruction process, local and federal policy decisions, or conditions of residents. They are, it would seem, urging us to forget New Orleans and its residents and re-settle into a state of comforting amnesia. The neoliberal ideology does underscore policy decisions made about New Orleans, but our willing acceptance of such exploitation in the name of recovery is neoliberalism's greatest achievement.

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