Against Resilence

The Katrina Disaster and the Politics of Disavowal

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September 21, 2015

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Forgetting Commemoration

A few weeks ago, New Orleans went through the ten-year commemoration of the Hurricane Katrina disaster. In fact, there were several quite divergent modes of commemoration. At one end of the spectrum there was the Tenth Annual Katrina March and Second-line, the most serious political event of the day, which sponsored speeches and performances at the site of the levee break in the devastated and still depopulated Lower Ninth Ward. It had a significant turnout, though certainly under a thousand participants.

At the other extreme was the Krewe of O.A.K, which practiced a kind of "commemorating by not commemorating" in its annual Mid-Summer Mardi Gras parade and celebration. O.A.K. stands for "Outrageous and Kinky," in addition to "Oak St.," its starting point at the Maple Leaf Bar. The parade, noted for its wild costumes and zany ambience, attracted perhaps 10,000 to this Carrollton neighborhood event. According to the *Times-Picayune*, the Krewe chose the theme "Tie Dye Me Up," to evoke the famous "Summer of Love," and "bring good vibes to this annual parade." It added: "No mention of the 'K' word, please."

Most of the "Katrina10" activities fell somewhere between the two extremes, but tended more in the direction of the Krewe of O.A.K., in that they were overwhelmingly in a *celebratory mode*. This was certainly true of the official commemoration that was sponsored by the city administration and local businesses. It focused on recovery, economic and educational successes, and, above all, the remarkable "resilience" of the local community. It presented an upbeat official narrative that erased many of the ongoing problems and tragedies of the city, in addition to effacing many of the most significant struggles and achievements of the community, when these did not fit into the official story. The major concerns here will be this official narrative, which pictures the city's post-Katrina history through the distorting lens of a politics of disavowal, and the many realities that this narrative disavows.

What then, is "disavowal?" It is in fact something that is quite common in everyday experience, and which we have all experienced many times. We often face two psychological processes in which truth is negated. One of these, which is called "denial," is a defense mechanism in which the truth can never be consciously recognized or spoken. Denial is *silence*. The other process, which is called "disavowal," is a defense mechanism in which the truth is at times recognized or spoken, but is systemically forgotten or silenced at every decisive moment, when it really counts. Disavowal is *re-silence*. The Hurricane Katrina Ten-Year Anniversary has been primarily a celebration of disavowal and re-silencing.

Resilience Kills

Much of this re-silencing has gone under the banner of "resilience." While this term has been used throughout the post-Katrina period, it has become a kind of watchword and rallying-cry for the official commemoration and the politics of disavowal that it expresses. Even beyond its ideological uses, it is in some ways a strange term to use to describe post-Katrina New Orleans. Resilience is defined as: "The capability of a strained body to recover its size and shape" and "an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change."[1]

[1] "Full definition of Resilience" in *Merriam Webster Dictionary*; online at www.merriam-webster.com.

Neither of these definitions describes post-Katrina New Orleans terribly well. As for the "strained body" part, consider this. If someone had a serious accident or disease and after ten years is alive and doing tolerably well—except at only three-fourths of his or her original size—we wouldn't think of that as the most admirable of recoveries. There are also problems with the "easily" part. Harry Shearer deserves much credit for defying the forces of complacency and self-satisfaction and boldly popularizing the term "the Big Uneasy."[2] Whether New Orleanians have fully recovered or not, the last ten years have not been particularly "easy' for most of them. Maybe these long years weren't so hard for those who have had the good fortune to be extremely wealthy, delusional, comatose or dead. But for a large segment of the rest, they have been difficult and even excruciating.

But the major problem with the term is its ideological use. In Post-Katrina New Orleans, "resilience" is associated with tendencies toward regression and mindless compliance. The voice of resilience says, "Congratulations, you're still here! (Those of you who are still here)," and asks, "How about doing a second line, or cooking up some gumbo for the tourists?" It asks, a bit more delicately, "How about making their beds, cleaning their toilets, serving their food and drinks, maybe even selling them some drugs, and doing a special dance for them at the club." It urges, above all, "Be resilient. Be exactly what you are expected to be."

The ideology of resilience ignores the extraordinary creative achievements and visionary aspirations of New Orleanians in the post-Katrina period, and celebrates survival, bare life. It focuses instead on the community's continued existence as a site for imposition of corporate-state hierarchically-formulated development plans. All the complements to the people of New Orleans for being resilient are a bit condescending and demeaning. After all, it's not the greatest tribute to people to complement them on their ability to survive. "Thank you for not just giving up and dying *en masse*. If you had done that would have been somewhat of an embarrassment to the greatest country in the world."

The real post-Katrina story is not a story of resilience. More on this later, but if you want to see the real post-Katrina story, check out the film *Big Charity*.[3] It's an account of heroic courage and dedication to saving lives and caring for the community. It's a story of crimes against humanity that are systematically repressed and forgotten. If you want to see the real post-Katrina story (in this case, of the larger region of Southeast Louisiana), check out the film *My Louisiana Love*.[4] It's the story of passionate struggle for the beloved community and the beloved land. It's another story of crimes against humanity, and also against nature, that are systematically repressed and forgotten. Both sides of this story, the nobility of struggle and dedication on the one hand, and the criminality and betrayal on the other, are lost in the fog of resilience. They are lost in the resilencing process. They are lost in the Official Story. It is versions of this Official Story that were presented by former President Bush, President Obama, and Mayor Landrieu as part of the official Katrina commemoration.

[2] See the website for his film *The Big Uneasy*; online at www.thebiguneasy.com.

[3] Website for *Big Charity: The Death of America's Oldest Hospital*; online at www.bigcharityfilm.com.

[4] Website for *My Louisiana Love*; online at www.mylouisianalove.com.

The Official Story

The Bush Version

According to Former President George W. Bush's typically blunt and non-nuanced judgment, "New Orleans is back, and better than ever." In fact, he is *amazed* by what has happened in New Orleans. This is not so astounding, since he specializes in being amazed. He was amazed by the atrocities of September 11, 2001, claiming that "nobody could have predicted" that there would be an attack on the World Trade Center—though about ten years before there had been an attack on the World Trade Center. Hint! He was amazed by the post-Katrina flood in 2005, exclaiming that no one could have "anticipated the breach of the levees"—though several experts actually did, and it had already happened in recent memory during Hurricane Betsy.[5] Hint!

So we should not be surprised, much less amazed, by Bush's reaction to Post-Katrina New Orleans in 2015: "Isn't it amazing?" What amazes him is that "the storm nearly destroyed New Orleans and yet, now, New Orleans is the beacon for school reform,"[6] But what alternative universe does he inhabit? On Planet W, "the storm nearly destroyed New Orleans?" But what storm? Hurricane Katrina didn't hit New Orleans and even what missed New Orleans had lost much of its force by the time its winds came our way. The disaster was not a storm, but rather flooding caused by criminal governmental and corporate negligence. Furthermore, over a quarter of New Orleans was not damaged at all by the storm and flooding and most of the rest could have recovered relatively easily given a reasonable level of response and support.[7] What should be truly astounding is that the victimizers of the city made the recovery so difficult for the victims. Also, Bush should also not be amazed by the quasi-privatization of the school system, since his own administration was responsible for promoting exactly the kind of predatory opportunism and disaster capitalism that produced that system.

Does Bush remember *anything* about what actually happened? Please excuse the foolish question. Of course, he has no idea, and he's counting on everyone else to forget, if they ever knew. As he twice implores of his listeners, "*I hope you remember what I remember*." This recalls the delusional wife-killer Fred Madison in *Lost Highway*, David Lynch's classic story of monumental forgetfulness. As Fred announces, unconsciously diagnosing his delusional rewriting of history, "I like to remember things my own way." Similarly, Bush's voice is the voice of denial. Never even reaching the level of *re-silence*, it is just dumb silence about anything that counts.

The Obama Version

Curiously, the same day that Obama visited New Orleans I got an email from him saying, "Let me be perfectly frank — I'm emailing to ask you for $5…."[8] My first thought was, "Why don't you

[5] Hurricane Betsy was a larger hurricane than Hurricane Katrina and hit New Orleans directly, with the passing slightly west of the city..

[6] Cain Burdeau and Jeff Amy "George W. Bush Visits Disaster Zone, 10 Years After Katrina" (Associated Press, Aug. 28, 2015); online at: hosted.ap.org.

[7] It is significant, and not widely known, that 28% of housing units in the city were not damaged, and 58% were not damaged seriously. See Rachel E. Luft with Shana Griffin, "A Status Report on Housing in New Orleans after Katrina: An Intersectional Analysis" in Beth Willinger, ed. *Katrina and the Women of New Orleans (* New Orleans: Newcomb College Center for Research on Women, Dec. 2008); online at webcache.googleusercontent.com.

[8] Barack Obama, "important (don't delete)." An email from Barack Obama at dccc@dccc.org to John Clark at clark@loyno.edu (Thu 8/27/2015 11:59 AM).

pass by so I can give you the $5 in person! That would give me a chance to be perfectly frank too, and explain how things in post-Karina New Orleans are not quite as rosy as you've been painting them to be." I was about to send the email to Air Force One, and then it occurred to me that Obama's problem is not really a lack of information, as his Katrina speech in fact confirmed.

Admittedly, Obama's speech was infinitely better than the ramblings of Bush, whose unfortunate native tongue is English As a Second Language. Obama usually manages to combine a certain amount of intelligent and lucid analysis (even if it is often intelligently and lucidly deceptive) with a calculated folksiness aimed at mitigating any sins of excessive sophistication and erudition.

Folksiness prevailed in his Katrina anniversary address, which gets the award for more clichés per sentence than any speech ever given here, and perhaps anywhere else on Planet Earth. In just the first paragraph, he managed to dispose of many of the obligatory local references, including "Where y'at," "the Big Easy," "the weather in August," "shrimp po' boy," "Parkway Bakery and Tavern," "Rebirth," "the Maple Leaf," "Mardi Gras," and "what's Carnival for."[9] Fortunately, somebody caught him before he told the crowd "jockamo fee nané."

But the agenda was basically about re-silencing. Obama enthusiastically promoted the neoliberal corporate capitalist project, including the quasi-privatization and de-democratization of the local schools. He actually citied some damning statistics about child poverty and economic inequality in New Orleans. And he noted that the city "had been for too long been plagued by structural inequalities." "Had been" before Hurricane Katrina, that is.

But this brief moment of quasi-recognition was lost in the deluge of upbeat generalization. He told the city that "the progress that you have made is remarkable" in achieving, among other things, a "more just New Orleans." In case we didn't get his point, he added, "The progress you've made is remarkable." So we are told that post-Katrina New Orleans is not only a model of opportunity for entrepreneurs and developers, as the Chamber of Commerce will enthusiastically inform us, but also a model for *progress in justice*.

Obama's voice is clearly the voice of disavowal. He knows the truth, and he can even tell you that he knows it. But this truth is consigned to footnotes and asides to a larger ideological pseudo-truth that is to be the focus of our attention. The truth is there only to be strategically forgotten. The dominant discourse remains the verbose but empty speech of re-silencing. So much for *les Menteurs en Chef*.[10]

The Landrieu Version

Next, the local political and corporate establishment, led by mayor Mitch Landrieu, joined in the celebration. For the anniversary, Landrieu and Walmart, along with other corporate entities, co-sponsored a "Citywide Day of Service." It's unfortunate that the community couldn't organize a large-scale volunteer effort itself, as it did after Katrina, when our state and corporate

[9] "Transcript of President Obama's Katrina speech" in *NOLA.com* (August 28, 2015); online at www.nola.com. The phrase "jockamo fee nané" from the song "Iko, Iko" is a universal favorite, but it is not generally known that it was an invitation by Mardi Gras Indians to their rivals to engage in a certain humiliating act. See "If You Don't Like What The Big Chief Say…. (An Interview with Mr. Donald Harrison, Sr., Big Chief of the Guardians of the Flame)" in *Mesechabe: The Journal of Surre(gion)alism* 8 (Spring 1991); online at www.academia.edu.

[10] "Lying Chiefs of State," which recalls the Chef Menteur Pass in New Orleans East, which, according to one story, was named by the Choctaw "Oulabe Mingo," or "Lying Chief,' after the French colonial governor.

masters largely abandoned the city, except as opportunities for incarceration and then exploitation emerged. The mayor's version of a "Day of Service" was four hours of service projects in the morning, followed by an hour of speeches and celebration, and then a break, before three more hours of speeches and celebration.

From Landrieu's perspective, there was much to celebrate. On his "Katrina 10: Resilient New Orleans" web site he claims that the Katrina disaster turned out to be a positive opportunity and as a result "New Orleans has turned itself around and has built the city that we should've built in the first time."[11] Presumably the city had to wait 287 years for the current experiment in neoliberal social engineering to arrive. Landrieu's boosterish assessment of Post-Katrina New Orleans can be summed up in his depiction of it as "America's best comeback story." In a blatant attempt to mislead readers, he boasts that "the New Orleans region has now returned to approximately 95 percent of its pre-Katrina population."[12] In fact, as a recent report shows, "New Orleans is now at about 78 percent of its population before the storm" and the recent growth rate has been 1.4%.[13] Aggregating the population with surrounding parishes is a transparent ploy to confuse the public.

Many have not come back to New Orleans because of lack of opportunities here and because the dominant model of development has created obstacles to their return. To make them disappear through fake statistics is an outrage. Landrieu obviously didn't grasp the ludicrous but painful irony of calling the post-Katrina era, in which almost a quarter of the population did not return, "the best *come-back story*" in U.S. history!

Landrieu's voice is the voice of denial, deception and delusion. Let's be explicit about what is denied, silenced and re-silenced.

Resilencing

Social Injustice

New Orleans, this city that has, according to Obama, made "remarkable" strides in becoming "more just," is second on the list of U.S. cities with the most extreme economic inequality, and the gap between rich and poor has been increasing.[14] The level of economic inequality in New Orleans is comparable to the rate in Zambia.[15] It has very high levels of child poverty in particular and widespread poverty in general. Recent studies have shown that 39% of children in New Orleans live in poverty, which is 17% above the national average, and childhood poverty has been increasing since 2007. The 27% poverty rate for families is also very high compared to other U.S. cities and by historic standards for New Orleans. The Jesuit Social Research Institute recently issued a report showing the shockingly high cost of living compared to income in Louisiana, but

[11] Polly Mosendz, "New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu on the 10th Anniversary of Hurricane Katrina" in *Newsweek* (August 29, 2015); online at www.newsweek.com.

[12] Mitchell J. Landrieu, "About the Project," in *Katrina 10: Resilient New Orleans*; online at katrina10.org.

[13] Jeff Adelson, "New Orleans area population still growing post-Katrina, but slowly: Post-Katrina increase slows to a plateau," in *The New Orleans Advocate* (March 28, 2015); online at www.theneworleansadvocate.com.

[14] This is according to a Bloomberg analysis, "Most Income Inequality, U.S. Cities," on *Bloomberg Business* (updated April 15, 2014); online at www.bloomberg.com.

[15] Robert McClendon, "New Orleans is 2nd worst for income inequality in the U.S., roughly on par with Zambia, report says," on *NOLA.com* (August 19, 2014), online at www.nola.com.

especially in the New Orleans area, which has seen skyrocketing property values and rents.[16] In addition, despite heroic efforts by local groups, homelessness has remained a severe problem in the city.

We must not forget the over 100,000 citizens of New Orleans who have never returned, many because of lack of recovery support and the vast proportional increases in cost of living for poor and working class people. The replacement of public housing by mixed-income housing that displaces most former residents has also contributed to a process that should be recognized as a form of ethnic and economic cleansing. There has also been a 55% decrease in public transportation service as of 2015, and the budget of the Regional Transit Authority was still almost 40% below its pre-Katrina level in 2013.[17] New Orleans was once appreciated by locals and newcomers for its combination of *joie de vivre*, rich culture, and modest cost of living, especially for housing. But this financial accessibility disappeared in the post-Katrina housing crisis and the drastic cutback in affordable public services.

The struggle over housing was a crucial one (and one in which I participated actively for a long time). However, the movement unfortunately fell under the influence of narrow leftist sectarians who suffer from fetishism of the state.[18] The result was a one-sided obsession with the less than 5% of pre-Katrina units that were in public housing and an almost complete neglect for the half of all housing consisting of commercial rental units, not to mention a lack of concern for the less privileged home owners who were struggling desperately for just and adequate compensation for damages. Almost 52,000 of about 79,000 seriously damaged housing units were rental property.[19] The vocal activist focus on public housing divided the citizenry and played into the hands of developers and their bureaucratic allies, who quickly developed plans to reengineer both public housing and the housing market in general for purposes of profitable ethnic cleansing and gentrification. The possibility for a broad-based movement for housing justice was lost and the result has been ten years of continuing injustice to renters in particular.

Another area of acute injustice in post-Katrina New Orleans has been health care. Medical services collapsed after the disaster, have continued to lag in some areas, and have remained in a state of crisis in others. Mental health care and addiction treatment have suffered the worst. Emergencies related to mental health, alcoholism and drug addiction are all most commonly treated in the same manner, by consignment to Orleans Parish Prison. Furthermore, one of the great tragedies of the neoliberal re-engineering of New Orleans was the fraudulent condemning and closing of Charity Hospital and the deliberate destruction of a historic mid-city neighborhood for the sake of lucrative opportunities in developing its replacement. Charity could have been returned to service within days when it was most desperately needed, immediately after the disaster. The story of its permanent closing is rife with lies by the Jindal administration, and involved literal sabotage of the closed facility in an effort to secure FEMA funds for a new medical center. The public was duped out of $283 million dollars by deception and disinformation that disguised the fact that the old hospital could have been successfully adapted to fulfill cur-

[16] Jesuit Social Research Institute, "Too Much for Too Many: What does it cost families to live in Louisiana?" in *JustSouth Quarterly*; online at www.loyno.edu.

[17] See Ride New Orleans, "The State of Transit Ten Years After Katrina"; online at rideneworleans.org.

[18] Legendary activist and cofounder of Common Ground Malik Rahim once replied to such sectarianism (at a US Federation of Worker Cooperatives national conference in New Orleans) that the goal must be the replacement of so-called "public housing" with democratic, resident-controlled community housing.

[19] See Luft and Griffin.

rent needs.[20] In addition, it is likely that many lives were lost and a great many people suffered needlessly as a result of this criminal injustice.

All of these injustices have been part of the neoliberal engineering process that has gone under the rubric of "New Orleans as a Boutique City." This concept was met with considerable contempt in the early days after Katrina, but it has returned repeatedly with a vengeance. Recently, Sean Cummings, a prominent real estate developer and CEO of New Orleans Building Corporation, boasted that "the city is a magnet again for new talent and new ideas, co-creating a new New Orleans." Cummings disingenuously explained that "a boutique city stands for something. It's original. It's authentic. It's one-of-a-kind."[21] In fact, this isn't what it means at all. New Orleans already stood for something, was original, was authentic, and was one of a kind. Creating a "new" New Orleans is based on a quite different agenda. To make it into a "boutique city" means that it will be marketed to more affluent tourists, to new residents from the entrepreneurial and technical ("Silicon Bayou") sectors , and to wealthy buyers looking for a second or third home in a town with appropriate entertainment and shopping opportunities.

The Education Disaster

Post-Katrina New Orleans has gained considerable notoriety as the site of one of the nation's most far-reaching experiments in the destruction of a public school system and its replacement with a network of charter schools. Andrea Gabor, in a brief analysis recently published in the *New York Times*, discusses many of the problems with charter schools in New Orleans that critics have long found to plague such schools everywhere.[22] The general case against these schools has been argued convincingly, indeed devastatingly, by Diane Ravitch in a series of articles in the *New Review of Books* starting with "The Myth of Charter Schools" and in her book *The Reign of Error*.[23]

Gabor applies many of these same arguments to the New Orleans case. She notes the discriminatory (a euphemism for "racist") nature of school reform. She cites "growing evidence that the reforms have come at the expense of the city's most disadvantaged children, who often disappear from school entirely and, thus, are no longer included in the data." Even establishment education figure Andre Perry, one-time CEO of the Capital One-University of New Orleans Charter Network, admits that "there were some pretty nefarious things done in the pursuit of academic gain," including "suspensions, pushouts, skimming, counseling out, and not handling special needs kids well." In other words, the case for charter schools depended in part on injustices to the less privileged students: those who in reality have the greatest needs, and who, from the standpoint of justice, deserve the most attention.

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[20] See the "Save Charity Hospital" website; online at www.savecharityhospital.com for extensive information on these issues. The film *Big Charity* is a good introduction to the entire story of deception, betrayal, and criminal opportunism. Spike Lee's *If God is Willing and the Creek Don't Rise* also covers many of the Charity Hospital issues well. See the website for the documentary online at www.hbo.com.

[21] Oscar Raymundo, "New Orleans Rebuilds As a Boutique City" on *BBC Travel* (11 February 2013); online at www.bbc.com.

[22] Andrea Gabor, "The Myth of the New Orleans School Makeover, in The New York Tims (Aug, 22, 2015); online at www.nytimes.com.

[23] See the *NYRB*'s Diane Ravitch page at www.nybooks.com and her book *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014).

Gabor points out the questionable nature of claims for high performance by charter schools. She observes that studies ignore the fact that many disadvantaged students have been excluded from high-performing schools or from schools entirely and do not appear in statistics. She cites a recent study that concluded that "over 26,000 people in the metropolitan area between the ages of 16 and 24 are counted as 'disconnected,' because they are neither working nor in school." The Cowen Institute for Public Education Initiatives was forced to retract, due to flawed methodology, a study that concluded that the re-engineered New Orleans school system had "higher graduation rates and better test scores than could be expected, given the socio-economic disadvantages of their students."[24] The biggest innovation introduced by charter schools may be that cheating on tests and reports, a practice once restricted to naughty students, has now become official policy.

However, the biggest flaw in defenses of charter schools in New Orleans is that they are based on comparison with the neglected and underfunded pre-Katrina school system. They do not consider what would have been possible if the same kind of support and resources that have been lavished on charter schools had been devoted to creating a just, democratic, community-controlled school system that is dedicated to the welfare of every student and every neighborhood in the city.

The Migration Disaster

In the midst of global turmoil over this issue, not a single politician was able to even speak the word "migrant" in relation to our city's recent history. As is often the case, *the truth is too big to be noticed.*

I grew up hearing New Orleans called "The Gateway to the Americas,"[25] a term that was popular during the long tenure of Mayor deLesseps "Chep" Morrison. It was only much later that I heard the story of United Fruit Company and the part of the history of plunder of Latin America that was directed from board rooms in New Orleans. I discovered that New Orleans was a gateway to the exploitation of those *Other Americas* that are excluded from the official definition of "America."[26] This aspect of history is, however, systematically forgotten.

Another forgotten reality is the fact that in many ways, New Orleans, "the Queen City of the South," is a *northern city*. This is true geographically. Our city lies at the northern edge of one of our great bioregional points of reference, the Western Mediterranean Sea, consisting of the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean.[27] This is also true culturally. We are a northern city because of our position at the northern edge of Latin America. Louisiana was for its first 121 years part of the French and Spanish empires, and New Orleans, in particular, has never entirely lost its Latin character. It is becoming more Latin once again.

Thus, we might have thought that the city would celebrate the renewed ties with Latin America that were created when Latino and Latina workers came to rebuild the city after the Katrina

[24] Jessica Williams, "Tulane's Cowen Institute retracts New Orleans schools report, apologizes" at *NOLA.com* (Oct. 10, 2014); online at www.nola.com.

[25] New Orleans aspires to regain that image, as a recent editorial story in *New Orleans Magazine* recounts. See "Rebuilding the Gateway" (June 2015); online at www.myneworleans.com

[26] See Stephen Duplantier, ed. *The Banana Chronicles*, an entire special issue of *Neotropica* magazine devoted to the story of the United Fruit Company and the exploitation of Central America; online at www.neotropica.info.

[27] The other great bioregional reality is, of course, the Mississippi River, and this is what makes us also a geographically southern city.

disaster. In reality, government and business gave at best an ambiguous welcome to these workers, even when they were most desperately needed. The authorities then either abandoned them, or redirected their attention to disposing of them. The local administration still gives lip service to the efforts of these workers in rebuilding the city, at least on ceremonial occasions. However, it does little to address their problems, while creating additional ones, and at the same time facilitating attempts to expel them from the city.

This treatment has been outrageously unjust and intolerable. For the past ten years, migrant workers and their families have been, and still are, subject to wage theft, dangerous health and safety conditions, housing discrimination, police harassment, arbitrary arrests, ethnic profiling, predation by criminals, terrorization by authorities, and subjection to demeaning tracking with ankle bracelets. In the early years after Hurricane Katrina, while migrants were hard at work rebuilbing the city, they were commonly called "Walking ATM's," since they were regularly preyed upon by thieves and had no recourse to a legal and penal system that was only interested in criminalizing the victims.[28] A recent interview with representatives of the Congress of Day Laborers (Congreso de Jornaleros) from WHIV radio's Katrina coverage is an excellent introduction to the experience of migrant workers and their families in post-Katrina New Orleans.[29]

We need to rethink that history and begin to celebrate New Orleans again as "the Gateway to the Americas." We just have to remember one thing this time: *A gateway opens in both directions.*[30]

The Incarceration Disaster

Randolph Bourne famously proclaimed, paraphrasing Hegel, that "war is the health of the state." What is usually forgotten is that war on its own citizens is the highest expression of the state's health. After Katrina we in New Orleans got to see what the state is like when all its mitigating qualities collapse and it is reduced to its essential repressive nature. This is the "minimal"—but maximally brutal—state. The state as a state of war against the people.

It is important that we remember the terroristic conditions that prevailed in a city with a penal system (the state's essential moment) and no legal system (the state's inessential moment). This is what existed in New Orleans during the post-Katrina "state of exception."[31] This period was a state of "exception," not in the sense that it varied in principle from the normal and unexceptional. It was "exceptional" only in the sense that the normal reached a level of intensity that it made it so conspicuous that it could not for a certain period of time (before resilencing) be ignored.

But resilencing has followed. Thus, we must remember. We must not forget the prisoners who were trapped in Orleans Parish Prison in the rising floodwaters after Katrina, or herded

[28] When one looks carefully at the perseverance and determination of these migrants in the face of struggles and extreme hardships, they make the locals look a lot less resilient by comparison.

[29] For information on the Congress of Day Laborers, a project of the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice, see nowcrj.org. For the WHIV interview, see "Mark Alain and Congress of Day Laborers" (Aug. 29, 2015) on WHIV radio; online at soundcloud.com. During the program, Dr. MarkAlain Dery interviews Brenda Castro and Santos Alvarado, representatives of the Congress of Day Laborers on the Katrina Tenth Anniversary. WHIV was founded by Dr. Dery, medical director for the Tulane T-Cell Clinic, and his coworkers. It is dedicated to "public health, human rights and social justice," and is New Orleans' only full-time grassroots community radio station.

[30] A clear recognition of the injustices done to migrants is so difficult for many because it necessarily leads to a questioning of the very foundations of nationalism and imperialism.

[31] For an excellent survey of post-Katrina penal and legal issues, see Sideris, Marina, "Illegal Imprisonment: Mass Incarceration and Judicial Debilitation in Post Katrina New Orleans" (Berkeley: University of California Berkeley, 2007); online at www.law.berkeley.edu.

away to spend countless hours on overpasses in the hot sun. We must not forget the horrors of the makeshift Greyhound Station Prison, "Guantanamo on the Bayou," where prisoners were put in outdoor wire cages, made to sleep on concrete floors, in oil and diesel fuel, where they were harassed and intimidated, and controlled by shootings with beanbag rounds.

We need to remember the subhuman conditions at Hunt Correctional Center, where inmates from OPP and victims of often arbitrary mass arrests after Katrina were herded together indiscriminately. Where they were thrown naked in bare cells, sometimes with hardened criminals or schizophrenics as cellmates. Where they were then given nothing to wear but jumpsuits, and nothing to read for over a month. Where they were often kept in cells for twenty-four hour a day. Where mattresses were taken away every day so prisoners could only sit or lie on concrete or metal. Where loud bells were rung every 15 minutes, every day, all day, in disciplinary tiers. We must remember the intimidation of citizens into forced labor with the threat of being sent to Hunt. We need to remember the period in which there was widespread police repression while racist vigilantes were allowed to terrorize some neighborhoods. We must remember the period in which power as domination was allowed to reveal its true face. The period in which *archy reigned supreme*.

Finally, we must remember one of the most horrifying of the realities that have been silenced, not only in Katrina commemorations, but in the everyday world of Big Easy business as usual. This is the brutal fact that New Orleans has for all these years been the world capital of "incarceration," which is merely a sanitized, Latinized term for the caging and torture of human beings. We must not forget that the United States leads the world in incarceration, that Louisiana leads the United States in incarceration, and that New Orleans leads Louisiana in incarceration. We must remember that in some ways incarceration in Louisiana has been the continuation of slavery by other means. We must never forget the murderous nature of a carceral system that destroys generations and destroys communities. This is a stark post-Katrina reality that no politician dares mention or commemorate.

The Ecological Catastrophe

Beyond all these forms of resilencing lies the most extreme form of post-Katrina disavowal, and disavowal regarding the fate of New Orleans itself. This concerns the social ecology of the city in relation to entrenched and accelerating global social ecological trends. No meaningful discussion of the future of New Orleans can afford to ignore the continuing loss of coastal wetlands, the implications of the accelerating rise in sea level, and the very real possibility (and long-term inevitability) of a much more powerful hurricane than Katrina hitting New Orleans directly. The specter of doom, indeed, highly likely doom, hangs over the city and it cannot be exorcised by denial, by disavowal, or by any amount of happy talk by politicians and corporate executives.

The depth of ecological disavowal was highlighted in a Katrina anniversary segment of the public radio program "On Point" Never during the hour-long program was the severity of the global ecological crisis and its implications for New Orleans really explored. However, I was struck in particular by an exchange with Dr. Paul Kemp, a Coastal Oceanographer and Geologist at Louisiana State University.[32] Kemp is one of the major advocates of Mississippi River diversion to create coastal wetlands. Paul Kemp is a good guy, standing up for the region, and, in particular,

[32] "On Point" (August 26, 2015); online at onpoint.wbur.org.

for the need to restore the coastal wetlands. But this is what makes his comments in some ways so troubling, since they also reflect the larger dominant ideology of disavowal.

Kemp didn't take on directly the details of how we are to cope with something between the three foot rise in sea level commonly accepted, and the ten foot rise recently suggested by a team headed by James Hansen and sixteen colleagues.[33] Furthermore, a rapid melting and collapse of large segments of the Greenland or Antarctic ice sheets would produce a much more rapid rise that would be devastating to coastal areas near or below sea level. The melting of the Greenland ice sheet would produce a twenty-foot rise in sea level, while that of the Antarctic ice sheet would produce a sixty-foot rise.[34] Most scientists believe that such effects will not be seen until into the next century.

Somehow, few think of a century as a comprehensible time span that has practical, concrete relevance. Even in relation to a three-hundred year old city. One might learn something from the ancient Hebrews, who posed the possibility that "the iniquity of the fathers" might be "visited on the children, to the third and the fourth generation."[35] Or from the Vedic Sages, who in the *Rig Veda* suggested that "the older shares the mistake of the younger"[36] Or from the Native Americans, who suggest that we consider the effects of our actions on the seventh generation. Or from the ancient Buddhist doctrine of karma, which, in literal terms, means taking responsibility for the way in which all the causes and conditions in which we are implicated have enduring consequences.

Kemp and others point out that if we can rebuild wetlands, to a certain degree the land will rise with sea level rise. And it is indeed true that in many ways our coastal wetlands are more ecologically adaptable than other kinds of coastline. However, such restorative approaches can only offer long term hope if global climate change is addressed much more effectively than nation-states and corporations have done or are indeed structurally capable of doing. If the worst scenarios occur, as they are likely to, given the persistence of the dominant global economic and political order, such projects will be no more than futile gestures in the long run.

Kemp concedes that "In a very large storm we are not going to be able to keep all the water out," but explained after evacuation there will be "teams" that will "make sure that the property will be protected. The host, Tom Ashbrook, asks the incisive question: "Is New Orleans going to be around as we get higher sea levels?" But Kemp evades this question. In a conspicuously off-point response, he explains that the city's "original defenses" were vegetation and that "the marshes and swamps provided protection against surge and waves." He notes that "we have a big river to work with," implying that these traditional defenses will once again protect the city in the same manner that they once did, if we work diligently on coastal restoration.

But the current threats are of a different order from those faced when our "original defenses" did their job so well. In 2002, the *Bill Moyers' Now* program did a piece that outlined starkly the dangers to New Orleans posed by what has long been called "The Big One."[37] In the segment,

[33] J. Hansen et al, "Ice melt, sea level rise and superstorms: evidence from paleoclimate data, climate modeling, and modern observations that 2 ℃ global warming is highly dangerous," in Atmos. Chem. Phys. Discuss., 15, 20059–20179, 2015; abstract online at www.atmos-chem-phys-discuss.net.

[34] National Snow and Ice Data Center, "Quick Facts on Ice Sheets"; online at nsidc.org

[35] Numbers 14:18.

[36] Thanks to Quincy Saul for this reference, and many other helpful suggestions concerning this discussion.

[37] "The City in a Bowl" (Nov. 20, 2002); transcript online at www.pbs.org. Excerpts from the original documentary are included in NOVA scienceNOW, "Hurricanes"; online at www.pbs.org.

Emergency Manager Walter Maestri points out that a direct hit from a major hurricane that stalled over the city could fill up the natural bowl between the levees and put twenty-two feet of water even in the relatively high ground of the French Quarter. Maestri also remarks that when his office participated in a mock Hurricane emergency[38] and saw projections of the effects of a major hurricane, model storm "Hurricane Delaney," on the city "we changed the name of the storm from Delaney to K-Y-A-G-B … kiss your ass goodbye … because anybody who was here as that Category Five storm came across … was gone."

An exchange from the interview is instructive. Daniel Zwerdling asks, "Do you think that the President of the United States and Congress understand that people like you and the scientists studying this think the city of New Orleans could very possibly disappear?" This is basically the same question that Tom Ashbrooke posed thirteen years later. But note the difference in the answer. Walter Maestri replies, "I think they know that, I think that they've been told that. I don't know that anybody, though, psychologically, you know has come to grips with that as — as a — a potential real situation." They know, but they cannot *act* as if they know. In other words, they respond to the situation through disavowal.

This kind of brutal realism is refreshing, and quite necessary, since our response needs to be proportional to the true magnitude of the problem, and we have cope with the fact that we are normally unable to respond in this manner. The documentary also included discussion of a proposal to build a large wall around the older parts of the city that are above sea level (more or less the quarter of the city nearest the river that didn't flood after Katrina), with huge gates that would be closed in times of heavy flooding, abandoning most of the city to destruction. This rather dramatic scenario may not be the correct approach, but at least has the merit of taking the long-term threats seriously. Taking possibly catastrophic future sea level rise seriously would require an even more ruthless sense of reality.

There is a fundamental obstacle to clear recognition of our true ecological predicament. If one really grasps the problem, one is forced to admit that the only sane, rational and humane response to such a problem is to take action that gets to its roots. This means becoming part of a local and global movement to destroy the system that is producing the catastrophe. Faced with this crisis of conscience and crisis of action, most who are not already lost in denial will succumb to the path of disavowal and try strategically to disremember what they have learned about the crisis. Fortunately for them, their path of bad faith will be supported an entire world of systematically distorted discourse and practice.

Dissident Voices & The Beloved Community

The final important thing that has been denied and disavowed, silenced and resilenced is in fact the most positive thing that came out of the disaster. This is the story of the community self-determination, collective creativity, mutual aid, compassion, and solidarity that arose out of the devastated city. This story is perhaps told best in scott crow's book *Black Flags and Windmills* and

[38] Louisiana Office of Emergency Preparedness exercise on 18 June 2002; see GlobalSecurity.org, "Hurricane Delaney"; online at www.globalsecurity.org.

in Francisco DiSantis and LouLou Latta's *Post-Katrina Portraits*.[39] It is a history that is obscured, minimized and even negated by the ideology of resilience.

Resilience is in itself merely an objective quality of a being, usually an organism or an ecosystem, and, by extension, a person or a community. It is not a moral virtue deserving of praise, though it is absurdly treated as one according to the resilientist ideology. The actual moral qualities related to resilience include diligence, perseverance, dedication, determination, and courage. Diligence or determination, which implies steadfastness and fortitude in the face of adversity, is in the Christian tradition one of the "seven Heavenly Virtues" that are counterposed to the "Seven Deadly Sins. Similarly, both *Adhiṭṭhāna* or resolute determination, and *Vīrya* or diligence, are among the *pāramitās*, or "perfections" in Buddhist ethics. And courage has been one of the cardinal virtues since the time of the ancient Greek philosophers.

A community needs a measure of resilience merely to survive. However, it needs *resolute courage* in order to break the chains of illusion and domination so that it can become free and self-determining, so that it can flourish and realize itself. The Katrina catastrophe loosened those chains for a moment, and the spectacle of the abject failure of the dominant political and economic system, and the flowering of grassroots mutual aid and solidarity inspired the beginnings of a movement to shake them off entirely.

In the wake of the Katrina disaster, Common Ground Collective volunteers talked about "a crack in history" or "a system crack" that had opened up, so that something new could emerge. A new world was emerging out of this fissure in the old, a new world based on values such as community and solidarity, care for one another, and care for the earth. If one reflects on these basic values, it is apparent this "new" world is in many ways a return to the very ancient idea of the beloved community.[40] It is a return to the commons, a world in which all our ancestors once lived. Just as the Peoples Hurricane Relief Fund and others fought in the name of a "Right of Return" to New Orleans, we need to be inspired by a "Right to Return" to the freedom of the commons. It was this spirit of the commons and the common that inflamed tens of thousands of (primarily) young people who came to New Orleans as volunteers, and sustained many thousands of local citizens who refused to leave or who returned quickly in order to serve and to save their own beloved communities.

The ideology of "resilience" is part of the process of paving over the crack, silencing the voice of insurgency. But not everyone looked to the Katrina anniversary as an opportunity to forget this history. In addition to the Tenth Annual Katrina March and Second-line[41], there was the Common

[39] scott crow, *Black Flags and Windmills: Hope, Anarchy, and the Common Ground Collective* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2014). *The Post-Katrina Portraits* consists of images of survivors and volunteers sketched by artist Francesco di Santis and accounts of their experiences written by the subjects. A collection was published as a large format art book, *The Post-Katrina Portraits, Written and Narrated by Hundreds, Drawn by Francesco di Santis* (New Orleans: Francesco di Santis and Loulou Latta, 2007) and can also be found online at www.flickr.com. See also Part V: "New Orleans: Common Grounds and Killers," in Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), pp. 231–303.

[40] This idea goes back two and a half millennia to the Buddhist concept of the *sangha* and two millennia to the Christian idea of the community of *agape*. In American history, it had its explicit roots in the thought of idealist communitarian philosopher Josiah Royce, and came to fruition and concrete actualization, as is well known, in the communitarian liberation theology of Martin Luther King. Before any of this history started, it was already implicit in the way of life of indigenous peoples everywhere.

[41] "New Orleans Katrina Commemoration" Facebook page; online at www.facebook.com

Ground Collective Ten Year Reunion[42] and the Fifth Annual Southern Movement Assembly.[43] All of these dissident commemorations carried on the spirit of the post-Katrina radicalism, looking back to a history of grassroots struggle and communal creativity and forward to a future that will not only remember but also continue that history.

Almost ten years ago, reflecting on the scenes of post-Katrina destruction and on the recovery communities that were also emerging as communities of liberation and solidarity, I made the following hopeful observation:

"At the same time that the state and corporate capitalism have shown their ineptitude in confronting our fundamental social and ecological problems, the grassroots recovery movement has continued to show its strength, its effectiveness, and its positive vision for the future. Most importantly, within this large and diverse movement, some have begun to lay the foundation for a participatory, democratically self-managed community based on mutual aid and solidarity."[44]

I took as the prime example of this communitarian creativity the work of the Common Ground Collective, which, I said,

"operates several distribution centers, two media centers, a women's center, a community kitchen, several clinics, and various sites for housing volunteers. Its current projects include house gutting, mold abatement, roof tarping, tree removal, temporary housing, safety and health training, a community newspaper, community radio, bioremediation, a biodiesel program, computer classes, childcare co-ops, worker co-ops, legal assistance, eviction defense, prisoner support, after-school and summer programs, anti-racism training, and wetlands restoration work."[45]

Fragments of this emerging community of liberation and solidarity have endured and some have even grown and developed. True, this transformative vision has remained, as of today, largely unrealized in the face of the forces of normalization, cooptation and resilencing. Yet, many in New Orleans, indeed a growing number, still strive to realize this vision, and seek to learn from our traumatic history a way beyond the chains of illusion and domination to communal freedom.

Perhaps the solution to our impasse is simply a matter of recognizing the obvious and acting accordingly. We need to admit that the disaster is permanent, and that it is of world-historical, indeed, earth-historical proportions. It seemed like a miracle that ten years ago, in the midst of devastation and abandonment, tens of thousands of volunteers could come together in post-Katrina New Orleans in a spirit of communal solidarity. Can there be a miracle today that is proportional to the magnitude of our challenge? The Earth itself, the *Oikos*, is our Common Ground. Our Time in History, the *Kairos*, is our Common Ground.

In a sense, I must ask today exactly the same question that I asked myself and others in the months after the Katrina disaster. In the Spring of 2006, I wrote an article that probed the psychological and ontological depths of devastation, and posed the political, and ultimately existential, question, "Do You Know What It Means?"[46] This is still the question. Will we put the disaster behind us, even as it continues and indeed intensifies at its deepest levels, or will we finally learn

[42] "Common Ground Collective 10 Year Reunion" Facebook page; online at www.facebook.com

[43] Anna Simonton, "Amid Katrina Commemoration Spectacle, a Southern Freedom Movement Takes Shape" in *Truthout* (Sept. 1, 2015); online at www.truth-out.org

[44] John P. Clark, *The Impossible Community: Realizing Communitarian Anarchism* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 210.

[45] Ibid, p. 211.

[46] John Clark, "New Orleans: Do You Know What It Means?" in *New: Translating Cultures/Cultures Traduites* 2 (2006); online at www.academia.edu.

its lessons? Will we finally learn how to think and act: for ourselves, for the community, and for the Earth?

The rest is resilence.

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Against Resilence
The Katrina Disaster and the Politics of Disavowal
September 21, 2015

<www.newclearvision.com/2015/09/21/against-resilence>