AFTER THE STORM

In the Wake of Katrina

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By the time you read this issue of the *Du Bois Review*, it will be nearly a year after the disaster caused by Hurricane Katrina swept the Gulf Coast and roiled the nation. While this issue does not concentrate on the disaster, (the next issue of the *DBR* will be devoted solely to research on the social, economic, and political ramifications of the Katrina disaster), the editors would be amiss if we did not comment on an event that once again exposed the deadly fault lines of the American racial order. The loss of the lives of nearly 1500 citizens, the many more tens of thousands whose lives were wrecked, and the destruction of a major American city as we know it, all had clear racial overtones as the story unfolded. Indeed, the racial story of the disaster does not end with the tragic loss of life, the disruption of hundred of thousands of lives, nor the physical, social, economic, and political collapse of an American urban jewel. The political map of the city of New Orleans, the state of Louisiana (and probably Texas), and the region is being rewritten as the large Black and overwhelmingly Democratic population of New Orleans was dispersed out of Louisiana, with states such as Texas becoming the perhaps permanent recipients of a large share of the evacuees.

Racial divisiveness also followed in the wake of the hurricane. Kanye West, the popular rap star and producer, voiced the sentiments of many African Americans when he stated that President Bush "didn't care about Black people," and that the media was being racist by labeling images of Whites getting food as survivors, and Blacks engaging in the same activity as looters.[1] Lack of trust in the government generally, and President Bush specifically, was reinforced by a video released by the Associated Press (AP) which showed the president being warned by his top advisers that the levees would break, the city was likely to flood, and that the Superdome was a further disaster waiting to happen. This stunning revelation flatly refuted Bush's early and vociferous pronouncements that he had received no warning that the levees were in danger of breaking, nor that New Orleans faced a potentially dire situation.

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In sum, for the second time during the Bush presidency the nation experienced a severe trauma.

National traumas such as the terrorist attacks of September 11th can, some argue, bring the nation together. The Katrina disaster did not. For example, the extraordinary racial divide in public opinion regarding the president persists in various domains, including the war in Iraq and whether protesting that war is unpatriotic, and the nation's progress toward racial equality. Further, an incredibly large racial gap exists in the interpretation of the events that transpired in Katrina's aftermath. While there is much heterogeneity on these issues within different racial and ethnic groups in the U.S., including African Americans, the racial gap, particularly between Blacks and Whites, overwhelms the differences found within individual racial groups. These differences are so large that one recalls the Kerner Commission Report on Civil Disorders of a quarter of a century ago. While it may not be the case that today we live, as the Kerner Commission suggested, in two worlds—one Black, one White—it would be accurate to state that Blacks and Whites do indeed *perceive* two different worlds and consequently have diametrically opposed positions on many of the key issues that face this nation.

The magnitude of the differences between Blacks and Whites (where the differences were the largest) can be seen in the following results.[2] Nearly 90% of Blacks believed that the people who did not leave the city failed to do so because they were trapped, not because they were too stubborn to leave. Only 57% of White respondents agreed. Similarly, 84% of Blacks thought that the federal response would have been faster if the majority of New Orleans residents had not been Black, but only 20% of Whites agreed. Not surprisingly, given the above results, less than 10% of Blacks thought that Kanye West's remarks were unjustified, while a clear majority of Whites, 56%, did believe that West's remarks were unjustified. On average, 79% of African Americans believed that the federal government should do what was needed to reconstruct the city and restore the evacuees to their homes. Nearly half of White Americans polled, 46%, believed that fiscal responsibility was more important than reconstruction and restoration.

The gulf of the racial divide in the wake of Katrina cannot be denied when one finds that 90% of Blacks believed that Katrina had something to indicate to the nation about the persistence of racial inequality, while only 38% of Whites agreed. This last statistic reflects a deep and more general division between Blacks and Whites. Nearly 80% of Blacks believe that racial equality will either never be achieved in the United States, or at least not in their lifetime. A majority of Whites, 66%, view a very different world—one in which racial equality has already been or will soon be achieved. Given the great dissatisfaction that Blacks feel about the status of the racial order in the U.S., their distrust of the current president, and intense anger about the criminally inept government response to the crisis, it is not surprising that many conspiracy theories have a substantial hold among the Black population in New Orleans.[3]

Another disturbing manifestation of the racial divide can be found in the post-storm media coverage. By and large, the media (and much of the White public) treated as toxic any claim to the effect that (a) there was a racial component involved in determining who was most likely to end up as a victim of the storm and its aftermath, (b) there was a division in public opinion in the aftermath of the storm (or, if there was such a division, African American perceptions were outside the bounds of what could be considered reasonable), or (c) the government's response (at any level) was shaped by the perceived race of the majority of New Orleans residents. A Knight Ridder report was seized upon by many in the media to show that Whites were

overrepresented among the storm's dead and that any suggestion that Blacks were especially vulnerable was so much racial "paranoia." But a re-analysis of the data by social scientists at the New Vision policy institute has shown that Whites were actually *underrepresented* among Katrina's casualties. When confronted with the depth of the racial divide over Katrina in public opinion, a columnist for the *Wall Street Journal* asserted that, "The truth about race that Katrina illuminates, then, is that, at least when it comes to matters involving race, black Americans are extreme racial outliers."[4] He blamed Blacks' views on race in general, and Katrina specifically, on "forty years" of bad racial social policy. That differences in perception could have both historical roots and systematically different outcomes and experiences in today's racial environment has eluded much of the media.

Efforts to construct a race-neutral or color-blind analysis of Katrina, much like the problem of race more generally, are contradicted by the durable interest in New Orleans and the rebuilding effort. That is, we suspect that much of the reason that Katrina continues to command an unusual degree of salience nationwide is precisely because it revealed so much about the modern state of this nation's historic racial divide. It has already produced an unprecedented level of charitable giving (far exceeding what occurred in the wake of the 9/11 tragedy or the Asian Tsunami).[5] It has challenged America's conscience and self-image in a powerful way. To be sure, its wider political ramifications have yet to be decided. But, it seems fair to say that in the wake of President Bush's fifth trip to the region, there is widespread concern in the White House, and perhaps Republican circles more generally, that the botched handling of the relief effort may have deeper political consequences. This concern runs sufficiently deep that even the Republican-controlled House of Representatives issued a report blasting the inadequacy. The report states: "Our investigation revealed that Katrina was a national failure, an abdication of the most solemn obligation to provide for the common welfare. At every level—individual, corporate, philanthropic, and governmental—we failed to meet the challenge of Katrina."[6] Although this report sidesteps the question of race, detailed analyses increasingly make it clear that the news footage from the Superdome and the Convention Center were accurate in conveying the "racialized" character of the disaster. Demographer Jon Logan, for example, has shown the sharply unequal impact of the storm. As he explains: "In the city, for example, 75% of residents of damaged area were black, compared to undamaged areas where a majority of residents were white."[7]

Systematic discussion of these and other issues of concern to social scientists and citizens alike will have to wait until the next issue. Many aspects of the racial order that were acutely manifested in the aftermath of Katrina are, however, reflected in the articles in this issue of the *Du Bois Review*.

Michael Brown and David Wellman remind us that "Contemporary color lines result from the cumulative effect of racial exclusion, a process in which Whites accumulate racial advantages to the detriment of African Americans and Latinos." This is of course a central lesson of the Katrina disaster. In his discussion of U.S. Census Bureau practices and their implications for Puerto Rico and its citizens, Carlos Vargas-Ramos demonstrates that the state is an active participant in constructing racial orders at the same time that it masks systemic patterns of inequality. That the racial order is not a static entity, but one that evolves, is revealed in Dwonna Goldstone's article on how the University of Texas remained segregated in "other meaningful ways" even after formal desegregation. Both John Mugane and Kesha Fikes demonstrate (in separate articles) once again that the racial order, or as Du Bois himself so famously argued, the color line, is global in scope. Mugane's provocative study of "necrolinguistics" is centered on the immense importance that language

practices, and one's facility with those practices, have for shaping the fortunes of entire racial and ethnic groups in a world where linguistic dominance is another critical source of the ability to marginalize some groups. Fikes examines the complicated pattern of postcolonial racial dynamics in a former colonial state—Portugal. Andy Baker and Corey Cook examine the effects of the recent entry of Blacks into the U.S. political arena. The issue is rounded out by penetrating book review essays by Jennifer Lee on how immigration continues to transform America, Dianne Pinderhughes on conflicting images of Blacks in America, and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes on the roles that various religious practices play in society today.

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NOTES

1. As detailed below, nearly 90% of Blacks thought that West's remarks were justified; a majority of Whites disagreed.
2. These public opinion statistics are from the "2005 Racial Attitudes and the Katrina Disaster Study," Principal Investigators Michael Dawson, Cathy Cohen, and Melissa Harris-Lacewell. The study was based on a random sample of 1253 respondents, and the data was collected by Knowledge Networks between November 11 and November 18, 2005. More details and analytical results from this study will be reported in the next issue of the *Du Bois Review*.
3. As part of the 2005 study, Melissa Harris-Lacewell conducted interviews in New Orleans with African Americans. In the survey component of the study, only 11% of African Americans reported that they believed President Bush represented the interests of people like them.
4. The columnist was James Taranto, who posted the statement on the *Wall Street Journal* website, <WSJ.com>, in the section, "Best of the Web Today," on Friday, January 6, 2006, at 3:40 p.m. EST.
5. The totals are being tallied by the Center for Philanthropy at Indiana University: <http://www.philanthropy.iupui.edu/Hurricane_Katrina.html>.
6. This 2006 report is of the Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina, "A Failure of Initiative: Final Report of the Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina," Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, p. x.
7. This is from John R. Logan's unpublished 2006 report, "The Impact of Katrina: Race and Class in Storm-Damaged Neighborhoods," Spatial Structure in the Social Sciences, Department of Sociology, Brown University, pp. 7–8.