

# Spectacular Disaster: The Louisiana Superdome and Subsumed Blackness in Post-Katrina New Orleans

Brian Greening

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*Often enough, as in the contemporary United States, the association of place with memory, loss, and nostalgia plays directly into the hands of reactionary popular movements.<sup>1</sup>*

— Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson

*The pleasures of New Orleans come from a crucible of undeniable pain.<sup>2</sup>*

— George Lipsitz

On September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2006, the New Orleans Saints returned to the Louisiana Superdome following a vagabond season that had them playing “home” games in San Antonio and New York. An understandably bewildered and preoccupied franchise following the onslaught of Hurricane Katrina, the Saints finished the 2005 season dismally with three wins and thirteen losses. But on the emotional homecoming night, spurred on by a boisterous crowd, the former drifting franchise started the game strong by blocking a punt on the game’s fifth play. Special teams player Steve Gleason carried the ball into the end zone for a quick touchdown. Head coach Sean Payton pumped his fist. Quarterback Drew Brees grasped his helmet by the facemask and thrust it in the air. Fans pounded stands draped in Saints banners with their hands and feet to express their approval. Following a 23-3 win, the Saints presented the game ball to the city.

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<sup>1</sup> Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, “Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference,” *Culture, Power, Space: Explorations in Critical Anthropology* (Bakerville: Duke University Press, 1997), 41.

<sup>2</sup> George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 240.



Figure 1. Louisiana Superdome reopening ceremony, New Orleans, Louisiana, September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2006. © Alex Brandon, AP.

Monday Night Football announcer Tony Kornheiser proclaimed that the Saints' success, along with the rebirth of the Superdome, signaled the reemergence of the city of New Orleans. Careful observers could not help but wonder, though, whether Kornheiser was glossing over the complex memory the Superdome contained. Throughout its thirty-year existence, the Superdome has housed spectacles in one form or another. From the four Final Four basketball tournaments to the two Bowl Championship Series National Championship football games to the record six Super Bowls that took place there, the Superdome has largely contained the hypermasculine spectacle of male sporting events. But for a week's span—from late August, 2005, until the last evacuees were sent by bus to Houston on September 3<sup>rd</sup>—the Katrina-battered and breached Superdome housed New Orleans', indeed America's, most vulnerable citizens.

Following Katrina's landfall in New Orleans, with the Superdome serving as a media-saturated microcosm of the city that spawned it, tuned-in world citizens viewed stories about roving

murderous hordes, pedophiles raping infants, and makeshift morgues storing bodies by the hundreds in the Superdome's sublevels. By using these shocking (and often aggrandized or falsified) tales of intrigue as an in-road for their abject positioning of the mostly black urban poor, journalists and willing subscribers allowed for blackness to be either repositioned or reified as a space where, without supervision, lawlessness prevailed. In this period of strain, many journalists reverted to archaic color-based stereotypes.<sup>3</sup> Black people looted while white people salvaged; blacks were obdurate in their decision to remain in the city while whites were largely victims taken by surprise; blackness was temperamental and violent while whiteness was composed and unwavering. But the images from inside and just outside the Superdome often resisted these assertions, suggesting instead that government negligence and media malpractice produced negative portrayals of black citizens rather than the other way around.

In an effort to support my assertions above, I will use W. J. Thomas Mitchell's image-rendering model "sounding the idols." Adopted from Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of "sounding out idols," Mitchell broadens Nietzsche's method of striking at eternal, mystifying idols to entail "a delicate critical practice that [strikes] images with just enough force to make them resonate, but not so much as to smash them."<sup>4</sup> Mitchell's declaration that images are "doubly conscious" and paradoxical—that they are both alive and dead, powerful and weak, meaningful and meaningless—is in keeping with the images that issued forth from the Superdome shortly after Katrina hit.<sup>5</sup> In this study, I adopt Mitchell's concept of sounding the idols to show how images from within the Superdome speak against widespread news stories that portrayed New Orleans' "so poor and so black" citizens as agents of their own displacement rather than victims of a natural (or national) disaster.<sup>6</sup> I seek to

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* (Cambridge: Perseus, 2006), 174-175. Dyson reveals how "Journalists outdid each other in the competitive urge to describe and remythologize the sheer horror of the huddled black masses." Dyson claims that "the message seemed to be: 'If this is how they act, if this is who they are, then their inhumanity is a justification for not rushing to their rescue;'" Dyson feels this message was echoed by viewers.

<sup>4</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 7. See also: Friederich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*; and, *The Anti-Christ* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 32.

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell, 7.

<sup>6</sup> While viewing post-Katrina scenes from devastated New Orleans neighborhoods on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005, CNN Situation Room host and longtime journalist Wolf Blitzer said the following about citizens wading through the floodwater: "... So many of these people, almost all of them that we

problematize the polarizing news stories coming out of post-Katrina New Orleans by examining rumor-laden accounts from in and around the Superdome during the weeklong ordeal following Hurricane Katrina's landfall and juxtaposing them with pictures that resist these assertions. In the days after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, the Superdome served as a site of contested visual space where whiteness faded into the background of images, out of consciousness, while black bodies bore the burden of the white gaze.

With the fifth anniversary of Katrina's onslaught recently passed, this study uses images and narratives from in and around the Superdome to resist two assertions made by a cohort of journalists in the post-Katrina aftermath: first, that blackness is a menacing identity marker; and second, that the rebuilt Superdome is a signal of New Orleans' "rebirth." All of the images in this article can be found on blogs, websites of non-profit organizations, and various sets of photographs on the image-hosting online community Flickr. They represent a modicum of available images, produced by photojournalists and lay folk alike, capturing the horrific conditions endured by citizens of the post-Katrina Gulf Coast. These images, and countless others like them, challenge the racial essentialisms and faulty claims of representation mentioned above. This study contends that viewers can "sound the idols" of images from the Superdome to refute pejorative stories proliferated by various medias to bring this building's complex meanings into clearer view. As the post-Katrina Superdome revealed, the meaning and symbolism of a sports stadium—constructed to ease spectacle viewing for gathered fans and television audiences—changes following a "refuge of last resort" designation such as the one levied by New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin.<sup>7</sup> Though it may be appealing to declare New Orleans "reborn" in the wake of a renewed stadium and a rebounding sports franchise, Americans must not distance themselves from the history this structure envelops.

The tragedy that befell New Orleans citizens is one that brought the conjoined issues of class and race to the forefront of American consciousness. If only for a moment, media consumers who previously subscribed to the notion that New Orleans was a

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see, are so poor, and they are so black, and this is going to raise lots of questions for people who are watching this story unfold."

<sup>7</sup> Russell McCulley, "'We Need to Pray': Katrina, the 'Perfect' Hurricane, to Hit Louisiana," *Reuters* (August 29, 2005). In his article, McCulley quotes Nagin, who refers to the Superdome as a refuge of last resort.

“cultural gumbo” saw the folly in this widely-held misconception.<sup>8</sup> In fact, before Katrina hit, New Orleans was a contested space where people of disparate racial backgrounds blended tensely, like the brackish waters where the Mississippi flows into the Gulf of Mexico.<sup>9</sup> But the storm and the ensuing flooding plunged eighty percent of the city under water, necessitating racial commingling. It created spectacular interzones, with the Superdome serving as the largest structure housing racially diverse evacuees. While recognizing the position of power his “racelessness” provides, Richard Dyer writes: “Race is not the only factor governing...people [who] everywhere struggle to overcome the prejudices and barriers of race, but it is never not a factor, never not in play. And since race in itself...refers to some intrinsically insignificant geographical/physical differences between people, it is the imagery of race that is in play.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, Dyer seeks to dislodge white authority by bringing whiteness into consciousness. Though not a disaster that struck only African Americans, Katrina galvanized racial disparities in the retelling of horror stories from within the Superdome. While the majority of those stories stemmed from black pain, they were often retold and mythologized by white journalists.

In the days leading up to and during Katrina’s onslaught, news stories varied as to how many people initially made their way into the Superdome. At least 5,000 and possibly as many as 10,000 became temporary residents of this sports facility during the original hurricane surge.<sup>11</sup> As worldwide media outlets released reports detailing Katrina’s unmatched strength and potential to land a direct hit to the vulnerable city, thousands of people either unwilling or unable to leave the city limits flocked to this structure. Captured by an Associated Press photographer Dave Martin, Figure 2 offers the viewer a glimpse of some of the first several thousand New Orleans residents to enter the Superdome. Shrouding his face with his left hand, the main figure in the frame walks around the Superdome as others in the background wait in lines to enter the space. The black

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<sup>8</sup> Dyson, 8-9.

<sup>9</sup> Dyson, 8. As Dyson notes, this process began in the 1960’s with deindustrialization: “In 1960, New Orleans was 37 percent black; in 1970 it was 43 percent black; by 1980, it was 55 percent black. In 1990 the city was 62 percent black, and by 2000 [New Orleans] was 67 percent black. As whites fled New Orleans, they turned to Jefferson Parish, which is 69.8 percent white and only 22.9 percent black; to St. Bernard Parish, which is 88.29 percent white with a paltry 7.62 percent black population; and to St. Tammany Parish, which is 87.02 percent white and 9.90 percent black. The black middle class sought refuge in Gentilly and New Orleans East, intensifying the suffering of a largely black and poor inner city.”

<sup>10</sup> Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 2.

<sup>11</sup> McCulley.

people in the frame do not acknowledge the camera; they are rather captured and objectified by it. The main figure's mannerisms remain unreadable. Perhaps he wants to avoid being on film, or he could possibly be distraught, consumed by thoughts of his family; or he conceivably could be revealing his acknowledgement of Mayor Nagin's shocking admission that the storm surge "'will most likely topple our levee system' and cause severe flooding."<sup>12</sup> Burdened by the weight of such bold and apocalyptic assessments, the viewer senses the uneasy dread shared by the people gathered and framed outside and within the Superdome, just before the din.



Figure 2. New Orleans residents entering the Superdome. © Dave Martin, AP.

Figure 2 (and others like it) showing black individuals walking, sitting, and waiting for the storm feeds into Michel Foucault's notion of ceaseless inspection ensuring the automatic functioning of power.<sup>13</sup> Rather than a single ubiquitous eye, New Orleans' displaced citizens

<sup>12</sup> McCulley.

<sup>13</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Random House, 1995), 201.

endured constant surveillance from a multitude of lenses. At first glance, media outlets from various corners of the globe would seem to resist any designation as a Foucauldian power-sustaining machine—they covered Katrina and provided news of human suffering compounded by a slow-to-react U.S. government. But these same media outlets took on a secondary function in New Orleans. “By means of an omnipresent and omniscient power,” these medias played a primary role in determining what characterized, what belonged to, and what happened to individuals.<sup>14</sup> As Johan Goldberg notes in a Katrina media retrospective, fact checking became optional. “The distortions, exaggerations and flat-out fictions being offered by New Orleans officials were accelerated and amplified by the media echo chamber... [swirling] around like so much free-floating sewage. It was as though journalistic skepticism of government officials was reserved for the White House, and everyone else got a free pass.”<sup>15</sup> When examined using Mitchell’s photographic double consciousness, the observer becomes aware that the scenes and images emanating from the Superdome remain trapped between race-based “naïve animism and hardheaded materialism.”<sup>16</sup> Rather than using images to vet the often redundant stories to emerge from a flooded New Orleans in the days following Katrina’s onset, a number of journalists, along with their audiences, allowed some captured photos and video footage to feed stories that vilified blackness rather than a few individuals, effectively equating darkness with criminality.

At first, few stories emerged from New Orleans in the *immediate* aftermath of Katrina. The storm struck on Monday, August 29<sup>th</sup> in the early morning and pounded the lower regions of the city with strong winds and rains, though according to one source New Orleans escaped Katrina’s fiercest winds.<sup>17</sup> But the Superdome’s temporary inhabitants watched as the edifice constructed to house spectacles yielded to the storm, thus ensuring their place in its spectacular history. Built to withstand the gale force winds of a category three

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<sup>14</sup> Foucault, 197.

<sup>15</sup> Jonah Goldberg, “Katrina Was Also a Media Disaster; Where are the Two-Year Retrospectives of the Journalistic Malpractice?,” *Los Angeles Times* (September 4, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Mitchell, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Bary Wigmore, “City Sunk by the Wrath of Katrina,” *London Daily Mail* (August 31, 2005). Also, in her “Failing Narratives,” Nicole R. Fleetwood notes how “Katrina had weakened and made landfall as a Category 3 storm, [with] the general assessment on the morning of its arrival... that New Orleans had been spared the destruction predicted by meteorologists across the nation.” See: Nicole R. Fleetwood, “Failing Narratives, Initiating Technologies: Hurricane Katrina and the Production of a Weather Media Event,” *American Quarterly* 58.3 (September 2006), 767-789.

hurricane, the Superdome proved incapable of enduring Katrina's wrath. City residents were forced to retreat to the outskirts of the Superdome as Katrina penetrated the roof.

Taken by Tyler Hicks, a photographer for *The New York Times*, Figure 3 reveals the holes cut in the crippled complex and the light filtering through.<sup>18</sup> The light in the frame beams down from one of the topmost contours of the fractured stadium, bathing the black body in the left center of the image in light and further darkening his frame until it resembles a silhouette. Caught in the crux created by the congruent light and stair angles, and foregrounded by two black women, this man slides between rows of plush seats toward the viewer. With eyes recessed to shadow and surrounded by flags, banners, scoreboards, and other evidence of the Superdome's intended purpose, the central figure is the only one of the three in the frame to potentially return the viewer's gaze. This image serves as an example of what Dyer calls the imagery of race. According to the author, because race is a social category rarely applied to white people, "they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, [whites] are just people."<sup>19</sup> Unlike the foregrounded man in Figure 2, the main figure in Figure 3 does not look away from the camera lens, compelling the photographer and those viewing the image to acknowledge the ills of socialized racism and concentrated poverty, both of which plague New Orleans. By peering back at the viewer, the figure in the center forces an interaction, perhaps even a recognition of this practice of visual othering to which Dyer refers.

Starting on August 31<sup>st</sup>, reporters began circulating a deluge of stories detailing the apocalyptic conditions in New Orleans. In her article "Failing Narratives, Initiating Technologies: Hurricane Katrina and the Production of a Weather Media Event," Nicole R. Fleetwood compares Katrina's onset with the 9/11 terrorist attacks. While one can draw parallels between New York's ruinous aftermath and that of New Orleans, Fleetwood focuses on the media's haphazard rush to find and retell stories in the wake of these disastrous events:

As journalists began to assess (visually) the storm's damage across Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi, and public officials learned that the levees of New Orleans had failed, news outlets, government agencies, and

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<sup>18</sup> See page 10 of [hurricanekatrina.com](http://hurricanekatrina.com) picture pages. Flanked by other post-Katrina images, the caption under this picture reads: "Hurricane Katrina survivors in the Superdome."

<sup>19</sup> Dyer, 1.



emergency response organizations all scrambled to gather information even when vivid images, with often scattered and contradictory commentary, aired live.<sup>20</sup>

Fleetwood maintains that reports from New Orleans were discordant at best, with inconsistency plaguing these news portrayals. The author ultimately determines that the falsified media stories that followed Katrina's onset ultimately hinged upon news outlets electing to embrace rumors while eschewing a complex read of their captured images.



Figure 3. Holes cut in the Superdome complex. © Tyler Hicks, *The New York Times*.

In one of the early stories to emerge from post-Katrina New Orleans, journalist Paul Koring found New Orleans citizens who stayed behind culpable for their collective predicament. In an accusatory style, Koring writes: “As the bodies emerge from Katrina’s receding waters—grim evidence of evacuation orders defied—hurricane experts say they have been warning for decades that not only do big storms pack a killer punch, but that those who fail to flee will pay the ultimate price.”<sup>21</sup> Noting the “sad and perplexing

<sup>20</sup> Fleetwood, 767-789.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Koring, “Hurricane Packs Deadly Punch; High Death Toll Could Have Been Avoided if People had Heeded Orders to Leave, Experts Say,” *The Globe and Mail* (August 31, 2005).

phenomenon of residents who refuse to flee," Koring seems content in villanizing New Orleans citizens, charging them with insubordination for not getting into their cars and leaving.<sup>22</sup> Throughout his piece, Koring frames his subjects as disobedient if not foolish, all the while resisting giving them a color. But an observer reading Figures 2 and 3 from Koring's perspective recognizes his silent declaration. In Koring's estimation, the black citizens that defied white orders are solely responsible for their suffering.

Subsequent stories further dictate public perception regarding who is involved *in* and who is to blame *for* conditions and events played out in post-Katrina New Orleans. Four news stories put out by the Associated Press, Newhouse News Service, *The New York Times*, and the London *Daily Mail* in a twenty-four hour period from August 31<sup>st</sup> to September 1<sup>st</sup> lead their respective pieces with sensational details about the mostly black bodies housed in the Superdome. All refer to hurricane victims as "refugees" at various points in their stories. All sources confirm deaths, although the numbers of the dead vary.<sup>23</sup> Most of these pieces show the Superdome's population rising by at least 10,000, swelling to as many 25,000.<sup>24</sup> With scant food and water sources, disabled power supplies and sewage systems leaving conditions humid and rank, and a population increase of 150% inside the Superdome, an objective observer could not be surprised that people began revolting inside the crippled structure; the observer would rather marvel that it took a number of days to do so.

As news agencies captured this footage, the image influx of black people suffering became overwhelming. In her text *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag links exotic "placeness" with increased visibility of death and destruction. "These sights carry a double message. They show a suffering that is outrageous, unjust, and should be repaired. They confirm that this is the sort of thing

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<sup>22</sup> Dyson, 5-6. "New Orleans ranks fourth out of 297 metropolitan areas in the country in the proportion of households lacking access to cars. The top three metropolitan spots are in the greater New York area, which has the most extensive public transportation system in the country. Black households nationwide generally have far less access to cars than white households, a trend mirrored in New Orleans... [where] 27 percent of blacks... were without cars."

<sup>23</sup> See Wigmore, "City Sunk by the Wrath of Katrina"; Mary Foster, "Superdome Evacuation Halted After Shots are Fired at Helicopter," *Associated Press* (September 1, 2005); Gordon Russell, "Tensions Mount Dangerously as Superdome Refugees Await Transfer," *Newhouse* (September 1, 2005); and Joseph B. Treaster, "At Stadium, a Haven Quickly Becomes an Ordeal," *The New York Times* (September 1, 2005). See also: Spike Lee, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, 40 Acres and a Mule (2006).

<sup>24</sup> Foster, "Superdome Evacuation Halted After Shots are Fired at Helicopter."

which happens in that place.”<sup>25</sup> Applied to post-Katrina New Orleans, Sontag’s statement is borne out in Kanye West’s admission that he could not look away despite the media’s unsavory recasting of black folk.<sup>26</sup> In a statement that reveals what Dyer would call the “human race’s” (read: “white race’s”) unique ability to dismiss much of what took place in New Orleans, Sontag continues: “The ubiquity of those photographs, and those horrors, cannot help but nourish belief in the inevitability of tragedy in the benighted or backward—that is, poor—parts of the world.”<sup>27</sup> In their article “Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference,” cultural anthropologists Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson force viewers to reexamine zones of American poverty as close kin to “third world” environments: “In the pulverized space of postmodernity, space has not become irrelevant: it has been reterritorialized in a way that does not conform to the experience of space that characterized the era of high modernity. It is this reterritorialization of space that forces us to reconceptualize fundamentally the politics of community, solidarity, identity, and cultural difference.”<sup>28</sup> When applied to post-Katrina New Orleans, Sontag’s take on the typical third world tragedy dismissal along with Gupta’s and Ferguson’s insistence on the continued relevance of space prove problematic in that they force the viewer to undertake a conceptual revision of America—one that identifies the black urban poor as a contemporary surveyed colonial subject.

In similar fashion to the New Orleans police department, reporters quickly shifted focus from space-based reporting and rescue efforts to property protection and disaster footage. Starting as early as August 31<sup>st</sup>, reporters adopted a rhetoric granting preeminence to looting, lawlessness, and anarchy. Akin to exaggerated accounts of the Superdome, journalists disproportionately reported stories of rampant looting in New Orleans. According to Dyson, these stories were often narrowly framed as “the rioting of thugs and not largely the survival activity of folk abandoned by their government, [raising] once again the specter,

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<sup>25</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 71.

<sup>26</sup> Dyson quotes West as saying: “I hate the way they portray us in the media. If you see a black family, it says ‘They’re looting.’ You see a white family, it says, ‘They’re looking for food.’ And...it’s been five days [waiting for the government to arrive] because most of the people are black. And even for me to complain about it, I would be a hypocrite because I’ve tried to turn away from the TV because it’s too hard to watch.” Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water*, 26-27.

<sup>27</sup> Sontag, 71.

<sup>28</sup> Gupta and Ferguson, 37.

splashed across national television, of blacks out of control.”<sup>29</sup> These stories paralleled those of the Superdome, where reports of “frustration [boiling] over into anger and fear” transformed into unconfirmed tales of assault, rape, gang activity, gunplay, and sniper fire.<sup>30</sup> As is apparent in this and other news coverage during this time, reporters made spectacle a priority.

Associated Press writer Mary Foster’s “Superdome Evacuation Halted After Shots are Fired at Helicopter” is the first in what would become a torrent of reports detailing the Superdome population’s devolution. In her piece, Foster reveals how attempts to evacuate the Superdome had been suspended on Thursday, September 1<sup>st</sup>, “after shots were reported fired at a military helicopter and arson fires broke out outside the arena.”<sup>31</sup> In a rhetorical instance that calls forth to panopticism, Foster reported that Ambulance Service Chief Richard Zenschlag—the man handling the Superdome evacuation—abruptly suspended operations “until they gain control of [the structure].”<sup>32</sup> In a Foucauldian sense, even Zenschlag’s assertion that the officials at the Superdome had lost control still “[produced] the homogenous effects of power” because it reaffirmed the mediated image of a city under siege by black people run amok.<sup>33</sup>

What remained consistent in Superdome portrayals was that, for those running the sports facility, the onset of more black bodies making their way to this sporting structure necessitated greater security, reduced freedoms, and a break from any perceived politically correct colorblindness. On September 2<sup>nd</sup>, in a thinly-veiled swipe at black residents, then-Louisiana Governor Blanco authorized 300 U.S. troops to shoot to kill “hoodlums.” In the wake of sensational stories designating victims housed in and around the Superdome as looters, rapists, thugs, crack-smoking drug addicts, and derelicts, Blanco further entrenched public perception of a New Orleans overrun by unleashed blackness. In a threat-ridden public statement, Blanco said of the troops: “They have M-16s and they are locked and loaded. These troops know how to shoot to kill, and are more than willing to do so if necessary. And I expect they will.”<sup>34</sup> President Bush reiterated Blanco’s warning, insisting that looters be

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<sup>29</sup> Dyson, 114.

<sup>30</sup> Russell, “Tensions Mount Dangerously as Superdome Refugees Await Transfer.”

<sup>31</sup> Foster, “Superdome Evacuation Halted After Shots are Fired at Helicopter.”

<sup>32</sup> Foster.

<sup>33</sup> Foucault, 202.

<sup>34</sup> No author given, “Shoot to Kill,” *Herald Sun* (September 2, 2005).

treated with “zero tolerance.”<sup>35</sup> In the midst of these absolutist caveats villanizing black people, still shots and live CNN footage of fully-armed soldiers patrolling the Superdome with black Katrina victims flanking them became commonplace on television, the Internet, and elsewhere (see Figure 4). As Sontag notes, “Photographs objectify: they turn an event or a person into something that can be possessed. And photographs are a species of alchemy, for all that they are prized as a transparent account of reality.”<sup>36</sup> As Figure 4 reveals, the measures endorsed by Blanco and Bush to counter looting and other disobedience were extreme, if not wholly irresponsible considering the tens of thousands of residents still stranded in the city; plus, Katrina had largely produced the docile bodies Foucault mentions. Lieutenant General Russel Honoré recognized this, ordering his troops traversing streets and other public zones with weapons raised to lower them because, as Honoré recognized, “This is not Baghdad; these are American citizens.”<sup>37</sup> And yet, images portraying white soldiers on guard against black subversion proved difficult to neutralize.



Figure 4. Hurricane Katrina victim carries unconscious boy past fully-armed National Guardsmen on concourse in front of Louisiana Superdome in New Orleans, September 1<sup>st</sup>.  
© Michael Appleton, *New York Daily News*.

<sup>35</sup> No author given.

<sup>36</sup> Sontag, 81.

<sup>37</sup> Honoré is the three-star general Mayor Nagin granted federal authority to evacuate New Orleans on September 2<sup>nd</sup>.

In the months following Katrina's onset in New Orleans, a few self-examining journalists and scholars disseminated news stories that called into question some of the outrageous material printed shortly after the storm. In an attempt to counteract the damaging, undocumented accounts presented (and repeated) as facts, these individuals worked to parse what had become mere blame banter between black New Orleans citizens and the federal, state, and local government agencies that continued to refute black humanity. Author Tiffany Brown offers readers a different interpretation of what took place in New Orleans than the ones Koring and his counterparts present. Brown's "Wade in the Water" is a less disdainful rendering of the spectacular scenes from New Orleans. Brown writes how media coverage ensured that "the line dividing the poor from the rich became crystal clear. The reality ended up on the front pages of newspapers delivered at the door and on television sets in the homes of those who thought 'that kind of thing' only happens somewhere else."<sup>38</sup> While images from the storm did reignite debates surrounding links between poverty, color, and social displacement, along with calling into question the federal government's priorities, the discussion was eventually pushed to the periphery of America's collective consciousness, replaced by more current media events.

A *Knight Ridder* news story that came out on October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2005 refuted earlier claims of rescue efforts being suspended due to helicopters taking on gunfire. According to Miriam Hill and Nicholas Spangler, "More than a month later, representatives from the Air Force, Coast Guard, Department of Homeland Security and Louisiana Air National Guard say they have yet to confirm a single incident of gunfire at helicopters. Likewise, members of several rescue crews who were told to halt operations say there is no evidence they were ever under fire."<sup>39</sup> Gale force winds and floodwaters disabled power and communication sources following Katrina, paralyzing city rescue workers and journalists. As Hill and Spangler note, "The storm created so much confusion that the government cannot agree on whether they issued an order to halt flights or other rescue efforts."<sup>40</sup> Most anyone observing post-Katrina

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<sup>38</sup> Tiffany Brown, "Wade in the Water," *What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race, and the State of the Nation* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2007), 48.

<sup>39</sup> Miriam Hill and Nicholas Spangler, "No Evidence of Shots Fired at Rescue Copters; Amid the Chaos in New Orleans After Katrina, Efforts to Save Stranded Residents Were Delayed Because of Gunfire Reports," *Philadelphia Enquirer* (October 3, 2005).

<sup>40</sup> Hill and Spangler.

New Orleans news coverage and the city's devastated environment can understand how exposure to the destruction could have made rescue and reporting efforts difficult. But allowing rumor to evolve into fact slowed down life-saving operations in the crippled city, doubtless costing some New Orleans citizens their lives.

Other texts seek redemption for New Orleans citizens by disseminating spectacular tales of truth-bending intrigue from the city. In "Death Rites Interrupted," Carolyn Kitch and Janice Hume rewrite part of the post-Katrina Superdome's anecdotal history. "Rumors were so strong regarding bodies in the Superdome that, according to the *Times-Picayune*, federal officials finally arrived there with a refrigerated 18-wheeler and three doctors—only to find six bodies."<sup>41</sup> As Kitch and Hume's work shows, these and other exaggerated accounts, including the press's tendency to overreport looting incidents, branded New Orleans an apocalyptic environment and deepened public apprehension. Indeed, earlier news stories frame the post-Katrina Superdome as a space teeming with unrestrained violence and vice, exemplified by myths proclaiming that "hundreds of bodies languished" in the stadium's lower levels, which served as an unrefrigerated makeshift morgue.<sup>42</sup> Other reports told of how "hundreds of bodies floated in shark-infested waters or were consumed by alligators, [while] 1,200 people had drowned in a school, [and] 30 to 40 bodies were stacked in a freezer at the New Orleans Convention Center."<sup>43</sup> Fearing that anarchy reigned in the Crescent City, government officials proceeded sluggishly with rescue efforts. These examples of rampant media exaggeration and flawed storytelling practices bring journalistic motives into question. They also dredge up the question: why were people so willing to accept these stories as truthful?

In the wake of post-Katrina New Orleans media coverage, an observer may find it necessary to reexamine Foucault's proclamation that "Our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance; under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth; behind the great abstraction of exchange, there continues a meticulous, concrete training of useful forces."<sup>44</sup> Contemporary media outlets have found a way to unite both spectacle and surveillance, as was evident in their

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<sup>41</sup> Carolyn Kitch and Janice Hume, "Death Rites Interrupted: Responsibility and Remembrance in Coverage of the Tri-State Crematory Scandal and Hurricane Katrina," *Journalism in a Culture of Grief* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 33.

<sup>42</sup> Daniel Politi, "Operation Relief," *Slate Magazine*, (September 3, 2005).

<sup>43</sup> Kitch and Hume, 33.

<sup>44</sup> Foucault, 217.

coverage in and around the Superdome.<sup>45</sup> In these instances, spectacular surveillance served to affirm a conservative, bootstrapping ideology proclaiming that New Orleans' largely black population brought on their own suffering. On his Fox News Channel program *The O'Reilly Factor*, taped shortly after Katrina made landfall, conservative pundit Bill O'Reilly co-opted footage from the Superdome and the surrounding area. At the height of insensitivity, O'Reilly opined that "Every American kid should be required to watch videotape of the poor in New Orleans and see how they suffered, because they couldn't get out of town. And then every teacher should tell the students, 'If you refuse to learn, if you refuse to work hard, if you become addicted, if you live a gangsta-life, you will be poor and powerless just like many of those in New Orleans.'"<sup>46</sup> O'Reilly's use of post-Katrina footage, along with his linking of poor black urban bodies with "gangsta-life"—i.e., self-elected black lawlessness—reveals a tendency to render these images as absolutisms. This visual event was, in O'Reilly's opinion, a spectacle of fear. But, as Sontag posits, "Photographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply the bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen."<sup>47</sup> If deconstructed in their proper complexity, the pictures that descend from the Superdome continue to contest the endorsed façade of black culpability in this tragedy. This is a great paragraph.

When Hurricane Katrina ripped the Superdome's rubber seal off, tore open the steel roof paneling and penetrated the stadium, it shed light on the conjoined problems of concentrated poverty, socialized and environmental racism, and America's ability to ignore the suffering of its own citizens. With camera lenses and lights abounding, the world viewed these problems live, as Katrina's nightmarish aftermath projected masses of black bodies onto our television screens. If only for a moment, viewers followed displaced victims and traversed the wreckage of the Superdome—a former symbol of sport-infused spectacle reborn as one of spectacular misery. But this melding of a shrine to athletic achievement and the dislocated urban poor who occupied and surrounded it provides

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<sup>45</sup> Guy Debord argued for recognition of spectacle as a social production rather than merely a collection of images, asserting that everything that has "lived" has moved into the realm of representation—whereby images supplant the reality for which they once stood. See Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1977), 2.

<sup>46</sup> Dyson, 181.

<sup>47</sup> Sontag, 13.



evidence of a paradoxical relationship. Produced by photographer John Rowland and taken following Katrina's onset in New Orleans, Figure 5 shows a young black male streaking across the waterlogged Superdome's artificial surface. In a story that went largely unreported, the unidentified child takes part in a youth-organized touch football game played in the darkened facility.<sup>48</sup> Captured in a pose that reminds the viewer of Saints superstar Reggie Bush, the child battles the hopelessness that pervades the stadium and its populace by utilizing the space for its designed purpose. In Barthes's terms, this is the photograph's punctum.<sup>49</sup> Rendered visible by the sunlight shining through the pierced roof, this young black male may aspire to occupy a level of black achievement deemed palatable to a dominant white audience—that of professional athlete. Post-Katrina, the Superdome, which regularly exhibits sports dominated by African Americans on a grand scale, became a site where the media was able to defy black humanity. In my estimation, Figure 5 works to reassert this humanity.

The Superdome was an oddly appropriate venue for the predominately black New Orleans citizens' degradation to play out. As a sports stadium that hosted professional athletes—a profession that continues to be viewed as one of few viable ways for black children to escape poverty—the Superdome was constructed for the easy transference of spectacle to a ravenous viewing audience, both at home and in stadium seats.<sup>50</sup> In his book *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*, sportswriter William C. Rhoden problematizes the media-endorsed notion of the black male professional athlete as pampered mogul who controls his league. Rhoden asserts that, contrary to public perception, black athletes remain fettered to a system that masks their commodification. "In their own world, by their own definition, black athletes already [are] 'free.' Unfortunately the terms of liberation have always been defined by the white men who were responsible for their wealth."<sup>51</sup> Akin to Rhoden's definition of sport culture, black identities from post-Katrina New Orleans became

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<sup>48</sup> Treaster, "At Stadium, a Haven Quickly Becomes an Ordeal." The author notes: "Teenagers stuck in the dome tried to make the best of it. Two pickup squads of about 20 players, shirtless and barefoot, battled in a rather loosely structured game of touch football Wednesday afternoon, ignoring the heat. Some of the boys took the barrel-like foam rubber padding off one of the goalposts and turned it into a tackling dummy, crashing into it with powerful, smashing lunges."

<sup>49</sup> Barthes puts forward the term punctum, which refers to "that accident which pricks [the observer, making the image] poignant to [him or her]." See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 26-27.

<sup>50</sup> Originally hatched by New Orleans businessman David Dixon and Mayor Chep Morrison in 1965, the Superdome did not open its doors for business until nearly a decade later, in 1975.

<sup>51</sup> Richard Rhoden, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), 265.

malleable products that passed through white lenses of perception. Many American citizens invite black athletes into their homes through television coverage and cheer their exploits as though postmodernism has dissolved the space between stadium and the home screen. And yet, as post-Katrina media coverage in New Orleans revealed, space allows white America to embrace certain black identities while deeming others visually offensive.



Figure 5. Young black male playing football in damaged post-Katrina Superdome, New Orleans, Louisiana, September 2005. © John Rowland, AP.

Appearing in an article in *The Starting Five*, an online publication featuring popular, race-conscious authors, Figure 6 is

entitled “Bushcares.”<sup>52</sup> This rendering melds images emblematic of two opposing forces in Katrina’s aftermath: President Bush and the black citizens that he, according to Kanye West, does not care about.<sup>53</sup> Manipulated by the artist to manifest a third interpretation, “Bushcares” is a study in dialectics. The image on the left, captured by the Associated Press’s Eric Gay, shows stranded Katrina victims waiting for aid outside the Superdome. The photograph conveys exhaustion, and many of these displaced individuals look out on the wreckage surrounding them, perhaps pondering when their government will arrive. Exposed to the sweltering summer heat, these victims linger on the Superdome’s concourse—a popular alternative to the rank, humid conditions inside the disabled facility. By this time the Superdome’s degraded conditions necessitated occasional fresh air privileges in the sewage-strewn streets of “the city that hope forgot.”<sup>54</sup> Black people crowd the frame. The foremost woman lies prostrate, almost corpse-like, with eyes closed as those around her look around anxiously. Despite the large victim population, the viewer sees scant individuals showing any sort of movement. Visibility, it seems, is indeed a trap—one that reveals our current media panopticism as a reifying power structure.<sup>55</sup>

Contrasting this scene of massed black humanity at the height of discomfort, President Bush’s infamous post-Katrina image, taken by the Associated Foreign Press’s Jim Watson, enters the subdivided frame on the right. Peering out an Air Force One window, the president squints with a furrowed brow and enfolded hands while absorbing the extent of Katrina’s destruction. Given its posed nature and the backstory of the former president electing to delay action, this image has become infamous on its own. According to George Lipsitz, the president, along with an American majority, equate New Orleans with its most popular tourist attraction: Bourbon Street. “Characterized by excessive drinking, lurid sex shows, and music that simulates the golden age of Dixieland jazz... this New Orleans is a place to come *to* from somewhere else not a place to live *in*, a spot

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<sup>52</sup> “Bushcares” is the image used at the top of Michael Tillery’s article in *The Starting Five* entitled “As Hurricane Gustav Touches Down, A Remembrance for Hurricane Katrina.” The artist’s name is not provided.

<sup>53</sup> During a live telethon, aired shortly after Katrina struck, that was aimed at assisting victims, Kanye West broke from script during a live televised fundraising event and claimed “George Bush doesn’t care about black people.” See Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water*, 27.

<sup>54</sup> Lee, *When the Levees Broke*. An interviewee in Lee’s *Levees* described modern-day New Orleans as “the city that hope forgot” for its consistent low rankings in country-wide polls on education systems, economic viability, access to transportation, and overall city livability.

<sup>55</sup> Foucault, 200.

for revelry that can be smirked about knowingly in New Orleans. [This] is the only New Orleans that the President could imagine worthy of rebuilding.”<sup>56</sup> By uniting these two disparate images—one containing the height of American power; the other capturing a glimpse of the powerless—the unknown artist dissolves place and space divisions in order to bring black American poverty into consciousness. As Gupta and Ferguson note, “East or west, inside or outside, left or right, mound or floodplain... anthropologists have known that the experience of space is always socially constructed. The more urgent task would seem to be to politicize this uncontested observation.”<sup>57</sup> By juxtaposing Bush with New Orleans’s black urban poor, the artist forces the viewer to examine various binaries, including historic black/white relations and the distribution of power in the city. In the original image, Bush surveys the wreckage and suffering from high above the city; in the juxtaposition, the artist dissolves the socio-spatial disparities between the surveyor and the surveyed, thus compelling the president to atone for the ills his brand of social conservatism manifested during his tenure.



Figure 6. “Bushcares,” New Orleans, Louisiana, September 2005.  
Image juxtaposition by unknown artist.

<sup>56</sup> Lipsitz, 238.

<sup>57</sup> Gupta and Ferguson, 43.

While few can argue against state and local officials playing a prominent role in the New Orleans' devolution, it is the displaced citizens of this sunken city—those who, according to some accounts, “refused” to heed ample warnings—who ultimately lose out in spite of the hypervisuality of this event. The injustices New Orleans evacuees endured have become their legacy. Kornheiser's claim in September of 2006 that the reopening of the Superdome serves as a signal of the reemergence of New Orleans negates the massed black faces whose images and stories filtered out of the Superdome wreckage a year previous and whose calls for rebuilding continue to go unheard.

Following Katrina, much of the American public revealed its continued bifurcation of black subjects into distinct realms of “acceptable” and “objectionable,” with the later designation reserved for the black urban poor who populated the Superdome. The Superdome's use as a refuge of last resort during Katrina and the ensuing coverage are doubly ironic because they reveal how viewers invite and celebrate certain African Americans in our homes via television while dismissing or vilifying others. The black citizens who stared out from the Superdome's darkened and drenched alcoves, with their stories and torments diluted or rendered mute through falsification, continue to charge America with socialized racism. Perhaps Sontag is correct in noting that people ultimately desire to have their vision of reality confirmed and their experiences enhanced by photographs.<sup>58</sup> Even though self-reflexive journalists and scholars have illuminated these errors, Americans remain largely complicit in their original telling because they remained, at least for a short time, untroubled. Transfixed by these early reports, world citizens stared in horror at scenes and still photos representing a terror zone similar to apocalyptic scenarios played out in Hollywood cinema. And while these same citizens have learned a great deal about the delayed and ineffective local and federal governmental response to this the worst natural disaster to strike American soil in the country's history, and cultivated or reformed their sympathetic bounds in response to the depths of human suffering played out live via satellite, the stories from within the Superdome during this brief one-week period remain shrouded in rumor, hearsay, and myth.

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<sup>58</sup> Sontag, 24. According to the author, “[It] is an aesthetic consumerism to which everyone is now addicted.”