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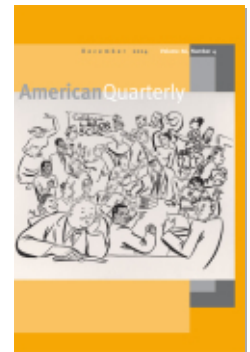
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## **Do You Know What it Means to Miss New Orleans?: Katrina, Trap Economics, and the Rebirth of the Blues**

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# Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?: Katrina, Trap Economics, and the Rebirth of the Blues

*Clyde Woods*

I hear the Blues everywhere/I feel the Blues all in the air . . . /Now you may not believe in reincarnation/But I know the Blues will live again/With all this hatred, of nation against nation/That put the Blues right in its tread./I want to tell you, people if I can/That the Blues and trouble both run hand in hand/And at a time like this, I know the Blues is in command.

Memphis Slim<sup>1</sup>

**T**he Katrina tragedy was a blues moment. The legitimacy of the United States is dependent upon multiethnic and multiracial cooperation at home and abroad, yet it affirms its status as the architect of a new world order by denying the existence of racism. Katrina has exposed both the absence of social justice and the futility of this “plausible deniability” dance. The blues tradition of explanation and development provides both a way out of the inner workings of inequity and a way into the Third Reconstruction.

The picture of twenty thousand slowly dying African Americans chanting “we want help” outside of New Orleans’s Convention Center was a blues moment. It disrupted the molecular structure of a wide array of carefully constructed social relations and narratives on race, class, progress, competency, and humanity. In the blink of an eye, African Americans, an identity fraught with ambiguity, were transformed back into *black people*, a highly politicized identity. Mass suffering simultaneously killed the dream and “learnt” the blues to the hip-hop generation. Katrina’s message was unmistakable. For example, on September 9, in an essay written for *The Monitor* of Kampala, Uganda, Vukoni Lupa-Lasaga summarizes the message sent to the African diaspora and the world at large:

This wasn’t the way America was supposed to be. . . Many people in the United States genuinely believe—with a fervor that puts religious fanatics to shame—that nobody else in the world can do anything better than America. But the failure of government at all levels in responding to the hurricane disaster rehashes a much older story about the United States,

one that has been steadily and deliberately noisily drowned or whited out of mainstream discourse. It is the story of race, class, poverty, and studied incompetence . . . for the rest of us, blacks in the United States serve as the proverbial canary in a coal mine. Those images on TV should, therefore, be a lesson for Africans and other people of African ancestry all over the world. Whether you are in peril in Darfur, Sudan, Ruhengeri, Rwanda, or New Orleans, saving your black behind isn't a priority for the American government, founded on a doctrine of white supremacy.<sup>2</sup>

The victims of Katrina were victimized once again by an army assembled to deny what they experienced, from administration officials such as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to leaders of the African American community who cautioned restraint. In this moment of crisis, many other black leaders, intellectuals, and professionals lost the gift of voice.<sup>3</sup>

Prior to the Katrina tragedy, there existed a raging global debate over the Bush administration's views on racial justice. Several incidents were ongoing sources of tension: the 2000 presidential election and black disenfranchisement, the undermining of the United Nation's Conference on Racism in 2001, opposition to affirmative action in 2003, Texas redistricting, the rise of racial profiling, and crises in the Middle East and along the Mexican border. In June 2004, NAACP chairman Julian Bond accused Bush and the Republican Party of appealing to the "dark underside of American culture . . . They preach racial equality but practice racial division . . . Their idea of equal rights is the American flag and Confederate swastika flying side-by-side."<sup>4</sup>

The 2004 election's themes of war, social intolerance, and disenfranchisement further poisoned the well. After Katrina, this debate began to converge on the federal indifference to the crisis's victims. On a September 2 nationally televised benefit for the victims, hip-hop artist Kanye West expressed the sentiments of the majority of African Americans who saw racism in the federal response. His comment revived the debate over the Bush presidency. By September 26, the crisis was deepening. At the Congressional Black Caucus's Town Hall meeting, Congressman Charles Rangel of Harlem proclaimed President Bush "our Bull Connor."<sup>5</sup> By this time, West's humorous and bitter song on sexual politics, "Gold Digger," had been remixed into a political manifesto by the Legendary K. O. hip-hop group from Houston:

I ain't saying he's a gold digger, but he ain't messing with no broke niggas (2x)/George Bush don't like black people (4x)/Five damn days, five long days/And at the end of the fifth he walking in like "Hey!"/Chilling on his vacation sitting patiently/Them black folks gotta hope, gotta wait and see/If FEMA really comes through in an emergency/But nobody seem to have a sense of urgency/Now the mayor's been reduced to crying/I guess Bush said,

"Niggas been used to dying!" / He said, "I know it looks bad, just have to wait" / Forgetting folks who too broke to evacuate / Niggas starving and they dying of thirst / I bet he had to go and check on them refineries first / Making a killing off the price of gas / He would have been up in Connecticut twice as fast / After all that we've been through nothing's changed / You can call Red Cross but the fact remains that [chorus]<sup>6</sup>

In his introduction to Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre discussed the role of the anticolonial wars of the 1950s and 1960s in undermining Europe's claims of superiority. To paraphrase Sartre, Katrina has replaced the celebration of American civilization with a striptease of American humanism. "There you can see it, quite naked, and it's not pretty sight."<sup>7</sup> We must look at this disaster from the eyes of working-class African Americans, blacks, from the eyes of the impoverished, and, more important, through the eyes of impoverished black children for whom this is a defining moment. This new blues generation is being constructed out of the same disaster-induced social ruins that were created after the biblical Mississippi flood of 1927. To keep African American families in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi, Red Cross camps were turned into concentration camps. After free Red Cross supplies such as food, clothing, and seeds were distributed to displaced whites and planters, the remaining supplies were then sold to penniless blacks to create new debts. These events deeply radicalized several generations already suffering from racial pogroms throughout the South. After serving on the federal Colored Advisory Commission established by President Herbert Hoover to investigate the disaster, Langston Hughes crafted a still pertinent four-line dissertation on poverty, abandonment, and state blindness titled "Justice":

That justice is a blind goddess  
Is a thing to which we poor are wise  
Her bandage hides two festering sores  
That once, perhaps, were eyes.<sup>8</sup>

## The Blues Grid and Trap Economics

Captain, Captain / What make you treat me so mean? / Captain, Captain / What make you treat me so mean? / You know I asked you for water / And you brought me gasoline.  
Muddy Waters<sup>9</sup>

Katrina not only revealed ongoing racial projects and practices; it revealed them at the pinnacle of a long half-century march against the New Deal, the

Freedom Movement, the War on Poverty, and the Poor People's Campaign. It transformed a relatively peaceful burial of the welfare state by setting the stage for ugly racial conflicts from one end of the country to the other. The arrival of desperate African Americans in large towns and small cities has often been accompanied by both an outpouring of sympathy and surging gun sales. To systematically understand the origins, form, and direction of this atavistic upsurge, it is necessary to choose an ontological and epistemological approach to this crisis that does not further marginalize working-class African American voices or blind their boundless social vision.

The blues tradition of investigation and interpretation is one of the central institutions of African American life. It is a newly indigenous knowledge system that has been used repeatedly by multiple generations of working-class African Americans to organize communities of consciousness. The blues began as a unique intellectual movement that emerged among desperate African American communities in the midst of the ashes of the Civil War, Emancipation, and the overthrow of Reconstruction. It was used to confront the daily efforts of plantation powers to erase African American leadership and the memory of social progress. It produced a new type of African American intellectual through a system of teachers, professors, apprentices, and schools. The blues and its extensions are actively engaged in providing intellectually brutal confrontations with the "truths" of working-class African American life. It draws on African American musical practices, folklore, and spirituality to reorganize and give a new voice to working-class communities facing severe fragmentation. This tradition has been engaged in the production and teaching of African American history from its inception. Many of the subsequent African American cultural traditions can be viewed as movements designed to revitalize the blues ethic of social justice. For Willie Dixon, the blues is also a form of social realism upon which African American survival is predicated: "Had it not been for the blues, the black man wouldn't have been able to survive through all the humiliations and all the various things going on in America . . . he had nothing to fight with but the blues . . . the blues is the facts of life."<sup>10</sup>

In New Orleans, experimentation by the organic intellectual, community leader, and trumpet player Buddy Bolden with the blues became known as jazz. The essential relationship between the blues, jazz, and African American dignity was expressed by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in his address to the 1964 Berlin Jazz Festival:

Jazz speaks for life. The Blues tell the story of life's difficulties, and if you think for a moment, you will realize that they take the hardest realities of life and put them into music,

only to come out with some new hope or sense of triumph. This is triumphant music. And now, Jazz is exported to the world. For in the particular struggle of the Negro in America there is something akin to the universal struggle of modern man. Everybody has the Blues. Everybody longs for meaning. Everybody needs to love and be loved. Everybody needs to clap hands and be happy. Everybody longs for faith. In music, especially this broad category called Jazz, there is a stepping stone towards all of these.<sup>11</sup>

The growing power of the blues tradition results from its evolution as the antithesis of the neoplatation development tradition as the latter has grown to become the dominant national and international regime. Among the central concerns of the blues tradition of social investigation is the breaking of the bonds of dependency in all of their economic, political, social, cultural, gender, class, and racial manifestations. In the U.S. context, these bonds have a number of forms, including racialized impoverishment, enclosure and displacement, neoplatation politics, the arbitrariness of daily life, the denial of human rights, cultural imposition, the manufacture of savages, regionally distinct traps, and the desecration of sacred places. I would like to explore the question of racism within the Katrina tragedy through these nine blues lenses.

### The Misery of Daily Life

Imagine this, imagine that/Everything you want in life, you will never get/From the ghetto cause it's crazy/Most niggas want roses but they get daisies/Imagine this, little kids with no shoes on/And every homeless person I see I'm willing to take them home/But I can't cause my life is pure misery/Every dollar I make, ten go back to Bill and Hillary/I guess life is real but I know deep inside I was dealt a bad deal/ . . . We was born dreaming/ . . . Imagine this, David Duke as our President/ . . . I'll keep holding on (These little kids ain't got a chance!)

Master P<sup>12</sup>

A central question in the blues tradition is: What happened to African American communities in the Louisiana and Mississippi Deltas after the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965? When you visit these regions, you will see a swath of human devastation and permanent crisis that has been pejoratively called "Third World on the Mississippi" and "America's Ethiopia." The decision of white leaders, black leaders, and scholars to accept this situation in silence is a racist project. Mississippi and Louisiana are the two poorest states in the nation. They have been, and are, the sites of intense racial schism. Sadly, many Americans are unable to connect these dots and an entire poverty studies industry has arisen to make sure that this understanding does not occur. Therefore, in many regions, poverty in America is a white supremacist social construction in that its roots lie in the effort to deny the historic claims of

African Americans for the redistribution of political power and economic resources. As biological and religious forms of explanation were being roundly condemned in the 1930s, social science was charged with rendering invisible both these historic demands and increasing monopolization with a cloak sewn from reinvigorated plantation theories of culture and behavior. This new discourse protected southern planters engaged in the expulsion of millions of African Americans on the eve of the restoration of their civil and voting rights. It was also used by northern blocs who welcomed southern refugees with extreme forms of residential and occupational segregation. In 1940, President Franklin Roosevelt's liberal secretary of agriculture, Henry Wallace, identified the central innovative tenet of this new social science paradigm. "It must be recognized that the problem of sustaining indigent populations is not the problem of agriculture . . . The problem itself is a sociological one and must be treated as such."<sup>13</sup>

After prolonged attacks, the neoplantation social philosophy reemerged in the 1980s with its psychological, sociological, cultural, and journalistic descriptions of African American inferiority intact. With a perfect eugenics-informed pedigree, "underclass" models of deviancy, family dysfunction, criminality, and nihilism were once again deployed. This time the social scientists were charged with masking the expulsion of millions of African Americans from historic urban communities, the mass incarceration of African Americans, and mass disenfranchisement with categories such as renewal, gentrification, revitalization, new urbanism, and "smart growth."<sup>14</sup>

In 2004, Mississippi and Louisiana had the first and second highest rates of poverty in the nation and the second and fifth lowest rates of median household income; they were among the bottom three states in unemployment benefits. Approximately 36.6 percent of black Louisianans and 34.9 percent of black Mississippians are considered impoverished. The destruction of public housing, neighborhood displacement, and the manufacture of the homeless were raging full tilt in New Orleans in 2005. On the eve of Katrina, the city's impoverished residents had already been abandoned.<sup>15</sup> Past and present racial schisms in the region have devastated its family, social service, educational, and physical infrastructure. A central question for the blues tradition would be: What is the relationship between historic and deepening poverty and the fabulous fortunes amassed by the region's sugar, rice, cotton, oil, gas, chemical, tourism, and gaming empires? These heavily subsidized and lightly taxed sectors were protected by Governor Barbour of Mississippi and former Governor Foster of Louisiana, even as they savaged health care and other antipoverty programs.

This regional movement has been replicated at the national level to make new forms of dependency-creating institutions or traps. The overthrow of the

right to social welfare benefits, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, by President Clinton and the congressional neoplantation bloc was cynically titled the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996. Their reversal of the right to public housing was even more cynically titled Hope VI. All of these projects were manufacturing destitution in New Orleans and Mississippi before the Katrina tragedy. Now, hundreds of thousands have been thrown upon a social safety net consisting of several frayed threads. This man-made disaster has been compounded by Bush's FY2006 budget, which contains massive program cuts: food stamps, elementary and secondary education, education for the disadvantaged, special education, school improvement, vocational and adult education, the Women, Infants, and Children (AC) nutrition program, Head Start, rental assistance, child-care assistance, low-income energy assistance, the Ryan White HIV/AIDS program, community block grants, and aid to localities. To pay for the costs of Katrina, more cuts from these programs, including Medicaid and Medicare, have been proposed by movement leaders within Congress. This feeding frenzy on the poor calls to mind the title of an 1857 book written by George Fitzhugh, the first plantation social scientist, *Cannibals All!*<sup>6</sup>

### Neoplantation Politics: That Ol' Black Magic

When compared to the triumphalism often associated with civil rights historiography, the blues tradition provides one of the few epistemologies capable of grasping the origins, meaning, and scope of neoplantation movement that has come to dominate national politics. It has never stopped asking what happened to the White Citizens Council's massive resistance movement, launched out of the Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana Deltas in 1954 to defeat *Brown v. Board of Education* and the civil rights movement as a whole. It led southerners opposed to civil rights into the Republican Party. A 1962 article in the *Louisville Courier Journal* heralded the birth of "Racial Republicanism." "The truth is that this Republican upsurge, if that is the word, owes much of its momentum to the very thing that has kept the South in one-party bondage for nearly a century—an unreasoning passion to maintain 'white supremacy.'" The Southern Strategy of the Nixon and Reagan campaigns crafted a southern, western, and northern national compact based on white economic and racial fears. In 1981, Lee Atwater explained the movement's rhetorical evolution as a series of "black magic" spells:

You start out in 1954 by saying, "Nigger, nigger, nigger." By 1968, you can't say "nigger," that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced bussing, states' rights and all that stuff.



You're getting so abstract now [that] you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're taking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is [that] blacks get hurt worse than whites . . . [It] is getting that abstract that coded that we are doing away with the racial problem one way or another. You follow me.<sup>17</sup>

Before becoming the Republican National Committee chair, Atwater provoked a national racial panic to secure the election of George H. W. Bush as president in 1988. The reborn White Citizens Council, the Council of Conservative Citizens, counts among its allies leading Mississippi politicians: U.S. Senator Trent Lott, former Governor Kirk Fordice, and current governor Harley Barbour. The organization also noted that Louisiana “ultra-conservative David Vitter won 50% of the vote to win the U.S. Senate seat held by retiring Democrat John Breaux. Vitter advanced to the senate from a congressional seat representing the suburban New Orleans district that once elected David Duke to the statehouse.”<sup>18</sup> Suburban New Orleans has also given the world David Duke, a national Ku Klux Klan leader, who became a Republican state legislator. He then went on to receive 60 percent of the white vote in his losing bid for the U.S. Senate in 1990 and 55 percent of the white vote in his unsuccessful bid for governor in 1991. After having received an honorary doctorate from a university in Ukraine, Dr. Duke now spreads his message of white anxiety and African American depravity globally.<sup>19</sup> It is within these confines that decisions about relief and the survival of black communities in New Orleans and Mississippi are being made.

### **Arbitrariness and Human Rights**

The ascendance of the states rights movement to federal power led to the replacement of the Keynesian and Fordist social welfare philosophy with a reborn plantation philosophy of governance. One reality became thousands of separate realities—every plantation has its own regulations. Increasingly, access to subsistence, services, health care, social justice, and even safe roads varies widely. This combination of weak federal authority and local authoritarianism has hobbled the Delta states for generations. Katrina revealed the present and future human costs of a fragmented, de-linked, privatized, and devolved state; no one is in charge. Other markers of this neoplantation system include runaway factories, technological displacement, ethnic rotation, subminimum wages, multiple levels of citizenship, educational disaster zones, and a justice system that creates instability and demographic collapse in black and Latino neighborhoods. The embodiment of arbitrariness was Robert Davis's night in the French Quarter on October 9. One minute the retired school

teacher was asking for directions, and the next minute he was lying on the sidewalk with blood gushing from his head and a jackboot on his back. For Mbembe, the chaos of daily life, this “contingent, dispersed, and powerless” existence, reveals itself in the form of arbitrariness. A growing feature of this new world is the multiplication of forces, official and unofficial, in society possessing the “absolute power to give death any time, anywhere, by any means, and for any reason.” This is not “just any arbitrariness, but arbitrariness in its comedy and stark horror, a real shadow that, while totally devoid of beauty, does not lack clarity.”<sup>20</sup>

At the same time there are growing certainties, such as the practices of residential segregation, which kept the black community of New Orleans in a floodplain surrounded by a faulty levee system further devastated by recent Bush administration budget cuts. Black Louisianans have also been systematically subjected to some of the worst instances of environmental racism in the world. In 1990, Louisiana legislator Avery Alexander described an environment that had been turned against the African American community: “Should we celebrate or mourn the fact that among African American women, near Saint James . . . that vaginal cancers are 36 times the national average . . . here in Louisiana . . . we have found the job promises empty and the risk of poisoning inevitable.”<sup>21</sup>

Attaining human rights is a fundamental category in the blues epistemology, particularly the fate of the incarcerated and the abused, since upon these pillars African American identity was born. Lawyers for New Orleans inmates moved to a facility in Jena, Louisiana, requested U. S. Department of Justice investigation. The 450 prisoners interviewed complained that “guards had been beating them, stripping them naked and hitting them with belts, shaving their heads, threatening them with dogs, shocking them with stun guns, and assaulting them after they attempted to report the abuse.” On August 7, 2005, a rally to oppose “police terrorism” was held in the Treme neighborhood of New Orleans. Remembered was Chief Tootie Montana, who died on the steps of city hall in June 2005 at a press conference. He was demanding that Mayor Nagin stop his campaign of police harassment, brutality, and the destruction of African American housing and culture. The organizers reminded participants that the New Orleans Police Department killed twenty-five people in 2005 and fifty in 2004. They also reminded them to listen to the Families Against Police Brutality Radio Show.

The Heart Ache Brass Band joined the rally to mourn a member ‘gunned down by the police.’ They led us in a second line . . . We also danced, laughed, sang, screamed, while we moved around the Treme streets with Heartache expressing that throughout our heartaches,

the losses from police terrorism and police brutality, our collective action still comes from the spaces within us that are joy-filled, hopeful, and resilient.<sup>22</sup>

## **Cultural Imposition: On Becoming Savage and Postsavage New Orleans**

In her study of the Acâgchemem and Mission San Juan Capistrano, Lisbeth Haas refers to the tendency of the Spanish to build their institutions on sacred sites central to Native American identity and autonomy as superimposition:

The missionary's selection of this site illustrates a deliberate strategy used by the Spaniards in their conquest of the Americas, one that had served them well already for three centuries prior to the conquest of this area of California. By choosing such locally meaningful places for their own rituals of appropriation, the missionaries attempted to replace indigenous structures of authority, power, and memory with their own.<sup>23</sup>

From their very conception, the blues, jazz, rock and roll, and hip-hop have had to battle two forms of cultural imposition. On the one hand, it was said that they were *prima facie* evidence of black savagery. On the other hand, it was said that they don't belong to blacks; they're universal. This bit of surrealism gave rise to the observation that "your blues ain't like mine." The black community of New Orleans is now engaged in a somewhat similar superimposition battle, a battle for its very survival.

First, there are those who attempted to define this community as savage with now discredited stories of rape, mutilation, beheading, cannibalism, and white genocide. Then the intellectuals weighed in with their genocidal musings. Columnist George F. Will attacked men, women, and children. It "is a safe surmise that more than 80 percent of African American births in inner-city New Orleans . . . were to women without husbands. That translates into a large and constantly renewed cohort of lightly parented adolescent males, and that translates into chaos in neighborhoods and schools, come rain or come shine." Out of the blue, the former U.S. secretary of education Bill Bennett decided it was a good time to attack black babies. "But I do know that it's true that if you wanted to reduce crime, you could—if that were your sole purpose—you could abort every black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go down." Others viewed the disaster as a gift from God. Republican congressman of Louisiana, Richard Baker, was quoted as saying, "We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did." Evangelist Franklin Graham declared that the city had a "dark spiritual cloud" hovering above it because of Mardi Gras, gays and lesbians, and the presence

of African traditional religions. "There's been satanic worship. There's been sexual perversion. God is going to use that storm to bring revival. God has a plan. God has a purpose."<sup>24</sup>

Others simply lusted for blood. Governor Kathleen Blanco decided it was time to shoot to kill while Brigadier General Gary Jones stated that New Orleans "is going to look like Little Somalia. We're going to go out and take this city back. This will be a combat operation" against "the insurgency." In an article titled "New Orleans Descends into Africa-like Savagery," Dr. David Duke asks, "Is this a story about tribal brutality in Uganda?" In "White Genocide in New Orleans," he concludes that not "all of the people of New Orleans are acting like savages, but unfortunately there are significant numbers of the African American community behaving that way."<sup>25</sup> Once the savagery discourse was imposed, then justifications for denying water to dying babies and refusing to let hundreds of people cross the Gretna Bridge for days are made to sound reasonable instead of what they are: racism, criminal activity, and gross human rights violations.

### **Gumbo Philosophy and the Third Reconstruction**

Distinctive regional identities and relations are constructed, and reproduced, through movements and countermovements. With one-thousand persons dead and with hundreds of thousands either unemployed, homeless, evicted, and scattered among forty-four states, New Orleans stands at the crossroads. The now dominant social philosophy has been used to wage an attack on the very programs needed to bring the city back to what it once was. Yet, there is no going back. The "Bring New Orleans Back" Committee formed by Mayor Nagin is top heavy with corporate leaders who are driven to build a city reflective of their desires. They and others in Congress view the disaster as an opportunity to remake the city without its black majority. Excluded from this new disaster in the making are working-class African American voices, visions, and movements.

Why should anyone want to live in, or return to, a place of great suffering? This question has haunted the millions of African Americans who migrated out of, and then back to, the South during the twentieth century in search of refuge. It was addressed by Louisiana's State Poet Laureate at the American Studies Association's Annual Meeting in November 2005. New Orleans native Brenda Marie Osbey insisted that residents should return to their homes; it was the government, not the city, which treated them poorly. To paraphrase several of her poems, she told the audience that New Orleans is both a city

where “the Saints walk in Congo time” and where “death is a road upon which walks those we loved and those we loved not long enough.” It is a place where the “slaves of the city” still ask “who will betray us today.” Through Osbey’s works, we understand that New Orleans is a city whose people and their ancestors will call forth the dawn of a new world.<sup>26</sup>

In many regions of Africa, religious ceremonies were held in sacred groves and forests. This practice was carried across the Atlantic to sacred bush arbors, woods, and rivers of North America. With urbanization, churches emerged in massive edifices and on street corners. Both became sacred. Several places became so important to the meaning of blackness that they became churches and cathedrals themselves. Then there are the Mecca and Jerusalem of African American culture, the Sea Islands and the Mississippi Delta, which receive humble pilgrims generation after generation. New Orleans is the Black Vatican. The Ado Bambara, Chamba, Canga, Congo/Angola, Fon, Ibo Maninga, Mina, Wolof, and Yoruba reconstituted in Louisiana were known for their resistance to all forms of bondage and defeatism. With the assistance of Native American allies they fought numerous wars against the French, the Spanish, and the American plantocracy. Many became maroons in the swamps, forests, and cities. The center of their survival was the communal gumbo pot. This stew came to symbolize the sacred struggle for dignity and the ability to make something out of nothing, to make freedom out of slavery. After the Civil War, these communities pushed the blues agenda, the Reconstruction agenda, and its endless definitions of freedom. Tragedy befell New Orleans, the blood of a heroic people flowed through its streets. What emerged next was a sound known throughout the world as the very sound of freedom itself. The Queens, Big Chiefs, Professors, Tribes, Whoadies, Saints, and Mothers of the city guarded its culture, knowing that without it, future generations could not stand.<sup>27</sup>

Today the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund, among others, carries the flag of the future. This grand coalition does what the governments have refused to do: honor African American sacrifice and courage. Thousands of New Orleans musicians have gone out to spread this lesson; in the words of the Stooges Brass Band, we “Can’t Be Faded” or as the Mardi Gras Indians chant “Big Chief Won’t Bow Down.”<sup>28</sup> The first cornerstone laid in the new New Orleans must be named social justice. Can American studies, the United States, and the global community possibly understand the cosmic significance of missing New Orleans? Perhaps. If so, they must work to defend this indigenous culture and ensure its return by removing the mask of the neplantation regime and its social philosophy. They could learn a great deal from another iconic symbol of black dignity and determination.

John Henry said to his captain  
 You know a man ain't nothin' but a man  
 Before I let anyone beat me down  
 I'll die with my hammer in my hand  
 I'll die with my hammer in my hand <sup>29</sup>

## Notes

- I would like to thank Lisa Marie Gill for her editorial assistance and Jessica M. Johnson for her leadership of the Blue Ribbon Campaign for Katrina victims.
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