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**November 2005****New Orleans and Women of Color:  
Connecting the Personal and Political**

By Janelle L. White

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There has been much reporting on the catastrophic impact of Hurricane Katrina, particularly the natural destruction and inaction of the state which only served to further expand the devastation of the region. Most of this writing and media coverage has been produced by those from outside the area impacted by Katrina. And more specifically, although there has been progressive, mainstream media coverage and analysis generated by residents of New Orleans, it has not been by those born and raised in the Crescent City. I recognize this because the silence from the most marginalized communities impacted by Hurricane Katrina, particularly women of color, continues to be deafening. When writing about the “other” or when conveying information from an outsider’s position, regardless of one’s intentions, it is extremely easy to further marginalize a community. Others end up speaking for them and of them, instead of with them and in support of them. Therefore, it is necessary now more than ever that we hear from those of the Gulf Coast region who have arguably never received popular attention.

As a black, lesbian feminist, academic, organizer, and currently displaced six year resident of New Orleans, I realize I represent a confluence of both privilege and minority status. That is my personal frame of reference and describes where I fit in the relations of power. As a displaced black New Orleanian, I am now part of yet another diaspora. This distinction links me to a specific racial/ethnic and geographic community, while it painfully denotes our severed new world.

**My Account—The Personal**

About a week after I left New Orleans, I wrote my evacuation account to share with friends and loved ones. I started by condemning the racialized and callous state/federal response to the victims and the despicable labeling of the people in my community as ‘looters.’ But most of what I conveyed was about the immense psychological and emotional trauma associated with such incalculable loss. I recounted listening to a radio station, while driving through Alabama with four close friends in caravan to the safety of my mother’s home. The radio announcer reported that a ‘worse case scenario’ for New Orleans would mean an estimated 40,000 people dead. Tears flowed.

I also wrote of how a friend who had been on life support before the hurricane died two days after the storm came ashore, how her lesbian life partner was not allowed to stay with her at the hospital, and how she had no idea when she might be able to claim her partner’s body. I told how my ex-partner, who evacuated to Alabama with us, after a week of not knowing her family’s fate, finally found that her 84 year-old mother, two brothers, sister and nephew had been evacuated to Houston.

I recalled some of the popular media images that still break my heart: hungry, dehydrated children and adults in the Superdome and at the New Orleans Convention Center—uncertain if or when they will be evacuated; elders who died sitting in their wheelchairs at their

designated ‘shelters’ with notes left on their bodies with names of next of kin to contact; people having to make a decision to leave their pets behind, or not be evacuated themselves, or children having their dogs snatched away from them, because they can’t board evacuation buses with them. Dead bodies piled next to sites where individuals are boarding buses for evacuation. Knowing that not even the most basic medical services were provided to those at the designated New Orleans evacuation shelters.

I began to consider how racism and class exploitation shape the state response to this disaster. And I realized that few individuals were discussing the specific impact on women, specifically women of color. It was a statement issued by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, a national organization of radical feminists of color organizing to confront violence against women of color and their communities (of which I support at the local level) that was the first text I read regarding this issue.

### **Violence Against Women of Color—The Political**

Like many progressive/radical organizations, INCITE! recognizes that because of the intersection of classism and racism those trapped in New Orleans were overwhelmingly people of color. In addition, they acknowledge that because of the existence of sexism, women of color are overwhelmingly represented within this population. Furthermore, INCITE! distinguishes these women also as “low-income and poor women, single mothers, pregnant women, women with disabilities, older women and women who are caregivers to family and community members who were unable to leave New Orleans.”

Reports of women and girls who were trapped in New Orleans experiencing sexual and physical violence are common. At times this violence was perpetrated by officials of the state—police, National Guard, FBI. This form of state sponsored violence is not at all surprising as it is a weapon of oppression utilized globally to suppress and maintain power and control over marginalized communities. However, some gender violence was perpetrated by men and boys of the New Orleans community. This is the more difficult abuse to speak of, especially for women of color, as we have no desire to aid further in stereotyping, demonizing, and criminalizing men and boys of color, particularly men and boys of African descent. Nonetheless, it is a painful truth that must be spoken. The bottom line that this catastrophe painfully demonstrates is, yet again, how women and girls of color are at the intersection of violence perpetrated upon marginalized communities, both by external social forces and by those within our communities.

Detailing this differential impact of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina on women of color is not at all about playing what a close friend refers to as the “oppression Olympics” (i.e. arguing that one particular group is more oppressed, exploited, marginalized than another). It is about recognizing a distinct experience faced by women and girls of color as they are uniquely confronted with both race and gender based oppression.

### **Connecting the Personal and Political**

In generating a macro-level political understanding of this disaster in relation to other issues of social justice—such as global warming, the war on Iraq, environmental racism, police brutality, or violence against women—I urge us to start with the personal experiences of those impacted by Hurricane Katrina. Political analysis stemming from accounts of those affected has the potential to spur the development of more enduring coalitions. In addition, it motivates individual and collective healing and empowerment. The Sociology Department of the University of New Orleans is supporting such efforts by offering online and on-site credit courses that ask students—many of whom are natives of New Orleans, students of color, and the first in their families to attend college—to document their own hurricane narratives and then collect histories from family and community members. This is just one way the experiences and views of marginalized, neglected communities are revealed. My hope is that these Katrina narratives can structure on-going and emergent political organizing.

Furthermore, I urge us to detail the diversity of experiences of those impacted by Hurricane Katrina. I worry that too often individual experiences are being generalized, overly condensed, flattened, or entirely lost in a desire to create or support a particular ideology, be

it anti-racist, feminist, anti-capitalist or environmentalist. For example, the issue of violence against women of color demands we simultaneously confront violence that is state sponsored and violence perpetrated against women of color by men of color who are part of our communities. This means the full range of accounts of women's experiences of sexual and physical violence must be detailed. A radical response to such abuses of power—one that challenges all forms of oppression—is one that is uncompromising about holding all perpetrators accountable and, at the same time, does not further bolster the prison industrial complex or the criminalization of men of color.

Efforts to end violence against women of color will be futile if we only address violence perpetrated on a community, but fail to confront those abuses perpetrated within a community by its own members.

### **The Intensity of Loss and Magnitude of Hope**

As I write, my ex-partner and close friend, a black woman born and raised in New Orleans, is watching her 84 year-old mother die as a result of the state's malevolent response to evacuating the city of New Orleans. And, as I write, 40,000 people have been estimated dead in the earthquake devastating Pakistan, India and Afghanistan. Such intensity of loss is overwhelming. I also write with knowledge that I am in community with women like Shana Griffin—self-described black feminist, young mother, social activist, and sister INCITE! member; she was born and raised in New Orleans and is currently displaced like so many of us. Within days of being uprooted by Hurricane Katrina, Shana was on record specifying that progressive activism surrounding the recovery of New Orleans must be driven by the most marginalized members of New Orleans and must center an analysis of race, class and gender. I can fortify my grieving heart and soul with her thoughtfulness, resolve, resilience and her continued organizing efforts and those of the People's Hurricane Relief Fund.

Audre Lorde wrote that we—those of us facing oppression—were never really intended to survive. So, survival in the face of such tremendous injury is resistance. This understanding prompts me to reach out for hope; it does glimmer here and there.

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