A Fortification of Race

Newspaper rack and debris at corner store

This morning I woke up in a curfew,
O God, I was a prisoner, too,
Could not recognize the faces standing over me,
They were all dressed in uniforms of brutality.

How many rivers do we have to cross,
Before we can talk to the boss?
All that we got, it seems we have lost
We must have really paid the cost.

(And that's why we'll be)
Burning and looting tonight,
Burning and looting tonight (to survive),
Burning all illusion tonight,
Burning all illusion tonight.

—Bob Marley, "Burnin' and Lootin'" (1973)

Rumor had it that prisoners had been left to drown in their cells. More stories flowed out of New Orleans in the weeks after Hurricane Katrina, about the subsequent relocation of thousands of prisoners (many of whom had been simply awaiting trial) to prisons throughout Louisiana, where they were being held incommunicado. As an artist and activist who has worked in New Orleans a good deal, I was invited to join a delegation to the city, along with organizers, service providers, and human rights lawyers. This essay is part of a body of work that draws upon my days there, media coverage of the storm, and previous experiences within activism and politics in New Orleans.

Upon my arrival in New Orleans, I spoke with the woman I'd be staying with to ask if she might need anything. She said we'd need water in the house; could I find some? This was my first introduction to the necessity now governing the city, but also made me think years back to an interview I'd conducted with a former New Orleans Black Panther. When I'd asked why she was an activist, she recalled long months of having the water cut off in her house, images of scraping change together with her daughter and hauling empty jugs to the water dispenser at a local store.

As I recalled this driving into a deserted city, it would be only the first similarity to strike me between social destruction of poverty and racism, and the destruction brought by Hurricane Katrina. Considering the processes brought on by the storm, accelerated by the storm, and enacted by the state in response to the storm, I soon began to see their collected effects as analogous to ghettoization: the manifold processes that go into transforming a community into a ghetto.

Median strip on Broad Street at Canal Street

First, Hurricane Katrina wiped out what little infrastructure actually existed to support New Orleans communities before the storm, just as ghettoization destroys infrastructure, more slowly but surely, whether by economic divestment and strangulation or by bombs and bulldozers.

Second, Katrina revealed that an aspect of ghettoization is immobilization: the freezing of people and cordoning them off in their space. This was revealed in the immobilization of residents who could not afford to evacuate the city, who were literally stuck in the path of the storm, others who not allowed to cross over bridges out of the city into white suburbs, the curfews established, and the sealing off of the city after the storm had passed.

Third was the criminalization that was deployed by the state and media to characterize the city's remaining survivors as lawless and pathological (under the general label of "looting"). This characterization acts as a racialization, assigning a radical Other-ness to a group of people and naming them as an immanent threat that, by their very nature, need to be quarantined.

Fourth, extending from this racialized characterization, this dangerous otherness attached to the ghettoized residents, is the authorization for the state to act with violence upon them, so both their quarantine and the armed patrols in their streets and houses seem to be normal, or, at least, not outrageous.

Finally, this militarization reveals the spatial relationship between the state and a ghetto as one of militarized territorialization. Each of the preceding processes also belongs to this territorialization, manifest either as overt military occupation, which in New Orleans included bits and pieces of every imaginable military, policing, and imprisoning force in the United States (prison guards from around the United States

were to be found in Louisiana), or indirect modes of occupation, such as antigang units, antidrug squads, extralegal policing squads, and public housing "safety" patrols.[1]

What this relation—enabled through racialization—might be compared to more generally is the *state of exception*, or *state of emergency*, the name given to any period of time when a state suspends its constitutional law: its obligations toward and respect for rights and protections (protections from state incursion), in response to a perceived danger. Giorgio Agamben has recently asserted that the state of exception is increasingly becoming the generalized condition of all states today.[2] In his writing about the "camp" (a close relative of the ghetto) as the definitive instance of such a space, he states:

> The camp is the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule . . . [in the camp, the state of exception, which was essentially a temporary suspension of the rule of law on the basis of a factual state of danger, is now given a permanent spatial arrangement . . .].[3]

That this "permanent spatial arrangement" is what "opens up" when the state of exception becomes the rule can be understood in at least two ways. First, the camp can be understood as a symbolic figure, wherein the camp is the total spatialization of a suspension of rights and a state without restriction. Second, in a more practical sense, it is one way we begin to see the state of exception manifest in our daily life, its first spatialization once implemented—not at all as an "exception" but as the beginning to the ruling principle to which we'll be submitted.

Collapsed house

This is why law firms of all political orientation have filed habeas corpus petitions for prisoners held incommunicado at Guantanomo Bay, including conservative firms: so as to prevent the state from opening up any such spaces in which people are rendered without rights and the state can act without limitation, what one such lawyer I've spoken with called a "legal black hole."

I would argue that this is precisely the rule and function of any ghetto, no matter what the justification for its implementation. More important, this was precisely the state's reaction to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans: suspending rights and lawfulness (of the state) in order to establish the "security" of the state; it prioritized the integrity of the territory as *state territory* and protected the private property of select interests, both prior to saving and protecting people who are, at least in legal formality, citizens of that state.

The permanent institution of the state of exception already built into all modern governments is the prison, where the processes of the ghetto are concentrated and their effects contained. Through the logic of public safety and "deprivation of liberty," prisoners (primarily people raised their whole lives subjected to processes of ghettoization) are stripped of all but a minimum of human and civil rights, and are used to satisfy any number of needs of the state.

In New Orleans, the refusal to evacuate the Orleans Parish Prison was a claim to such exception, where prisoners were accorded the status of vermin: to be contained rather than rescued or acknowledged as human beings; their containment valued over their lives. Only after it had flooded horribly did the sheriff finally evacuate, while beginning the immediate construction of a chain-link fence jail behind the city's Greyhound Bus station. Looking a great deal like the Guantanomo Bay prison, it continued support for the state of exception and the larger ghettoization of the city: a holding space for storm victims not regarded as victims, but rounded up by police and military for looting, curfew violations, and charges that can be understood as "poor laws."[4] In this way, rather than fulfilling their avowed civil function, prisons tend to function as ghettos of a ghetto, where the negligence and violence of ghettoization, and the responding social disorder and dissidence, are disappeared and the generalized criminalization of the ghettoized is accomplished.

As this condition was not only the response to a storm but was also the history of New Orleans, it brings to light what we see in communities throughout this country and the world, where more and more, communities and cultures are demonized and cinched off economically; surrendered of their rights and protections; categorized as immanent threats by virtue of the criminality or dangerousness projected onto them as their inherent "nature." Everywhere, under varied rationales, we see communities living under permanent states of exception: policed rather than served by the police; subjects of control, inspection, and detention rather than subjects of politics; for whom the state is a militarizing and surveilling force authorized by the discourses of the War on Crime, the War on Drugs, and increasingly, the War on Terror—all of which can be understood as post–Civil Rights era discourses of race-making, each of which is inherently raciological and racializing.

At this point, however, I should back up and say that none of this is really so simple, and it points to a certain inadequacy of the neat and tidy categories of race and class as they've been simplified in our popular and political discourses. Whatever authorized the social and political destruction of Katrina must have been much deeper and more complex than mere prejudice or derisive sentiment, as racism is generally located today, especially when we are asked to untangle race from class.

It is essential to point out that what fell away during Katrina was not just New Orleans's civil structure and infrastructure, but also the built and socialized spatializations of race and class hierarchy that are New Orleans's history (as they are of every place). Beneath superficial attitudes of racism is the ordering of space and experience—in the partitions of space, social habits and physical architectures—which are the major technology of how race and class continue to be regulated, hierarchized, and policed; the every day fortifications which control the racial Other and "keeps them in their place," of which the ghetto is just one expression.

Importantly, such spatializations are not only what *regulates* race, but are *how race exists*. As the theorists of spatial practices teach us that there is no social or political relation that does not have a spatial corollary or manifestation, it can also be said that such corollaries are not *additions to* a relation, but are in fact the very *location* of that relation—how and where that relation can and does take place. Since race is not a biological fact, but is a social fiction which is always in crisis, the building and territorializing of space is not only how race is "enacted" but is in fact how race *can be;* space preserves not only the proper ordering of race, but inasmuch as these structures are also symbolic, it maintains the illusion of race as a stable reality altogether.

Once Katrina wiped out the material mechanisms and practices that had kept the black and poor communities of New Orleans "in their place" for centuries, it took with it these symbolic markers of racial stability and control, leaving only the racial imagination, which, for its own stability and affirmation, needs to perceive the neat separation of one group from another; to perceive a *self* that is "safe" from that *other*, or deeper, simply *distinct* from its Other. What happens when the stability of the distinction between one racially based identity loses the terrain upon which it knows itself, sees itself as protected from its Other, and ultimately loses the markers that separate itself identifiably from its Other?

New Orleans District Attorney's Office with car

One place to look is to much of the hysteria that took place during Katrina, specifically the irrational fear throughout the outlying suburbs that hordes of ''animalistic black people'' were coming to rush over the bridges from New Orleans to loot and ravage entire white communities.[5] Or we can consider the untruths that the sheriff's and police departments themselves announced about marauding gangs of black youth in the streets, murders and rapes in the Superdome and Convention Center, none of which have since been substantiated as anything other than rumors, yet never explained.[6]

What was to account for these rumors spread by law enforcement themselves, beyond the possibility they had spread them to justify the use of paramilitary force or to garner extra resources? Both these explanations are likely but, alone, fall short, for they do not account for how predisposed the general public was to embrace such rumors, or how easily the rumors came to characterize the whole of the situation in New Orleans to the public that was audience to the disaster throughout the United States.

> [W]hen the colonist speaks of the colonized he uses zoological terms. Allusion is made to the slithery movements of the yellow race, the odors from the ''native'' quarters, to the hordes, the stink, the swarming, the seething, and the gesticulations . . . This explosive population growth, those hysterical masses, those blank faces, those shapeless, obese bodies . . . all this is part of the colonial vocabulary. (Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*)

Perhaps these examples were not only a mixture of strategic desire and paranoid fear of an unleashed, mythological ''black horde,'' which Fanon helps us to situate as a figure of the Western racial imagination. Perhaps, upon the disintegration of the symbolic structures that would ''hold back'' this racial figure, these were reifications of the catalogue of that imagination, unleashed in the very real form of hysterical hallucinations. In such a traumatic environment, the likelihood of such hysteria was real, and asks us to push past simple calculations of race and class prejudice, toward the breakdown of figures of knowledge that belong to a broader ordering of social life.

Katrina and its aftermath revealed not just an intersection of race and class as two separate things unto themselves, but rather, overlapping discourses that claim common as well as opposing objects, both producing a truth effect that categorizes groups of people as generally mad—a labeling that renders those labeled as less than fully human and illegible as subjects. Michel Foucault begins his *Madness and Civilization*:

> We have yet to write the history of that other form of madness, by which men, in an act of sovereign reason, confine their neighbors, and communicate and recognize each other through the merciless language of non-madness.

In the case of New Orleans, I'm not referring to the storm as having ''driven people crazy,'' although it certainly did. I mean madness as a limit line, a threshold which was exposed, on one side of which lies the figure of civilization, and on the other is

the projection of madness that Foucault describes as the ''constitutive outside'' of that civilization, against which ''civilization'' can know itself.

Foucault describes a socially produced split between reason and nonreason, where nonreason constitutes this othered outside, whereupon it is converted into an object of scientific inquiry, an inquiry that is barred from ever referring back to that original split or its social or political character, leaving its division already natural, unquestionable, a priori. He writes:

> What is constitutive is the action that divides madness, and not the science elaborated once this division is made and calm restored. What is originative is the caesura that establishes the distance between reason and non-reason; reason's subjugation of non-reason, wresting from it its truth as madness, crime, or disease, derives explicitly from this point.

In New Orleans, where we saw ''survivor'' written onto the bodies of some people (primarily white), we saw the figure of ''looter'' mapped onto others. This was by no means assigned only to people who'd transgressed private property law but was drawn in broad strokes onto swaths of bodies that appeared already to the racialized gaze of ''civilization'' as markers of the irrational, the uncontrollable, of chaos. While the former were recognized as civilization's own members, legible as citizens to be saved, the latter was split off, written out of this possibility by the projection of madness onto them—the madness which, in our society, is written through discourses of race, class, gender, and sexuality, producing them as Other, imbuing them with threat, chaos, disorder, the pathological, dishonest and simple.

This ''originative'' split is a discursive operation that distributes bodies respectively to one side or other: while on one side are the sane—people legible and audible as legitimate political subjects—on the other are the mad—people illegible, rendered silent, politically muted. Incapable of speech, they become instead subjects to a culture's discourses of truth, of its ''science[s] elaborated once this division is made,'' which cannot hear them but can only study them in monologue. Foucault continues:

> [O]n one hand, the man of reason delegates the physician to madness, thereby authorizing a relation only through the abstract universality of disease . . . [this] posits the separation as already effected, and thrusts into oblivion all those stammered, imperfect words without fixed syntax in which the exchange between madness and reason was made. The language of psychiatry, which is a monologue of reason *about* madness, has been established only on the basis of such a silence.

Media and political analysis were precisely such monologues during Katrina, the primary ''sciences'' taking the ''mad'' as their object, articulating their ''disease'' as crime. This mirrored the larger state of our society in which no longer a physician, but the police chief, warden, and district attorney are ''delegated to madness,'' thereby, shifting Foucault's terms, ''authorizing a relation to the mad through the abstract universality'' of *criminality and dangerousness;* projecting madness, but along with it, all that is wrong with or challenging in society. Put in the colonial context, Fanon continues:

"Military helicopter"

> The colonial world is a Manichaean world . . . the colonist turns the colonized into a kind of quintessence of evil . . . The "native" is declared impervious to ethics, representing not only the absence of values but also the negation of values. He is, dare we say it, the enemy of values.

What looking to Katrina can push us to consider is a more careful read of this split between madness and reason, a concocted dividing line whose original split is barred from recognition, as it resembles, or is perhaps structurally archetypal to, the split that marks so many forms of subjugation which are explained through vocabularies of madness and irrationality. We can think of how this permeates the history of discourses of race, from supremacist texts that argue genetic bases for intellectual and moral inferiority of people of color, to more recent texts that have argued the same on sociological bases, to current discussions that blame stubborn, "nonassimilated" black culture and familial structure for their own poverty, such as those of John McWhorter of the Manhattan Institute.[7]

We could also trace the use of madness in the historical subjugation of women and policing of gender, wherein modes of resistance, intellectuality, self-defense, and rejection of gender codes are attributed to hysteria, or the "devil in the womb." Phyllis Chesler, for example, in her book *Women and Madness*, documents a variety of manifestations of this, including historical accounts of women confined to mental asylums by their husbands for having been disagreeable or unruly, resisting sex, being in the way of an affair, or any number of other ways of inconveniencing husbands and fathers.[8]

Another obvious place to look is discourses on queerness and non-normative sexual identity that construe same-sex desire as pathological. It was only in 1986 that the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its *Diagnostic and*

Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), whereas the World Health Organization only ended its classification of homosexuality as a mental disorder in 1992.

Add to these the production of the Other common to any historical case of genocide, and the dehumanizing rationales that have been operative in slave societies, and we have at least a partial list of such instances, one that begins to situate Katrina within long and varied histories of subjugation which are perhaps not so distinct in their mechanics. The state's response to Katrina expressed madness through the discursive figures of race and class—interwoven in a projection of madness, but also as an *expression* of madness (as Foucault wrote of the ''madness'' in ''acts of sovereign reason'') and ultimately, a *cause* of so much madness. Despite the sympathy that Katrina's images inspired, whether they could ultimately be read as human suffering is an important question, since they were understood first as racialized chaos and disorder. More than any overwhelming threat to private property or ''the rule of law,'' this perception of madness in the form of a racial crisis is why the state's response was definitively one of violence, territorialization, containment, and quarantine, excusing a generalized state of exception that is instrumental to the goals and processes of ghettoization.

This brings us to the final stage of ghettoization, which is no longer ghettoization. What follows is the final removal of the ghettoized, argued through racialization, authorized by the state of exception, and setting the stage for *gentrification*. Accordingly, right-wing think tanks, pundits, and blogs praised the ''unintended consequences'' of the storm as a much needed cleansing of the city's ''criminal elements.'' It takes no stretch of the imagination to consider what the benefit would be to the powerful interests of the city and region if these populations—perceived in their inhumanity as a scourge and obstacle to profits—were erased. Clearing the way for expanded tourism, breaking up one of the only black voting blocs in the state, and the redevelopment of eminent domain property lots, seized from those who cannot make it back to the city, are but three obvious motivations to consider.[9] And now the first post-Katrina census of New Orleans has been publicized, whereupon Ray Nagen's P-Funk predictions are sounding increasingly hollow.[10] The census reveals the city's black majority has dwindled from two-thirds to just fifty-five percent, while its

Public housing unit and boat at the Calliope Projects

median income rose by ten percent. Embedded more clearly in the interesting statistic that the number of households *without access to vehicles* has declined by more than half,[11] is a clear sign that Katrina has already made New Orleans richer and whiter, a disturbingly successful gain for those who envision a total cleansing of poor and black people from the city, wherein conditions of ghettoization lay the groundwork for gentrification, and meet ultimately with historical modes of banishment and exile from city gates.

It is a grim picture, but it is so far a grim history. If I were to offer hope, it would not be to first seek reform of the government or "enlighten" the racial vision of society. Instead, I see hope within the autonomous grass-roots organizing that has taken place in the city, stopping home demolitions, documenting police and jail abuses, creating independent media, and rehabbing houses so as to help bring back people who can't afford to rebuild.[12] Ultimately they are working on the principle that power is not uniform, unidirectional, or univocal, nor is it ever "completed" forever in its monopoly, which those who live with necessity, by necessity, already know. Hope is in the power that belongs to those categorized as mad, rendered illegible, muted, or in Ralph Ellison's terms, invisible (not in what is offered to them); it is in the ability of social movements to convert the energies and strategies already in the service of daily survival—and those used to subjugate them—into their own political power. "I myself, after existing some twenty years, did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility," claims the nameless narrator of Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Despite the torment of his invisibility, he finds power and autonomy within it as well, while teaching us of the madness to be found in the position that claims a monopoly of reason. Recall the haunting passage of the story's prologue, in which arrogant insults flung at him by a white man summon the violent rage of a lifetime of racial attacks, so that he nearly slits the man's throat. "Oh yes I kicked him! And in my outrage I got out my knife and prepared to slit his throat." But in an epiphany of both his own power over this oppressor and the nature of that vision that renders him invisible, he stops himself, realizing that the man was, "as far as he knew . . . in the midst of a walking nightmare!" He continues:

> Then I was amused: Something in this man's thick head had sprung out and beaten him within an inch of his life. I began to laugh at this crazy discovery.

As James Baldwin describes whiteness as ultimately a dependent to its exoticized and demonized Other, or as Orlando Patterson declares the master a parasite living off the slave, rather than the reverse, the arrogance that valorizes domination is always a misrecognition of both itself and the dominated. It is always a distorted vision, blind to the power it invests in its Other, whereas the power and energy exercised by a dominant group becomes, in itself, a potential source of power to be amassed and organized by those subjected. Before political demands of legibility and recognition, voice and inclusion, there must be self-organization and self-definition, buoyed by the reminder that no dominated subject is precisely what an oppressor fantasizes that temporarily dominated subject to be. In the words of Ellison's narrator:

> It is incorrect to assume that, because I'm invisible and live in a hole, I am dead . . . Call me Jack-the-Bear, for I am in a state of hibernation . . . Please, a

definition: hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action . . . I believe in nothing if not action.

1. In New Orleans's public housing developments these mysterious police squads are called the "Safe Home" force, which to the (now former) residents of these developments was nothing short of cynical and a source of laughter.
2. I regard Walter Benjamin's assertion that "the state of emergency is the exception but the rule" important here as an expression of the latent desire of all states to be unrestrained, unaccountable, and totalitarian, and when not forced to do otherwise, will act accordingly. Hence, when Agamben states, "when the state of exception begins *to become* the rule," I distinguish this from Benjamin's assertion in that it is referring to the actual, practical implementation of constitutional law's suspension—fulfilling that latent impulse.
3. Georgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 1998; also see Agamben, *State of Exception*, 2005.
4. For discussion of the history of class and criminal codes, see *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century,* by Peter Linebaugh, 2001; also see the ACLU of New Orleans's report on coerced plea bargains forced upon many arrested, exchanging guilty pleas for reduced sentences of community service, cleaning out the flooded jail and courthouse.
5. Although there's no way to categorize the intentions behind the fivefold increase in background checks for gun purchases the FBI documented in the month after Katrina, the only places people near New Orleans could buy guns were in the outlying, white suburbs. Similarly, the Chief of Police for Westwego County told National Public Radio that he'd authorized $18,000 in new weapons purchases to protect against looters in a town where there was no looting.
6. Despite the perception of the hurricane, for months after Katrina the last homicide officially recorded by the police had been on 27 August, two days before the hurricane hit. See Adam Nossiter, *International Herald Tribune*, 11 November 2005.
7. For an excellent recounting of this intellectual history, see Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: Race, Power, and the Blues in the Mississippi Delta*, Verso, 1998, or his forthcoming revision, Development Arrested: From the Plantation Era to the Katrina Crisis in the Mississippi Delta, 2007.
8. Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness*, 1972, 2002.
9. For a more thorough elaboration, see Mike Davis, "Gentrifying Disaster," http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID = 72&ItemID = 8992; and Naomi Klien, "The Rise of Disaster Capitalism," *The Nation*, 2 May 2005.
10. Gulf Coast Impact Estimates, U.S. Census Bureau, http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Products/Profiles/gulf_coast/tables/tab1_katrinaK0100US2203v.htm; http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/emergencies/gulfcoast_impact_estimates.xls.
11. http://www.census.gov/acs/www/Products/Profiles/gulf_coast/tables/tab4_katrinaK0100US2203v.htm.
12. Visit the Web sites for the Common Ground Collective (http://www.commongroundrelief.org), the People's Hurricane Relief Fund (http://www.peopleshurricane.org), Hurricane Autonomous Workers Collective (http://www.peoplesfreespace.org/hurricanerelief), and New Orleans Independent Media Center (http://neworleans.indymedia.org).

Ashley Hunt is an artist, activist, and writer who works with video, mapping, and installation to engage the ideas of social movements, modes of learning, and public discourse. His primary work of the past eight years has been the development of *The Corrections Documentary Project* (www.correctionsproject.com), which deals with the contemporary growth of prisons as central to today's wealth accumulation and racial exclusion. Hunt's work has been exhibited at the Martin Luther King Jr. Center in Atlanta, the Contemporary Museum in Baltimore, Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, as well as numerous grass-roots and community-based venues throughout the United States. Other writings can be found in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest* (2005), *Sandbox Magazine* (2002) and at Artwurl.org (2003–present). He is currently a fellow at the Vera List Center for Art and Politics, and lives in Los Angeles where he teaches at the University of California at Irvine.