Failing Narratives, Initiating Technologies: Hurricane Katrina and the Production of a Weather Media Event

Nicole R. Fleetwood

> The preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina show we are still an analog government in a digital age. We must recognize that we are woefully incapable of storing, moving, and accessing information—especially in times of crisis.
>
> Many of the problems we have identified can be categorized as "information gaps"—or at least problems with information-related implications, or failures to act decisively because information was sketchy at best.
>
> —*A Failure of Initiative*

The *Final Report of the Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina* is a bold statement about the centrality of technology to securing the nation's population and its future. From the first page, the report frames the crisis resulting from the hurricane as a failure of individuals to access accurate information and to actualize proper technologies both prior to the hurricane's arrival and after New Orleans flooded. By staging the disaster in these terms at the outset, the Republican-led congressional committee displaces the privilege given in public culture to the media coverage of the disaster, in particular the media's focus on abandoned black residents in the city's floodwaters. In fact, the committee asserts that part of the disastrous consequences of Katrina resulted from the media's spreading unfounded information about the extent of the disaster and civil unrest, as opposed to the scientific accuracy of reports by the National Hurricane Center and the Army Corps of Engineers.[1] In assigning accountability, the document states: "The media must share some of the blame here . . . its clear accurate reporting was among Katrina's many victims. If anyone rioted, it was the media."[2] The *Final Report* is the federal government's attempt to be the authoritative voice through which the public understands the impact of Katrina. This is crucial given how the media's coverage has shaped the nation's understanding of what happened prior to and after the arrival of the

hurricane. The congressional committee's report has the effect of shoring up the grand narrative evoked in the epigraphic quote. This narrative depends on technological determinism and scientific truth; and it reduces the Katrina event to the misdeeds of individuals, misinformation, and outdated technologies.

The term the "Katrina event" is one I will use throughout this essay to describe a host of activities and processes surrounding the hurricane and its aftermath, including the reportage during and afterward, the ensuing flooding of New Orleans, the displacement and evacuation of thousands of people stranded in the city, and the ongoing and contested reconstruction process. The Katrina event refers to the material and social impact of the storm, as well as the complex set of social, technological, and economic narratives and processes reported by the news media and through governmental reports. The committee's assertion that Katrina revealed the need for institutions to embrace the digital age relies on a belief in technology to decrease, if not overcome, human failure. As evidenced in this report and other post-Katrina efforts, the government invokes technological determinism—or technology as the central force behind progress and social development—as a response to the public's belief that the Katrina event represents a massive failure in governmental accountability and social and technological progress. At the same time, the Katrina event is the result of the success of other forms of technologies, that is, the power of meteorological technologies to predict disaster and that of news media technologies, as the privileged producers and disseminators of knowledge and as consumable goods for the national public. These two sets of technology were instrumental in producing Hurricane Katrina as a weather media event, what Marita Sturken describes as a convergence of news and meteorology, and as a national crisis.[3] The application of these technologies constructed Hurricane Katrina as the national disaster that has been imprinted on the nation's psyche, especially through the images of suffering, emoting, and abandoned black bodies in the floodwaters of New Orleans. Turning attention to the importance of technological mediation and narratives in the production of the crisis and in devising its solution reveals a great deal about the operations of race, class, and risk in the United States. Technology here should be understood as a media process of production and as a discursive tool by which particular narratives are naturalized and certain bodies made vulnerable. In this context, Hurricane Katrina reveals a different kind of determinism—the stark operations of technology in determining who lives and who dies.

This essay focuses on the complex relation between concepts of technological determinism, the definition of a crisis within technological discourses as a failure of specific technologies and operators, and the role played by media

technologies in framing thousands of blacks as disposable beings. In tracing the role of technology in the production of Katrina, my analysis engages with two of the most widely distributed sources by which Katrina has been recorded and which simultaneously reveal the significance of technological determinism as a national motif: (1) the news media archive of the storm and its aftermath (a diffuse set of stories and images that dominated television for much of September 2005), and (2) *A Failure of Initiative*, the report of the Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina. These sources, on many levels, compete with each other to be the authority through which this event gets marked and understood. Working with these two sets of documents, I attempt to track the technological production of the storm as it developed in public discourse, specifically through news media coverage.

In focusing on the unfolding production of Hurricane Katrina as a weather media event, this analysis exposes how a particular narrative of technology revealed itself in the moments after the hurricane arrived on land. For a brief period, the Katrina event showed the instability the dominant technological narrative (in particular, the notion that technology and scientific truth trump racial and social barriers). Katrina exposed how systems of power invest in material and infrastructural technologies to maintain certain imbalances. Take, for instance, the notoriety of the convention center in New Orleans, a place where thousands fled for safety. The masses of black bodies in despair housed in a site meant for industry, public conventions, and "state of the art" expositions defeated dominant notions of technological advancement and progress as color-blind processes and objectives. Analyzing the significance of the abandoned subjects in the convention center, Michael Ignatieff writes: "What has been noticed is that the people with the most articulate understanding of what the contract of American citizenship entails were the poor, the abandoned, hungry people huddled in the stinking darkness of the New Orleans convention center . . . Having been abandoned, the people in the convention center were reduced to reminding their fellow citizens, through the medium of television, that they were not refugees in a foreign country."[4] The convention center no longer was a site of innovation and progress but a dumping ground for housing a group of displaced subjects, or "body objects."

While the Katrina event challenged the dominant U.S. technological narrative and made it temporarily vulnerable, the government's attempt to mend this failing narrative was to initiate more technology as a material solution to the disaster of Katrina. Technology as public, governmental, and media discourse follows a positivistic model that festishizes specific commodities, frames the nation-state at the center of technological advances, and posits the future

of labor, citizenry, national security, and public life through a deterministic model of progress. More important, technological determinism is complicit in producing certain populations as disposable for the state, or what Achille Mbembe theorizes as necropolitics. Necropolitics refers to the state's ultimate expression of sovereignty as "the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die."[5] States may sanction the annihilation of specific populations through various means, including "technologies of murder" and by producing the conditions in which many poor and racialized groups found themselves before Katrina arrived, the state of living dead.[6] In the days following Hurricane Katrina, as the national audience sat glued to the television, the imagistic power of the living dead on the streets of an American city shook the sovereignty of the nation-state and its foundational narratives.

Technologies of Forecasting: Imaging the Weather, Predicting Disaster

> So tragically, so many of these people, almost all of them that we 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.[7]
>
> —Wolf Blitzer, CNN anchor

Wolf Blitzer's candid and perplexed statement during his CNN news show exposes precisely the moment in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in which dominant narratives of technology failed to account for the overwhelming images broadcast by news media organizations and the lack of organized governmental response to the disaster. At the same time, Blitzer's confusion highlights the flexibility and power of media technologies to make visible the failure of these narratives as camera crews arrived long before first responders and governmental agencies. Blitzer, like many others, was caught off guard by the disarray that resulted after Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast. Much of the media's tracking of Katrina was an impressive and orchestrated exercise in meteorological technologies to build anticipation over a period of days. While the Weather Channel and the major news media organizations accurately predicted the hurricane and activated a range of technologies to forecast, simulate, and record the disaster, these technologies and their application could not provide an adequate narrative to explain the flood of "so poor" and "so black" bodies in despair as a result of the storm.

During the late summer of 2005, disaster reportage dominated much of television news, a time when viewership tends to be low. News shows were

dedicated to predicting and witnessing weather media events, including a record number of hurricanes. This coverage was bolstered by sophisticated hurricane tracking technologies and on-the-ground reporting by well-known anchors and newspeople. When the Weather Channel, the major networks, and cable news sent crews to the U.S. Gulf Coast to track Hurricane Katrina, a massive storm that had reached Category 5 status, news reporters transformed into thrill seekers. After days of following the movement of the storm across Florida and the Gulf Coast, they were there when the hurricane finally landed on Monday, August 29, 2005. Because Katrina had weakened and made landfall as a Category 3 storm, the general assessment on the morning of its arrival was that New Orleans had been spared the destruction predicted by meteorologists across the nation.[8] Yet, 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 emergency response organizations all scrambled to gather information even while vivid images, with often scattered and contradictory commentary, aired live. The hurricane was precisely the storm that the National Hurricane Center had predicted and yet its consequences and aftermath came as a shock to both government officials and the weather-focused media. In spite of meteorological accuracy, Katrina became the terrorist attack that the American public had feared would hit at some unsuspecting moment, and years after 9/11, the nation-state proved unprepared to handle such a crisis.

While Hurricane Katrina is widely understood as a spectacular moment of failure in the national imaginary, the technologies available through the National Hurricane Center (NHC) and National Weather Service (NWS) allowed the storm to be predicted with uncanny accuracy. On the day before Katrina made landfall in the Gulf Coast, the National Weather Service put out the following alert: "Most of the area will be uninhabitable for weeks . . . perhaps longer . . . human suffering incredible by modern standards."[9] Partly in coordination with updates from NHC and NWS, weather media reports began to develop a narrative of the hurricane. In producing the Katrina event, news media organizations straddled a complex nexus of imaging technologies, entertainment, information, and communication technologies. According to media scholar Katherine Fry, such dramatization of weather events and the primacy of their coverage, known as the "CNN Syndrome," have grown more prominent since the early 1990s.[10] The CNN Syndrome uses both technological instruments (weather maps, Doppler radar, interactive diagrams) and narrative strategies (anticipation, climax, denouement) to make weather must-see TV news.

On some level, meteorological technologies give the power to predict the future. We are able to witness the storm as weather media event from its inception as tropical storm to its naming to its levels of categorization to its arrival. The detailed sophistication afforded the viewer promises to lower our risk by increasing preparedness. Marita Sturken argues that computer visualization technologies, such as Doppler radar, "are used to convey the sense that weather-tracking technologies can actually help to control the weather itself."[11] Further, Sturken argues that the production of weather media events and the illusion of controlling the future have little impact on preparedness: "Weather prediction is in fact a very limited kind of knowledge that promises protection and reassurance yet which bears no relationship to the social infrastructures that would ensure preparedness. Indeed, it could be argued that prediction not only has little impact on people's daily lives but serves to screen out the politics of disaster."[12] Taking Sturken's argument further, one could say that prediction becomes an instrument of necropolitical operations by effacing "the politics of disaster" and assigning responsibility for protection to individual consumption.

If anything, the ability to track and monitor weather has evolved into a particular form of spectator pleasure that writer Mark Svenvold terms catastrophilia.[13] Weather becomes the big media event, similar to the anticipation around the Super Bowl or other risk-involved live events. Further complicating the type of participatory spectatorship and consumption involved in watching weather media events, Sturken argues, "the weather is the site of a production of knowledge that functions as a means to erase political agency and to substitute the activity of witnessing in its place. Watching it becomes the central experience; indeed it subsumes all other experiences."[14] In fact, Sturken says, the consolidation of media and news technologies has created the "weather citizen," a social position that combines civic responsibility and consumerism with spectatorship and technological fetishism.[15] Assuming the role of the weather citizen, connected to the disaster through news media production, was the dominant method by which the public responded to the unfolding events in late August and early September 2005. Yet, those stranded on the Gulf Coast were not afforded this position of civic participation through spectatorship and consumption. Instead, they were denied their more fundamental and substantive rights as citizens and residents to be protected and sheltered by the government during times of catastrophic disaster, or what the federal government labels an Incident of National Significance (INS).

Quite certainly, Hurricane Katrina made for excellent television programming, as it also unified the nation of weather citizens in a shared sense of shock

and horror at the evolving footage of the Gulf Coast. The combination of the storm's cinematic destruction of a major metropolitan area, the unfettered images of human suffering, the emotional outburst of media personalities and celebrities, and the portrayal of governmental ineptitude fixated viewers across the country on their television screens. Part of the power of Katrina as weather media event had to do with the news media's juxtaposition of, on the one hand, human desperation and need and, on the other, neglect on various levels. For example, it has been widely reported that President George W. Bush was on vacation when the National Hurricane Center predicted that Katrina would be a catastrophic weather event, and he remained on vacation for two days after the hurricane hit. (Even more troubling, several months after Hurricane Katrina, the Associated Press released video footage of top FEMA and National Hurricane Center officials briefing Bush on the potential catastrophic damage that could result from the hurricane and Bush responding that the federal government was fully prepared to handle the situation.[16]) *Newsweek*, examining the president's initial lack of response, reports that Bush was not aware of the severity of the storm until one of his aides made a DVD of news coverage and showed it to him on Thursday, three days after the storm's arrival.[17] This account foregrounds the centrality of news media in making the hurricane a weather media event worthy of watching, as well as the role of technology in providing access to the nation, even the president, as he watched the "highlights" of Katrina news coverage. In essence, Bush and his administration chose not to heed the National Weather Service's warnings and responded only after technological interfaces produced images that validated the warnings.

The Katrina event showcased the power of imagistic news technologies and the ineffectiveness of rescue/security/disaster technologies, as they have become even more closely connected in the era of George W. Bush's War on Terror. Under Bush's leadership, domestic emergency and rescue operations, most notably FEMA, have become housed in the Department of Homeland Security. With Katrina, the bureaucracies and technologies of crisis that Bush has spent several years developing in the post-9/11 era were revealed as impotent when faced with immobilized bodies, rendered as such by news media and consumer technologies (camera phones, digital cameras, consumer camcorders). Furthering this point is the fact that governmental officials were reliant on the visual narrative unfolding through media coverage to execute technologies of war and rescue. In *A Failure of Initiative*, one top-ranking military official reported to Congress that military and first responders relied on media coverage for situational updates: "We focused assets and resources based on situational awareness provided to us by the media, frankly. And the media

failed in their responsibility to get it right . . . we sent forces and capabilities to places that didn't need to go there in numbers that were far in excess of what was required, because they kept running the same B roll over and over . . . and the impression to us that were watching it was that the condition did not change. But the conditions were continually changing."[18] The jarring contrast of technologies of circulation and mobility (such as portable news cameras, Coast Guard rescue helicopters, and later, military convoys) functioned in stark contrast to the stasis of thousands of black bodies framed in congested, filthy, dire conditions. News helicopters hovered above flooded homes, with cameras zooming in on people stranded on their roofs with signs such as "Help Us." Searching for narratives of heroism, news crews would occasionally wait until a Coast Guard or other rescue force appeared and then showed live coverage of the rescue mission. At other times, the reporter on duty would explain that the news media helicopter was not equipped to rescue but that the reporter would notify authorities of the person's location: "Oh gosh, there's nothing we can do to help these people but notify the Coast Guard."[19] The rooftop rescues made for exciting, dramatic television, as opposed to the bureaucratic wrangling and the structural repairing that were taking place at the same time.[20] Portable technologies—handheld digital video cameras, still cameras, videophones, and camera phones—captured the corporeality of the body as the social machines necessary to support it broke down. Visual media exposed bodies emoting, bodies suffering, bodies bloated and decaying, bodies—live and dead—as obstacles to be removed so that "disaster capitalism" could begin its work of rebuilding what has been described as a dead city.[21]

On the Ground Scramble:
Infrastructural Failure and Technologies of Survival

> We saw buses, helicopters, and FEMA trucks, but no one stopped to help us. We never felt so cut off in all our lives. When you feel like this you do one of two things; you either give up or go into survival mode. We chose the latter. This is how we made it. We slept next to dead bodies; we slept on streets at least four times next to human feces and urine. There was garbage everywhere in the city. Panic and fear had taken over.
>
> —Patricia Thompson, New Orleans resident and evacuee[22]

The level to which Katrina destroyed, interrupted, and severely damaged already weakened technological infrastructure and capacities in New Orleans is immense. The lack of technological access after the storm arrived affected the operations of public and private sectors in countless ways. Downed power lines littered the landscape; cell phone coverage was absent for days; and batteries

were in short supply. News footage showed thousands of cars in ruin, often mangled into barely recognizable forms. Images of parking lots filled with flooded buses, potentially available to evacuate many before the storm had arrived, further underscored the neglect of those stranded in the floodwaters. Hospital officials were forced to abandon some of their most ill patients and to euthanize others because of loss of power and failing generators, which cut off critical medical interventions. Governmental computers with vital court records were destroyed. Oil rigs were left slammed against the coast, and production platforms were destabilized. Tide gauges failed in the New Orleans area, making a precise measure of the storm surge in the urban region almost impossible.[23]

News reportage showed stranded people, mainly black residents, making use of materials and objects for survival. Stranded individuals turned refrigerators and blow-up mattresses into flotation devices. Some trapped residents "chopped their way to their roofs with hatchets and sledge hammers, which residents had been urged to keep in their attics in case of such events."[24] Reports surfaced of carjackings becoming a means of escaping what for many was an apocalyptic environment. One of the more dramatic stories was of a young teenage boy who commandeered a yellow school bus. He filled the bus with stranded Orleanians and drove it to Houston for shelter. When reporters asked him if he had ever driven a school bus, he stared into the camera blankly and said no. After days of nonstop coverage of flooded New Orleans, television news organizations turned to recycling several familiar images of black suffering and survival. News media selected specific images and clips from their disaster coverage to stand in for a range of black pathos. For example, there was the repeated image of a dead elderly woman at the convention center, left in a wheelchair, covered by a plaid blanket. Another commonly replayed image was that of the young woman who held two listless babies outside of the convention center. Out of these images emerged stories of individualized hardship and struggle.

One story that became the symbol of black tragedy and hope was that of Hardy Jackson of Biloxi, Mississippi. Speaking to a reporter at WKRG, a local CNN affiliate station, Jackson, confused, disheveled, and tearful after narrowly escaping drowning, describes having to let go of his wife's hand as she is swept away by the waters. The reporter asks of the whereabouts of his wife now; Jackson responds, "Can't find her body. She gone." He then cries: "She told me, 'You can't hold me, . . . take care of the kids and the grandkids.'" The news camera focuses on Jackson's emoting face but with occasional wider shots that include his two young grandchildren and the young, white, blond reporter. The story ends with Jackson looking aimlessly at the devastation around him, as his grandchildren stand next to him silently looking in other directions.

CNN titled the news clip "Hurricane Heartache" and replayed it numerous times in the immediate aftermath of the storm. News organization produced several follow-up stories on Jackson's plight. In one brief segment on *Good Morning America*'s Web site titled "Story of Man Whose Wife Was Swept Away in Flood Touched Nation," Jackson's story is framed in moral terms: "It's his devotion to his family that has captured Americans' hearts. Each day since Katrina, Hardy has returned to what is left of his home—and to thoughts of what he will do about his wife's last words."[25] A week later, CNN followed up with a news story that began: "His face is etched into our collective memory." The story traced Hardy Jackson to Georgia, where he, his children, and his grandchildren were housed temporarily with a relative. In another update attempting to resolve Jackson's loss, we learn that an anonymous benefactor donated a house to him.[26] The emphasis on individual profiles continued for several months after the hurricane. In part, this appeared to be an attempt by media organizations not to forget the faces of Katrina or a response to the criticism that dominant news media have only short-term memory, that is, one sensational story supplants another. Yet, the process of individuating the disaster through news media representations plays into grander narratives of technological determinism and personal responsibility. This is in part because the focus on personal suffering and survival has sidetracked the public away from the larger structural causes that produced the Katrina event. Instead, the major news corporations and the federal government promote narratives of individual survival and technological reinforcements, focusing on rebuilding efforts, such as strengthening houses and making more durable levees. The proliferation of individual Katrina narratives supports the quick fix strategy of resolving the disaster, an issue I explore further in the following section.

While the news media have focused on the individual tales of people like Hardy Jackson, Katrina's impact was so far-reaching in large part because of the level to which poor and black communities in New Orleans had been systemically neglected and rendered as obstacles to the city's and ultimately the nation's progress. The racial and environmental history of New Orleans is one of structural inequality, particularly in housing, infrastructural development, and protection against weather events. Since Reconstruction, blacks have occupied the swampier lowlands of New Orleans.[27] Even more critically, Jim Crow–era housing segregation led to blacks, poor whites, and immigrants occupying the bottom of "the bowl" and other flood-prone areas. In discussing the racial implications of early-twentieth-century public works and civil engineering projects in New Orleans, Craig Colten writes: "Although the improved drainage system opened new areas to black residences, at the same

time it contributed to segregation, reflecting established patterns of turning low-value land associated with environmental problems to minority populations."[28] In recent years, the Ninth Ward has flooded repeatedly, most notably during Hurricane Betsy in 1965 and during the winter of 1983, leading residents of the district to file a lawsuit against the levee board for inaction and neglect due to the 1983 flood.[29]

In addition to flood vulnerability, the environmental toxicity of these districts is another major condition that contributes to the structural, environmental, and social neglect of poor and black (pre-Katrina) inhabitants. Julie Sze argues, "The 'toxic soup' that has received much public attention is filled with the effluence from the oil and petrochemical industry, and stands as a visible manifestation of the everyday environmental and human disaster that poor, African-American Gulf Coast communities faced before Katrina on an everyday basis."[30] With many industrial and manufacturing plants, from petrochemical to vinyl chloride, located there, southern Louisiana is one of the most polluted regions in the country. Three Superfund toxic waste sites exist within or in close proximity to New Orleans, due to years of toxic accumulations, all of which were flooded by Katrina.[31] Theodore Steinberg argues that poor development policies manufacture "natural disaster" risk.[32] As Katrina made obvious, as one's risk of living in an area prone to natural disaster increases based on being raced as black and classed as poor, so too does one's risk of governmental neglect.[33] These analyses make evident that the notion of risk is central to the positioning of certain subjects as the living dead. Given that nation-states rarely take responsibility for creating vulnerable populations, dominant narratives typically frame risk as caused by "acts of God" or by the pathological behavior of marginalized groups, which reproduces their own vulnerability. New Orleans's environmental toxicity, infrastructural neglect, compiled with its high poverty, illiteracy, and crime rates contribute to the city as an inescapable "death-world," a site occupied by those who have been rendered the living dead.

Considering the persistence of the living dead in the nation, Sharon Holland asks: "What if some subjects *never* achieve, in the eyes of others, the status of the 'living'? What if these subjects merely haunt the periphery of the encountering person's vision, remaining, like the past and the ancestors who inhabit it, at one with the dead—seldom recognized and, because of the circum-Atlantic traffic in human cargo or because of removal, often unnamed?"[34] Holland's questions then provide a context to understand Blitzer's confusion, that is, how do we make sense of all those poor and dark bodies on the nation's television screen in light of our overinvestment in technologies as the nation's future (as tools

Figure 1.
Deborah Willis, *Where the Levee Broke,* February 2006. Digital C-Print 11x14. Courtesy of the artist and Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, Miami.

Figure 2.
Wyatt Gallery, *Casino Boat and Chair,* Biloxi, Mississippi, October 2005. Digital C-Print Edition #1/5 30x38. Courtesy of the artist, Watermark Fine Arts, and www.wyattgallery.com.

Figure 3.
Cheryl Finley, *Sorting Debris: Intersection of Royal and Dauphine*, 9th Ward, 2006. 16x24. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 4.
Wyatt Gallery, *Personal Files,* St. Bernard Parish, LA. October 2005. Digital C-Print Edition #1/5 30x38. Courtesy of the artist, Watermark Fine Arts, and www.wyattgallery.com.

Figure 5.
Deborah Willis, *Lower 9ᵗʰ*, February 2006. Digital C-Print 11x14. Courtesy of the artist and Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, Miami. Forida.

Figure 6.
Cheryl Finley, *"I'm Back! R U?"*, 2006. 16x24. Courtesy of the artist.

to predict disaster with uncanny precision, machines for capitalistic growth, systems to offer longer life expectancy, and operations that enforce national security). In other words, those stranded in the floodwaters had been deemed dead, even prior to Katrina's arrival. A state-supported narrative of decline and death, one that seems to contradict the narrative of technological progress but in fact colludes with it, underlines the reality that most working-class and poor blacks in the United States have already been given the status of the "living dead." The visual images and material conditions of thousands of stranded black subjects provides evidence of how death and decline and technological progress work together; the "so black" and "so poor" were rendered as object bodies clogging the social machines that worked to contain or erase their presence. Those desperate figures on rooftops, streets, and huddled in the Superdome and convention center were the subject(s) of death. Their morbidity and expendability circulated through the ultra-flexible portable imaging and informational technologies available to media outlets. Appropriating Susan Sontag's analysis, we—the audience—were given uncanny access "to look at people who know they have been condemned to die."[35]

While risk of disaster is increased by structural and governmental neglect, the discourse of personal responsibility often places the burden of preparedness on individuals, personal wealth accumulation, and private technologies. Such is the case in the emphasis placed on automobiles during and after Katrina. The primary mode of evacuating before the storm hit, and in most urban disaster plans in the United States, is the private automobile. Until the levees failed, this plan had been considered a success in the case of New Orleans, then undergoing the largest evacuation in the region's history. The *New York Times* reported that "at one point during the evacuation of New Orleans on Sunday, more than 18,000 cars an hour were leaving the city."[36] In response to the early public questioning about why so many remained in New Orleans after the government called for a mandatory evacuation, writer Ann Rice argued in an editorial that "thousands didn't leave New Orleans because they couldn't leave. They didn't have the money. They didn't have the vehicles. They didn't have any place to go. They are the poor, black and white, who dwell in any city in great numbers; and they did what they felt they could do—they huddled together in the strongest houses they could find. There was no way to up and leave and check into the nearest Ramada Inn."[37] Because of the centrality placed on the consumer vehicle in times of crisis, the lack of automobile ownership among the New Orleans poor became the default explanation as to why so many were left behind before the hurricane hit. Yet, I find this a wholly unsatisfying explanation. For one, it does not account for the more than

250,000 vehicles left in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina.[38] Nor does this address the role of automobiles in helping to create the Katrina disaster. Scientists have noted how greenhouse gases contributing to global warming might affect the strength and severity of tropical storms. Further, the evacuation of Houston during Hurricane Rita, predicted to hit dangerously near the city a few weeks after Katrina, demonstrated how disastrous this strategy can be: more people died in the Houston area during attempted evacuation by automobiles than from the damage of the hurricane. Furthermore, the irony of FEMA's long-term relief plan for those affected by Katrina was to house them in hotels and mobile homes, often on the outskirts of existing communities. These mobile homes, which are even more vulnerable to natural disaster, will be the residences for thousands indefinitely, thus rooting them in another type of flexible, transitional housing without the social mobility to flee.[39]

The focus on the lack of personal automobiles is a myopic attempt to grasp all of those dark bodies in the Katrina aftermath, when there are no easy answers to make sense of racialized and classed human suffering. Explanations offered by journalists and pundits about the lack of automobiles in poor communities, the lack of news and emergency information and resources circulating in these communities, the culture of poverty argument about irresponsibility and neglect in these communities, as well as the fact that Katrina hit at the end of the month (when many on government assistance are *anxiously* without money until the first of the month) reproduce black subjects of New Orleans as already static beings prior to the arrival of Katrina.

The reasons so many residents stayed in New Orleans after the mandatory evacuations are more complex than lack of access to vehicles. They return us to structural neglect, narrative violence, and discursive erasure. More tangibly, many Orleanians had to remain in the local region for medical reasons or to care for sick and elderly relatives. In fact, the Superdome, before being designated a shelter of last resort, had been established as the primary shelter for "special needs" populations. Prior to the storm, the city used buses and paratransit vehicles to bring "'special needs' citizens" there.[40] After the city flooded, it was revealed that many deaths occurred when ill patients ran out of oxygen or could not get access to their dialysis center. For others, especially—but not exclusively—those with limited social networks and financial means, the most secure place to be in times of crisis is home. The safety associated with one's domestic environment takes on heightened relevance in postindustrial urban areas with neglected infrastructural systems. In examining why the majority of heat-related deaths during the 1995 Chicago heat wave were elderly blacks, Eric Klinenberg considers the social ecology of the neighborhoods where the

death toll was the highest. Arguing that the high mortality was connected to the failing infrastructure in these neighborhoods, Klinenberg writes that "the dangerous ecology of abandoned buildings, open spaces, commercial depletion, violent crime, degraded infrastructure, low population density, and family dispersion undermines the viability of public life and the strength of local support systems."[41] During the Katrina event, rumors and reports about happenings, especially violent attacks on other stranded people, in and around the Superdome and the convention center simply reinforced this belief for many that home was the safest place to be during the crisis. The infrastructural neglect and the overreliance on private technology (i.e., the automobile) are discourses of abandonment and neglect presented as individual failures that obscure the perpetuation of "death-worlds."

Technological Solutions and Narratives of Reconstruction

In his infamous speech given in New Orleans's French Quarter two weeks after the city flooded, President Bush, responding to the criticism that had been launched at his administration, raised the specter of an unjust historical past without locating the blame on the nation-state. Bush connected racism to narratives of individualism and capitalism, arguing that attempts at redress must operate through national progress, business development, and technological determinism.

> Within the Gulf region are some of the most beautiful and historic places in America. As all of us saw on television, there's also some deep, persistent poverty in this region, as well. That poverty has roots in a history of racial discrimination, which cut off generations from the opportunity of America. We have a duty to confront this poverty with bold action. So let us restore all that we have cherished from yesterday, and let us rise above the legacy of inequality. When the streets are rebuilt, there should be many new businesses, including minority-owned businesses, along those streets. When the houses are rebuilt, more families should own, not rent, those houses. When the regional economy revives, local people should be prepared for the jobs being created.[42]

In the same speech, Bush described Katrina as wiping clean the region ("Along this coast, for mile after mile, the wind and water swept the land clean. In Mississippi, many thousands of houses were damaged or destroyed. In New Orleans and surrounding parishes, more than a quarter-million houses are no longer safe to live in"). While lamenting the history of racial injustice, Bush locates these issues in a bygone past. His speech makes no reference to the conditions that make certain populations vulnerable to "acts of God." Bush

instead sees economic and technological opportunities in the aftermath of Katrina. According to him and the business and political interests that support him, Katrina created a blank slate for developers and businesses to reconstruct without the burden of displacing the already displaced, thousands of poor, black, and undocumented residents now dispersed throughout the country.

The displacement process was the result of a haphazard evacuation that relied primarily on charter and school buses. It has led to large populations of Orleanians rebuilding their lives in other regions of the country and a whitening of the city. The *New York Times* referred to the movement as "a diaspora of historic proportions. Not since the Dust Bowl of the 1930s or the end of the Civil War in the 1860's have so many Americans been on the move from a single event. Federal officials who are guiding the evacuation say 400,000 to upwards of one million people have been displaced from ruined homes, mainly in the New Orleans metropolitan area."[43] The rescue strategy in New Orleans evidenced a complete disregard for social relations among black and poor residents, while prison populations and the undocumented remained off the media and government's radar, which was tracking those who "should" be saved. One evacuee was quoted in the *New York Times* as stating: "In the middle of the flight they told us they were taking us to New Mexico. . . 'New Mexico,' everyone said. 'My God, they're taking us to another country.'"[44] The separation of family members and disruptions of community networks were possible because the thousands of subjects stranded were considered impediments to both the process of draining and the process of rebuilding the urban environment.

What is more, developers and federal public officials have portrayed the City of New Orleans as an obstacle to its own development and progress. Through reports of looting and disorder, background stories on the pre-Katrina conditions of the city, and comparisons between the city and less developed regions of the world, New Orleans was portrayed as both premodern and decaying. While the national audience was encouraged to sympathize with individualized narratives through the consumption of images and through charitable donations, simultaneously New Orleans was portrayed as deserving its demise. Its high crime rate, failing school system, and bureaucratic inefficiency were emphasized, along with its racial demographics: a city in which nearly two-thirds of its pre-Katrina population and most of its public officials were black. To solidify this point, *A Failure of Initiative* rests much of the blame for the high number of deaths in New Orleans on Mayor Nagin's shoulder, making him (and Governor Blanco) largely accountable for evacuating those who remained behind after a mandatory evacuation was ordered: "Finding: The failure to

order timely mandatory evacuations, Mayor Nagin's decision to shelter but not to evacuate the remaining population, and decisions of individuals led to incomplete evacuation."[45] The weight of this statement grows heavier when compared with the report's assessment of President Bush and Michael Chertoff, Secretary of Homeland Security: "Finding: It does not appear the president received adequate advice and counsel from a senior disaster professional."[46] On policy and urban development levels, Hurricane Katrina was the panacea that wiped the city clean of its disease, that is, lawless, lazy, and premodern blacks in large numbers. The framing of displaced black residents, instead of Katrina or the years of social and structural neglect, as the cause of the city's destruction allows for developers to begin the process of reshaping the city without regard for the majority of the city's population prior to the hurricane. Urban renewal projects of recent years have focused on repopulating U.S. cities with middle-class white singles and families. In most places, these initiatives have met with much opposition as the movement of whites into these areas is instrumental to the removal of blacks, Latinos, and poor, disenfranchised communities from areas where many have lived for generations. New Orleans, however, one of the blackest cities in the United States, one with a much reported failing infrastructure, provides the opportunity for capital to accelerate and expand now that the traditional obstacles have been removed: disenfranchised subjects, public housing, and locally based community networks.

Thus, the military's late arrival to provide rescue operations for those stranded in New Orleans was not a failed operation, but rather an instrument in facilitating the city's redevelopment by protecting and guarding contractors and the interest of entrepreneurs over private citizens. Given that the technologies of disaster recovery, war, and reconstruction overlap, military forces were right on time and well positioned for the work of creating New Orleans anew. In part, the use of amphibious vehicles, armored tanks, and helicopters to re-establish order and to create paths for recovery and reconstruction highlights these technologies' effectiveness as the tools of war and diffusing social unrest but not the tasks of humanitarian and rescue missions. The links that Bush attempted to make between the Katrina event and the War on Terror solidified in the activities and plans following the evacuation of those stagnant bodies literally and figuratively impeding progress. Investigative journalists pointed to the fact that the same companies receiving large security and rebuilding contracts in Iraq were put to work in New Orleans a week after the hurricane arrived.

As business leaders and government officials talk openly of changing the demographics of what was one of the most culturally vibrant of America's cities, mercenaries from compa-

nies like DynCorp, Intercon, American Security Group, Blackhawk, Wackenhut, and an Israeli company called Instinctive Shooting International (ISI) are fanning out to guard private businesses and homes, as well as government projects and institutions . . . Some, like Blackwater, are under federal contract. Others have been hired by the wealthy elite, like F. Patrick Quinn III, who brought in private security to guard his $3 million private estate and his luxury hotels, which are under consideration for a lucrative federal contract to house FEMA workers.[47]

These security forces, along with the U.S. military, operate as "war machines," which Mbembe defines as "diffuse organizations" that are highly mobile and "are characterized by their capacity for metamorphosis."[48] These loose structural organizations and their flexible technologies stand in contrast to older forms of militarization and occupation. Their organizational structures and tools can be used for multifarious purposes, from destroying infrastructure and landmarks to reconstituting social order to reconstruction through the erasure of certain populations.

Two of the most important lessons of Katrina, according to the federal government's investigation, are individual accountability and better access to technology. The emphasis on individual accountability furthers the emergence of the weather citizen, who consumes weather as media spectacle and consumes preparedness goods for comfort and as civic duty. In terms of governmental responsibility, *A Failure of Initiative* argues for the need of all levels of government to strengthen their technological infrastructure and to invest in more sophisticated machines. The report emphasizes efficiency, protocol, and technological consumption. The privileged site of technology in this dominant account of Katrina further mitigates the suffering and disposability of displaced subjects. Much of the media coverage of reconstruction has focused on mending the levees to survive the next hurricane season. The general interest technology magazine *Popular Mechanics* ran a cover article, "Now What? The Lessons of Katrina," in which the writers debunked a series of "myths" about Katrina by presenting the scientific and technological "reality" of the Katrina event. In privileging scientific truth and technological progress, the writers present a series of suggestions for the next-time scenario, focusing on better technological investment: "In disasters, the right tools are everything. PM [*Popular Mechanics*] chose three Katrina-tested technologies that should be part of every emergency manager's arsenal."[49]

While one might expect a publication such as *Popular Mechanics* to focus on equipment-based solutions, this same framework defines government and private industry's post-Katrina rebuilding efforts. The government has focused on adding technologies to its arsenal of disaster rescue and recovery, while

thousands of Orleanians remain in temporary housing, often isolated from pre-Katrina family and community networks. The inability of many black, poor, and undocumented Orleanians to return to the city aids in the redevelopment initiatives of the government and private contractors. The technological fix to Katrina necessitates a clean slate, that is, the erasure of historical struggles and the removal of disposable bodies. The Katrina event was a result of a narrative of progress and disposability that technology makes visible and can be used to enforce, but technology does not create the narrative. Through the Katrina event, we see both the vulnerability and recalcitrance of the nation-state's investment in a deterministic narrative of progress, one in which the central belief in technology is essentially integrated with (and dependent on) the marginalization and disposability of certain populations. The Katrina event is not a revelation of American racial and class stratification, as those social and discursive processes were not hidden but instead have always hovered at the spectral margins of public discourse and media culture. Instead, the Katrina event reveals the operations of American necropolitics and how dominant discourse about the nation's stability and progress necessitate the decline and death of certain black subjects as the embodiment of national anxiety and a historical past that must be overcome. This revelation was facilitated both by flexible technologies and by the participation of the weather citizen as national spectator. Even as we, as weather citizens, witnessed the state produce living dead subjects, we see historical erasure and technological determinism subsume the state's violence into a narrative of reconstruction in which Katrina "swept the land clean" to begin anew.[50] The technological fix to Katrina then provides dangerous comfort in the post-9/11 nation, where we watch as disaster hovers on the horizon and frames public discourse.

Notes

1. "The lack of a government public communications strategy and media hype of violence exacerbated public concerns and further delayed relief." U.S. House of Representatives, "Executive Summary," *A Failure of Initiative: Final Report of the Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2006), 4. In other sections, the committee spends a great deal of time attempting to correct media reports, in particular on how contracts were divvied out and services dispersed.

2. "Conclusion," *A Failure of Initiative*, 360.
3. Marita Sturken, "Weather Media and Homeland Security: Selling Preparedness in a Volatile World," *Understanding Katrina*, Social Science Research Council, October 5, 2005, online at http://understandingkatrina.ssrc.org/Sturken/ (accessed October 26, 2005).
4. Michael Ignatieff, "The Broken Contract," *New York Times Magazine*, September 25, 2005, 15–16.
5. Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003): 11. Although Mbembe's analysis focuses on the colonial and postcolonial state, I find his theory relevant for discussing how the United States assigns disposability to populations of blacks historically and in the present.
6. Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 19.
7. "Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina: New Orleans Mayor Pleads for Help; Race and Class Affecting the Crisis?" *The Situation Room*, CNN, aired September 1, 2005; transcript at http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0509/01/sitroom.02.html (accessed October 24, 2005).
8. Hurricane Katrina made landfall at Buras, Louisiana, 65 miles south-southeast of New Orleans on August 29, 2005, at 6:10 a.m. CDT. "Pre-Landfall Preparation and Katrina's Impact," *A Failure of Initiative*, 71.
9. As quoted in "Investigative Overview," *A Failure of Initiative*, 12.
10. Katherine Fry, *Constructing the Heartland: Television News and Natural Disaster* (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 2003).
11. Sturken, "Weather Media and Homeland Security."
12. Ibid.
13. Mark Svenvold, "Look, Dear—More Catastrophes!" *Washington Post*, November 6, 2005, B1, B5. Also see Svenvold, *Big Weather: Chasing Tornados in the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005).
14. Marita Sturken, "Desiring the Weather: El Niño, the Media, and California Identity," *Public Culture* 13.2 (2001): 187.
15. Ibid., 172.
16. Scott Shane and David D. Kirkpatrick, "Unaware as Levees Fell, Officials Expressed Relief," *New York Times*, March 2, 2006, A16. Also see "Video Shows Bush Katrina Warning," BBCNews, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/4765058.stm (accessed March 15, 2006).
17. "The reality, say several aides who did not wish to be quoted because it might displease the president, did not really sink in until Thursday night. Some White House staffers were watching the evening news and thought the president needed to see the horrific reports coming out of New Orleans. Counselor Bartlett made up a DVD of the newscasts so Bush could see them in their entirety as he flew down to the Gulf Coast the next morning on Air Force One." Evan Thomas, "After Katrina: How the Response Became a Disaster Within a Disaster," *Newsweek*, September 19, 2005, 32.
18. Lt. Gen H. Steven Blum, as reported to the Select Committee on October 27, 2005. "Conclusion," *A Failure of Initiative*, 361.
19. According to the report of the Select Committee, the U.S. Coast Guard rescued more than 33,000 and the Louisiana National Guard more than 25,000. "Evacuation," *A Failure of Initiative*, 116.
20. A few days after Katrina hit, CNN showed much less exciting footage of the levees being plugged. For minutes the audience could hear the whir of helicopters and intermittent commentary from a local reporter or anchorperson as engineers attempted to drop massive sandbags into the gaps left by the breakage in the levees.
21. Here I refer to Naomi Klein's analysis of profiteers of disaster: "The Rise of Disaster Capitalism," *The Nation*, May 2, 2005, posted April 14, 2005, at http://www.thenation.com/doc/20050502/klein (accessed September 22, 2005). Also see "Needed: A People's Reconstruction," *The Nation*, September 26, 2005, 12.
22. As quoted in "Investigation Overview," *A Failure of Initiative*, 6. Thompson was interviewed by the committee on December 6, 2005.
23. "Levees," *A Failure of Initiative*, 93.
24. "Pre-Landfall Preparation and Katrina's Impact," *A Failure of Initiative*, 73–74.
25. From abcnews.com, September 2, 2005, http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/HurricaneKatrina/story?id=1090173&CMP=OTC-RSSFeeds0312 (accessed November 10, 2005).
26. "Anonymous Benefactor Gives Jackson a Home in Atlanta," abcnews.com, September 3, 2005, http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/HurricaneKatrina/story?id=1093853 (accessed November 10, 2005).
27. See chapter 3, "Inequity and the Environment," of Craig E. Colten's *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wresting New Orleans from Nature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005).

28. Colten, *An Unnatural Metropolis*, 106–07.

29. Ibid., 154.

30. Julie Sze, "Toxic Soup Redux: Why Environmental Racism and Environmental Justice Matter after Katrina," *Understanding Katrina: Perspectives from the Social Sciences*, Social Science Research Council, October 24, 2005, online at http://understandingkatrina.ssrc.org/Sze/ (accessed October 26, 2005).

31. Juliet Eilperin, "Flooded Toxic Waste Sites Are Potential Health Threat," *Washington Post*, September 10, 2005, A15. Also see U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' reports on the sites: "Bayou Bonfouca Superfund Site," last updated April 26, 1999, at http://www.mvn.usace.army.mil/pd/iis/BayouBonfouca.HTM (accessed November 2, 2005); "Agriculture Street Landfill Superfund Site New Orleans, Louisiana," last updated July 6,1999, at http://www.mvn.usace.army.mil/pd/iis/agriculture.htm (accessed November 2, 2005).

32. Theodore Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of "Natural" Disaster in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 98.

33. Journalist Jon Ellison wrote that the year previous to Katrina, FEMA had denied three requests from Jefferson Parish, one of the hardest hit areas of southeastern Louisiana, for grants to decrease its flood vulnerability. Jon Elliston, "Confederacy of Dunces," *The Nation*, September 26, 2005, 5.

34. Sharon Holland, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 15.

35. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 60.

36. Joseph B. Treaster and Abby Goodnough, "Powerful Storm Threatens Havoc along Gulf Coast," *New York Times*, August 28, 2005, A12.

37. Ann Rice, "Do You Know What It Means to Lose New Orleans?" *New York Times*, Editorial, September 4, 2005, Sec. 4, 11.

38. "Evacuation," *A Failure of Initiative*, 116.

39. Keith Naughton and Mark Hosenball, "Cash and 'Cat 5' Chaos," *Newsweek*, September 26, 2005, 34–36.

40. "Pre-Landfall Preparation and Katrina's Impact," *A Failure of Initiative*, 65.

41. Eric Klinenberg, *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 91.

42. Presidential Address, "President Discusses Hurricane Relief in Address to the Nation," Jackson Square, New Orleans, La., September 15, 2005. Transcript accessed at http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/09/20050915-8.html (accessed September 28, 2005).

43. Timothy Egan, "Uprooted and Scattered Far from the Familiar," *New York Times*, September 11, 2001, Sec. 1, 1. What has been seriously underrepresented in coverage of Katrina is the number of migrant workers and undocumented people living in the region.

44. Ibid., 1.

45. See "Evacuation," *A Failure of Initiative*, 111. In more severe terms, this section concludes: "New Orleans' decision to shelter instead of evacuate the population, as well as individuals' reluctance to leave, further resulted in an incomplete evacuation. The thousands of people left in New Orleans suffered death or had to be rescued to await an evacuation that should have already occurred before landfall" (123).

46. "National Framework," *A Failure of Initiative*, 132.

47. Jeremy Scahill, "Blackwater Down," *The Nation*, October 10, 2005, 18.

48. Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 32.

49. Camas Davis et al., "Now What? The Lessons of Katrina," *Popular Mechanics* (March 2006), 66.

50. Presidential Address, "President Discusses Hurricane Relief in Address to the Nation."