CHOICES IN DISASTROUS TIMES: WHO GETS THEM AND WHO DOESN'T?
By Legier Biederman

As Lynda Hinkle noted in her call for papers, "The word choice has been used as a galvanizing point concerning abortion, but the concept of the right to choose extends well beyond the womb." Indeed it extends well beyond a single identity. Women, if there is such a discrete category, are never perceived simply or exclusively as women: Our feminine identity is always already imbricate in other aspects of our perceived and experienced identity. Every woman of color and every queer woman knows this because she has to. *She has no choice.* One's right to choose is affected not only by our gender, but also by the multiple social locations in the interlocking systems of social hierarchy we inhabit at a particular moment in time and space. Our identifications, our positions:sex, gender, race, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, etc.within the social shape and mutually intersect (per Kimberley Crenshaw's theorization of intersectional in her essay on the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings) [1] with each other, effecting how we position ourselves in the world *as well as how we are understood by others*.

Given the enormity of the disaster and the toll it has taken on so many, as well as the deep social inequities it has exposed and subsequently the possibilities, I hope, it opens up for radical social change, today, it's extremely important that we attempt understand how, during the calamitous events in New Orleans, one's right to make choices about one's livelihood has been and is still being affected by the social position/s one inhabits or is perceived to inhabit. The tragic events that have taken place in New Orleans are a result of a convergence of the some of the most destructive and insidious tendencies in American politics and culture and has been embodied in the repeatedly uttered odd phrase: "those who chose to stay behind." I must admit from the outset that I have a particular investment in the city of New Orleans, as that's where my family is from and where I have lived on and off all my life. If asked where I call home, if I can to name only one place, I have always chosen to call it New Orleans. Although I was not physically affected by the disaster, I've been touched psychologically on many levels: missing friends, hearing from those who are safe, empathizing with their personal loss, and mourning my own, realizing the city as I knew it, will be no longer.
A Choice: Stay or Evacuate

It's been said that natural disasters come in two waves. [2] First comes the rainstorm, and then the recriminations and the political conflicts that ensue. Floods wash away the facade of society "the usual way things have been done" and render visible the underlying power structures, the injustices, the patterns of corruption and the unacknowledged inequalities. The flood that followed the storm, and the Bush administration's ineptitude following the flood, were the blows that sent an already weakened city down for the count.

The odd phrase, "those who chose to stay behind" embodies the confluence of the many of the most pernicious trends in American politics and culture that led to the destruction of New Orleans: poverty, racism, militarism, elitist greed, environmental abuse, public corruption and the general decay of democracy at every level. This phrase, uttered by even the most circumspect mainstream media sources, is only one example of the language that has been used to frame the situation: a language that flatters the prejudices of the comfortable, while it denies the reality of the most vulnerable, implying, instead, that the victims were just too lazy and idle to get out of harms way. Little attempt has been made by the media or the US population in general to understand the isolation, and immobility experienced by the poor, the sick, and the elderly, the disenfranchised among us. While there were indeed people who stayed behind by choice, most stayed behind because they had no choice. [3]

Other responses have been much less restrained. Rush Limbaugh commenting on an ABC news article, "Poorest Hit Hardest By Hurricane Katrina," [4] lambasted the liberal media for missing the big picture. He claimed that the hurricane did not distinguish between the rich and the poor, and went on to say that the poor were no harder hit or hindered than the middle or upper class. Meanwhile, President Bush's mother commended the government's evacuation response a success, saying that the evacuees "were underprivileged anyway," and that many of the poor people she had seen while touring a Houston relocation site were faring better than before the storm hit. "What I'm hearing, which is sort of scary, is they all want to stay in Texas," Barbara Bush said in an interview on Monday with the radio program "Marketplace." "Everyone is so overwhelmed by the hospitality. And so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them," she said. [5] On the audio version of the interview, former first lady Bush chuckles audibly as she observes how great things are going for families who were forced to abandon their homes, who are separated from their loved ones and their communities, and who now have to explain to their children that not only are their pets and toys gone, but in many some cases their friends and family may be lost forever. Perhaps she was amusing herself with the idea that evacuees without bread could eat cake.

A Choice: Looter or Finder

The general failure of the mainstream media to heed the racist angle has been evidenced in the infamous juxtaposition of captions for wire service photos, in which depictions of essentially the same scene were given markedly different spins. In one picture, a white couple is described as struggling along after **finding** bread and soda at a grocery store, whereas in an almost identical photo of a young black boy with a bag of groceries, we are told that a "looter" wades through the streets after robbing a grocery store. This is a vivid reminder of the racism that is still rampant in the US today. It is a tragic reminder that one has little or no choice about how one is perceived by others, as the color of one's skin

is always visible, unless, of course, you're white—in other words invisible. [6] Indeed, people of all colors (though the majority *stranded in the city* and left to weather the storm were black) were stranded by floodwater - a stew of sewage and toxic chemicals - and broke into and carried off food, clean water, clothing, and medicine from abandoned stores. Maybe they should have left a check on the counter, but then again, what exactly was going to happen to all those perishables and consumer goods, sitting around in fetid, diseased water for weeks on end? Or maybe, the local officers could have broken a small window and distributed the food and bottled water in an organized and systematic manner, [7] or perhaps, the federal government could have come through on its end. But they did not, nor did the rescue buses, which the evacuees had been repeatedly promised were on their way, show up and nor did the food and water, when almost all was gone. Later in the week, more organized lawless looting, the type of every hue, in every society, did occur and its chief victims were the poor and vulnerable. Sadly, there was an almost instant conflation of these criminal acts with the earlier pilferage painting a single seamless picture of America's favorite racist horror story: "Black Folk Gone Wild: Those Uncivilized Monkeys." The situation is unimaginable: trapped in a flooded city, left to tread amongst human waste and dead bodies, with a scarcity of the basic human necessities (food and water) and no sign of aid was in sight. So why does America (and its media) continue to vilify its most disenfranchised rather than, for once, consider the large socio-economic structures that have forgotten so many for so long that forgot to include thousands in the evacuation plan for the long predicted disastrous hurricane and which subsequently left thousands without a choice as to whether or not to evacuate?

Recently many have argued that during a week when communications were difficult, the media played a major role in spreading rumors, which, through repetition, have acquired a particular currency. In a week filled with dreadful scenes of anger and desperation in New Orleans some stories stood out, and as time goes on, these and many others remain unsubstantiated and may yet prove to be fictional. Moreover reports with titles like "Nightmare of Robbery, Filth, Death and Rape in the Superdome" [8] suggested a crisis that, I would argue, demonized those who, without a choice, were left stranded and also quite possibly hastened the relief effort. As Allen Breed of the Associated Press recently wrote, "Katrina's winds have left behind an information vacuum. And that vacuum has been filled by rumor." [9] Indeed a great deal of the a great deal of the mayhem reported or rumored (such as, an early Reuters report of a 3 foot shark spotted swimming in flood waters) to have occurred over the past several days appears to have been exaggerated.

Who's looting whom?
Regardless, the bottom line is that those whose lives were most threatened and who were hit hardest during this disaster were indeed those that were forgotten by the government, and who were subsequently demonized by the media: the poor, the minority, the elderly, the women, the single moms, the already

disenfranchised. That said, New Orleans has long had a serious crime problem, and it has never been dealt with. In short, much of the city was a mess, and no one was marshaling the considerable resources necessary to help pull its stricken residents out of the trouble of their daily lives. Nor were they marshaled to improve the New Orleans public school system, which is 93 percent black and one of the worst in the nation. [10] School officials, enveloped in a bureaucratic fog and the toxic smoke of corruption, do not even know how many people are employed by the system. According to a Times-Picayune editorial last fall: "When it was still unclear which way Hurricane Ivan would go, school system employees on school system time driving school system vehicles using school system materials were sent to board up the superintendent's house." Though that superintendent is gone, the neglect of the young has remained. As Bob Herbert recently noted, "Long before the hurricane, the children of New Orleans had been failed by the adults responsible for them," [11]   beginning sometimes with their parents, going up through their teachers, city officials, state officials and a national administration that sees the kids as objects :to be hugged during campaign photo-ops and *left behind*. It is these residents, who were failed by the government at all levels that were left behind to suffer and die when the people of means began sprinting toward higher ground. They are the ones who are always left behind, out of sight and out of mind.

An Unnatural Disaster

The monumental failure of the federal government to respond immediately and effectively to the catastrophe that resulted from Hurricane Katrina was preceded by many years in which the people of New Orleans, especially its poorest, most marginalized residents, were shamefully neglected by all levels of government. Indeed, the brutal effects of this long predicted natural disaster could have been greatly mitigated. [12]   The city might not have been affected so disastrously had not over the past century1.2 million acres of Louisiana disappeared, a consequence due to, in large part, land-use that includes oil, gas, and timber extraction; industrial, commercial, agricultural, and residential development. These economic activities demanded erosion-causing modifications to the landscape such as canals, levees, and drainage. Historically, these wetlands provided invaluable flood protection by acting as a sponge to soak up the menace of storm surge, and now the open water, which sits where land once stood, provides fuel to the fury of hurricanes. [13] In other words, economic growth has translated into more water, more danger, and a greater catastrophe, and those that have suffered most these past weeks have not been those that have benefited economically from these developments. The break in the levees that has led to the inundation of the New Orleans area constitutes more than an engineering failure. It represents a failure in the promises of economic development to improve the quality of life in our communities; it signifies a failure of our governing institutions to represent and serve the public interest:*to give us a choice.*

But where were the resources "money, manpower, and transport, not to mention the food and water " that would have kept people from starving or removed all those forced to stay behind and given them someplace safe to take shelter? Where, indeed, were the resources that could have bolstered the city's defenses:that would have taken wetland restoration seriously and strengthened its levees along Lake Pontchartrain? Where were the National Guard troops that could have secured the streets and directed survivors to food and aid? As many have noted, the bulk of the personnel, equipment and financial resources necessary for a "war-like" response to such devastation are sunk into another delta, a half-a-world away, at the mouth of the Tigris and the Euphrates. In other words, those resources had been looted to pay for the war in Iraq, to pay for a tax cut for the wealthiest, safest and most protected Americans, to gorge the coffers of a small number of private and corporate fortunes, while letting the public sector wither away. These, as well as the devastating budget cuts on projects specifically designed to bolster New Orleans' defenses against a catastrophic hurricane, such as money for strengthening the very levees that broke and left New Orleans in its current state, were all specific actions of the Bush Administration. [14] Outrageously, these cuts took place in the face of specific warnings about what would happen if these measures were neglected: the city would go down "under 20 feet of water," one expert predicted not too long ago. [15]

The Bush Administration, as culpable and loathsome as it is, is only the apotheosis of an trend in American society that has been gathering force over the years: the destruction of the idea of a public sector whose benefits and responsibilities are shared by all and directed by the consent of the governed. Over the past decades, the corporate Right has sought to atomize individuals into isolated "consumer units." This atomization has been facilitated in large part by the ubiquitous corporate media, which has deliberately kept the public's political energies under informed and diverted them to emotional emotionalized "hot button" issues (such as gay marriage, school prayer, flag burning, drugs, porn, abortion, teen sex, terrorist threats, etc., etc.) that never threaten the rapacious policies of and destruction caused by Corporate America's bottom line. When unbridled commercial development of delicately balanced environments like the Mississippi Delta is discussed in the media or "at the table" of the power players in national, state and local governments, whose voice is heard? Doubtful it's the slowly dissipating middle class, who might opt for the security of safer, saner development policies to protect their hard-won businesses and definitely not the poor and disenfranchised, who are becoming more and more marginalized and unstable, and as we have seen this week, will overwhelmingly bare the brunt of the overstressed environment.

A choice. A responsibility

The destruction of New Orleans was a work of nature, but a nature that has been worked upon by human policies. If changes do not come quickly, we will see

more and more driven further and further onto the low ground of society, where every passing storm, whether it be economic, political, or natural, etc., will threaten our families, our communities, our very existence. That said, Katrina has disrupted the patterns that have led one oppressed, impoverished and marginalized generation to follow another, and given us an amazing chance to do something serious about these social inequities. Chris Cuomo recently stated, "Hurricane Katrina is perhaps the most economically destructive event in American history since the Great Depression, the last time the country responded with unprecedented sweeping changes to help the least fortunate. Today may demand an equal effort. Couldn't this hurricane be something that is a historically relevant event that may change how we deal with each other in this society?" The eyes of many have been opened, and, I hope, we will never again look at, allow for, or tolerate the suffering of others. Now we all have a choice:a choice about how to respond, and I hope the response will not once again reveal the poverty of the American imagination, which refuses to dream of workable solutions to our social, political, economic and environmental problems, and is mindlessly forced to seek salvation through the promise of an ostensibly free market. At a moment when the entire country **the entire world** is paying attention, what will be our response to the ruling class indifference, which left so many without a choice? As I see it, a choice is not just a right, but also a responsibility. Those of us with a choice: those of us writing and reading about, watching and experiencing this disaster from the safety of our own apartment or home, have an ethical responsibility to insure that the future holds for all, especially those that were hardest hit by the disaster in New Orleans, those that have been repeatedly and continuously marginalized and disenfranchised, *a choice: a choice that does not come at the cost of another's.*

[1] Kimberlé Crenshaw. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectional, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," in *The Public Nature of Private Violence*, eds. Martha Albertson Fineman, and Rixanne Mykitiuk, New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 93-118.

[2] See David Brooks' article, "The Storm After the Storm," September 1, 2005, Late Edition - Final , Section A , Page 23 , Column 5.

[3] For the 27% of the population of New Orleans that lives below the poverty line a ride out of town and a hotel to stay in doesn't come easy. This statistic is from a recent study by the Total Community Action, Inc., a public advocacy group based in New Orleans.

[4] http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/HurricaneKatrina/story?id=1081329&page=1
While countless are dead and others distraught, Rush, meanwhile joked about the hurricane, calling it Hurricane Katrina vanden Heuvel (Katrina vanden Heuvel is editor of *The Nation).* See Katrina vanden Heuvel's, "Messing With Mother Nature" *The Nation,* September 19, 2005.

[5] "The Former First Lady Barbara Bush Calls Evacuees Better Off," *The New York Times,* September 7, 2005.
http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/07/national/nationalspecial/07barbara.html
An audio version of the interview can be found at this site also.

[6] On the invisibility of whiteness see, Richard Dyer, *White*, New York: Routledge Press, 1997.

[7] As was suggested by Larry Bradshaw and Lorrie Beth Slonsky in their article, "First By the Floods, Then By Martial Law," Counter Punch, September 6, 2005. Bradshaw and Slonsky are emergency medical services (EMS) workers from San Francisco who were attending an EMS conference in New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina struck. As their article attests, they spent most of the next week trapped by the flooding—and the martial law cordon around the city. http://www.counterpunch.org/bradshaw09062005.html

[8] LUKASI. ALPERT, "Nightmare of Robbery, Filth, Death and Rape in the Superdome"   New   York   Post,   September   2,   2005. http://www.nypost.com/seven/09022005/news/nationalnews/52162.htm

[9] Gary Younge, "Murder and rape - fact or fiction?" The Guardian, September 6, 2005.

[10] See Beating the Odds IV, a report issued by the Council of the Greater City Schools, http://www.cgcs.org/reports/bto4profiles.html. As well as, Gary Orfield, Schools More Separate: Consequences of A Decade of Resegregation, A Report from   the   Civil   Rights   Project,   Harvard   University,   2001. http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/index

[11] Bob Herbert, "No Strangers to the Blues," New York Times, Op-Ed, September 8, 2005.

[12] Notice the date on this National Geographic article about the likelihood of a major hurricane and catastrophic flood in New Orleans: Oct. 2004. Joel K. Bourne, Jr., "Gone with the Water," *National Geographic Magazine,* October 2004. http://www3.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0410/feature5/

[13] For a more thorough account see, Brian Azcona's recent article "Hurricane Katrina: A   natural   disaster   or   a   failure   of   governance?" http://www.opednews.com/articles/opedne_brian_az_050901_hurricane_katrina_
__.htm

[14] See, among others, Andy Sullivan's Reuter's article, "Bush Cuts delayed New Orleans Flood Control Work"
http://news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20050901/pl_nm/weather_katrina_funding_dc

[15] Mark Fischetti, "Drowning New Orleans," *Scientific America,* October 2001. As well as, Sheila Grissett "Shifting federal budget erodes protection from levees: Because of cuts, hurricane risk grows," *Time Picayune,* June 8, 2004.