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Ethics of Intervention

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<div align="center">A Humanitarian Analysis of the Response to Hurricane Katrina</div>

In the early morning hours of August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the

Gulf Coast near the Louisiana/Mississippi border. The ensuing storm surge ruptured dozens of

levees surrounding New Orleans, flooding over 80% of the city and helping to render Katrina as

the costliest natural disaster in United States history. The events that unfolded over the next

several days – including physical destruction of essential infrastructure, indiscriminant and

forced displacement of thousands, and widespread breaches of the rule of law – share many of

the defining characteristics of the so-called "complex emergencies" (ReliefWeb Glossary, 2008

p. 18) that are frequently handled by humanitarian organization and international actors. Yet

despite these similarities, the domestic activities undertaken in response to Katrina are not

considered humanitarian actions, and have not been subject to the same type of intense scrutiny

and theoretical analysis that "typical" transnational actors and actions have been. Such scrutiny is

essential for the continued improvement of various aid apparatuses, and provides a way to

"inform those who are giving so much of themselves to help others and to help others who have

so little find ways to improve their life circumstances" (Barnett, 2008 p.263). The goal of this

paper is to leverage such discourse in order to determine how to judge the response to Hurricane

Katrina through the lens of humanitarian critique.

The framework for this critique will be provided by Michel Agier's *Managing the

Undesirables* (2011), which uses detailed ethnography to argue that the concepts of "refugees"

and "camps" are better understood as vast populations of "undesirables" and the "spaces of

exception" that control them. While ostensibly directed at refugees, Agier's work is also explicitly applicable to a broad range of activities and situations. Noting "the diversification in the forms of camp" (p. 4), he declares that his goal is "to situate refugees among all those others today who likewise find themselves devoid of state protection or recognition and constitute a whole world of undesirables" (p. 6). This provides the necessary justification for applying the refugee framework to the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina, but it is not sufficient. To establish the appropriateness of this model, I will first confront its limitations, then look to the historical and social roots of New Orleans as a distinctly "other" location (Clark, 2008 p. 27).

The use of "refugee" terminology with regard to Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath is neither unique nor without controversy (Sommers, Apfelbaum, Dukes, Toosi, & Wang, 2006). Prominent news organizations, including The Associated Press and The New York Times, embraced the word as a means to "capture the sweep and scope of the effects of this historic natural disaster on a vast number of our citizen," while others such as The Washing Post and the Boston Globe banned the word for implying that "the displaced storm victims, many of whom have been black, are second-class citizens – or not even Americans" ("Calling Katrina," 2005). Both those in need and those in power rejected the word, for opposing reasons. Describing a woman sheltered at the New Orleans Convention Center, who cried "We are American!" as television cameras panned over her, Ignatieff observed, "people in the convention center were reduced to reminding their fellow citizens…that they were not refugees in a foreign country" (2005). At the same time, President George W. Bush attempted to deflect criticisms of his administration's response by declaring, "The people we're talking about are not refugees. They are Americans, and they need the help and love and compassion of our fellow citizens" (Pierre & Farhi, 2005). In each case, rejecting the term was a way of constructing a reality that the speaker wished to be. Strong reactions to the word from both sides of the controversy illustrate its power

to emphasize the "otherness" of the victims of Katrina; paradoxically, the term is useful now for the same reasons it was harmful in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. This "othering" power underlies the common criticism that the term refugee in this context is racist – a criticism that is, largely, still applicable. I am cognizant of and sensitive to such criticisms, but I argue that this use of the term is necessary as a part of "the moral responsibility of the scholar…to constantly critique existing forms of power" (Barnett, 2008 p. 263). Rather than reify racial inequalities, I seek to shed light on them in order to expose their machinations and implications.

Beyond its rhetorical power, the refugee framework is appropriate for both cultural and technical reasons. Culturally, individuals displaced by Katrina can be considered refugees[1] because of their forced, violent removal from their true home; even though these people remained American citizens, they self-identified as New Orleanians first. This distinction relies on an understanding of place identity, which posits that place is "a geographical unit in which identity is grounded" (Falk, M. Hunt, & L. Hunt 2006, p. 116). As a result, "a person's social and existential identity is…a by-product of where they live. They are in part *who* they are because of *where* they are…They are *Southerners,* or *New Yorkers,* or *Texan,*" (p. 117). Sense of place identity was particularly strong in pre-Katrina New Orleans, which was the subject of "an enduring, historically constructed definition of New Orleans as 'other,' an island of exotic, erotic Creole something-or-other that is essentially foreign to what is 'American'" (Clark, 2008 p. 27). Forced displacement did little to diminish this identity among the returnees, who "insist that New Orleans…possess[es] a unique bundle of characteristics that, when taken together, constitute a sense of place that cannot be found or replicated elsewhere" (Chamlee-Wright & Storr, 2009 p.

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[1] According to the ReliefWeb Glossary of Humanitarian Terms (2008), these individuals would technically be internally displaced persons (p. 36) rather than refugees (p. 45) because their relocation did not involve international borders; however, we argue that this distinction is arbitrary, reiterating Agier's contention that "every act of naming and classifying is a political act" (p. 33). We therefore use the term "refugee" for all types of "undesirables."

621). One interviewee, a pastor from the notoriously devastated Ninth Ward neighborhood, attempted to capture the spirit of the area as follows:

> There's a strong sense of neighborhoods here—a very strong sense…[O]n the surface… this city is racially divided, however, there's no real difference between the black and white here. We all love the same things, good food, good friends, all of that stuff. We like the same kind of music. And we can get along. I mean listen, whatever our troubles are, we…find a reason to make a party out of it. We'll get together with our worst enemy and we just have a good time together and go back to being enemies tomorrow…I don't know. It's just something special about this city. It's just the overall culture of this city just makes it hard not to be here. (p. 621)

The point here is clear: New Orleans was this man's home, and no amount of "reminding" him of his American citizenship could change that fact. Those displaced by Katrina were removed from their places of origin and their homes in the truest senses of the words, just as any other refugees. Furthermore, there is an important functional similarity between "traditional" refugees and Katrina victims, many of whom were:

> Adrift and functionally stateless…A good number lost vital documents such as government identifications, birth certificates, and health insurance cards, and hence had great difficulty securing services elsewhere in the state or the country. Some were the victims of scam artists who exploited the evacuees' lack of documents, often taking what few funds victims possessed in exchange for worthless documentation. Others fell prey to identity theft when thieves gained access to the social security cards and other vital data left behind by their victims in the haste of evacuation. (Inniss, 2007 p. 331)

Taken together, these observations establish the victims displaced by Hurricane Katrina as forming a community, one "based on shared experience and lived situation [that] can then unite

these anonymous crowds in a history made up of violent disruptions" (Agier, 2011 p. 16). This shared experience, this lived reality of Katrina, is the source of an equally shared identity as refugees, one that cannot be undone by political statements or invisible national borders.

Having established that the refugee framework is appropriate in this situation, we now turn our attention to a more practical question: is this framework accurate? Do the events seen in the aftermath of Katrina fit the models proposed by Agier? Are there parallels that can be drawn between the experiences of Katrina evacuees and "typical" refugees in Africa, for example? If so, are these parallels informative, and can we gain insight into the underlying causes and long reaching implications of the Katrina response? To answer these questions, I will first illustrate the ways in which the general spatial and temporal progression followed by many Katrina refugees closely parallels the evolution of classes of refuges that Agier describes. I will then present a brief case study that recapitulates the patterns observed and predicted by Agier.

Drawing on his experiences in camps in Maheba, Zambia, Agier defines three successive categories of refugees, defined in terms of both their temporal and cultural experiences: the *new arrivals*, the *recent*, and the *settled* (p. 121). The new arrivals are the most vulnerable, having the least experience and finding themselves "in a situation of extreme dependence on…aid…their needs having a particular urgency in this precarious situation…Tired, haggard, hungry, or ill" (p. 125). This description eerily echoes the landscape recalled by Katrina victims housed in the Louisiana Superdome, which served as a "shelter of last resort" for nearly 20,000 refugees deemed the most vulnerable, those rescued from rooftops or lacking the resources to evacuate. Armed National Guard personnel established security checkpoints to confiscate illicit items and control the flow of people; the same soldiers would later patrol the space and provide daily food rations: two boxed meals and two nine-ounce bottles of water per person (Gold 2005). Devoid of medical supplies and basic sanitation – power and running water were both lost – the conditions

deteriorated rapidly. A young British woman backpacking through America at the time described

her experience as follows:

> Day One…Me and the other travellers are being bused to the city's huge sports arena, the
>
> Superdome. Once there, it's chaos. People are collapsing all around.
>
> Day Two…I'm woken by this horrible sound. Bits of the roof are blowing off. I
>
> sit terrified, curled up on a plastic seat. No one tells us what is happening...By the
>
> afternoon, National Guard soldiers hand out ration packs. I begin to realise that things
>
> must be bad and we'll be here a while. People are starting to get a little crazy.
>
> Day Three…I can't smile anymore, and I can't contact home, so how will I ever
>
> get out? We hear there has been a rape, a suicide and a murder in here...A soldier says the
>
> generator is about to fail, so we'll be in darkness and a riot may break out. I'm terrified.
>
> Day Four…Last night was horrendous. I heard shouting, and drinks machines
>
> being smashed. There's no sanitation and it's so smelly...More people are arriving, and
>
> the dome is like a refugee camp. I see two soldiers carrying a corpse and we hear there
>
> are more dead in the basement. (Rockette, 2010)

The recent arrivals occupy a tenuous position, characterized by waiting and uncertainty.

Following an indeterminate amount of time at transit centers and foot travel between various

locations, they are finally placed in small settlement camps, or "villages in which this category of

recent refugees are housed [that] sometimes resemble tiny urban nuclei" (Agier, 2011 p. 125).

The refugees living in these villages have received more permanent forms of aid, as "most of

these refugees have received their allotment of 2.5 hectares" (p. 125). This mirrors the

experience of Katrina survivors who were granted temporary housing units from the Federal

Emergency Management Agency. Beginning roughly one month after Katrina – during which

time the Superdome residents were relocated to the Houston Astrodome to continue waiting –so-

called FEMA trailers were distributed to approved families on the basis of requests. There were widespread delays in allocating trailers, thousands of which sat unused during the indeterminate waiting process (Louisiana Justice Institute, 2008 p. 5). For those that were given trailers, life was still characterized by uncertainty, indeterminacy, and waiting, even after more than a year:

> Private security officers patrol the trailer park's wide gravel roads on golf carts, but few people feel safe. A key to one FEMA trailer may also open another person's or several more, officials discovered last month, leaving many people to live in fear of neighbors they do not know.

> Donna L. Brown, 41, curls up at night with knives. "I sleep with knives under my bed…I sleep with knives all over. Because of the fear. I don't know what's going to happen."

> Uncertainty is everywhere these days. FEMA officials had hoped to move everyone out of the trailers within 18 months of the storms...[but]...with 132 group sites still operating in Louisiana and roughly 8,000 displaced people still waiting to get a trailer, officials now say the 18-month deadline is unrealistic. Trailer life could go on indefinitely. (O'Brien, 2006)

Finally, the settled refugees are the most established, and are characterized by a strong sense of pride. They are "well settled…and proud of not needing humanitarian assistance…this part of the camp population [is] well established, integrated, and seeing itself as only little assisted" (Agier 2011, p. 123). This sense of self-reliance and resilience is echoed by those fortunate enough to resettle in permanent housing, often after lengthy stays in FEMA trailers. One such person was Pamela Landry, a Mississippi resident whose mobile home was destroyed by Katrina. Following nearly two years in a FEMA trailer, Ms. Landry was given a $25,000 housing allotment by the government. Finding that this was not enough to buy a house or even a mobile home, she turned

to a more creative solution: "one day she saw a big shed in a parking lot near her work in Bay St. Louis, and she said, 'That's it,'" (Lohr & Penaloza, 2011). She purchased two large sheds and joined them together, creating a makeshift shotgun house on an inherited plot of land. She grows vegetables in a garden, continues to make improvements on the house, and plans to bring in state inspectors to make the solution permanent. Reflecting on her solution and displaying the intense pride characteristic of the settled refugees, she stated: "I 'm tickled with what I've done. I 'm really proud of what I have accomplished" (Lohr & Penaloza, 2011).

While there are significant parallels between the refugee evolution described by Agier and the circuitous path taken by the victims of Katrina, this is perhaps unsurprising insofar as these describe only broad experiences and generalities. It is not unreasonable to believe that any natural disaster or violent disruption of daily life produces a series of emotions including need, uncertainty, and resilience. To address this potential and further strengthen the comparison, I will now present three specific situations that demonstrate the accuracy of the refugee framework.

The first and most infamous of these has become known as the Gretna Bridge Incident. Gretna is a small, mostly white suburb located across the Mississippi River from New Orleans, and connected by the two-and-a-half mile Crescent City Connection bridge. Three days after Katrina made landfall, thousands of refugees fled New Orleans on foot and headed toward Gretna, which had largely been spared flooding damage. The National Guard loaded an additional 6,000 people on buses to follow them. Upon reaching the Gretna side of the bridge, however, they were confronted with a blockade of local police cars and officers armed with loudspeakers and shotguns. Police fired warning shots above the crowd and instructed them to disperse, saying, "We're not going to have any Superdomes over here," and "This is not New Orleans," (Kopp, 2009). The blockade was strongly supported by the mayor Gretna, even years after the fact:

> [Mayor Ronnie] Harris says he saw brief reports of the looting in New Orleans. "Quite
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> frankly, I was embarrassed to see a free-for-all of not taking food and water but goods
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> and items. Vandalism. Civil unrest. Civil disobedience. And it sickened me."…Mayor
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> Harris says he sealed off the city because he wanted to protect the lives of Gretna's
>
> residents. "You had to be there to understand and witness total chaos, total mayhem, the
>
> lack of information." (Kopp, 2009)

This level of suspicion, absent any evidence, is identical to the behavior described by Agier in

the relationships between refugees and the residents of surrounding towns:

> This a priori blaming of the undesirable is applied case by case, in the midst of the very
>
> localized dramas and contexts that successively form the justification for a policy of
>
> keeping spaces and persons at a distance. (Agier 2011, p. 111)

Having established the appropriateness and accuracy of the refugee framework, I now turn to the

most important question: what can this analysis teach us? Are there lessons to be learned, and

can we derive strategies to confront similar issues with improved outcomes? On a practical level,

these observations underscore the importance and the power of terminology and classification.

Just as the identity of the victims is constructed by their surroundings and experiences, their

perceived identity is constructed by the reports that outsiders hear. Government officials and

media outlets have the power to generate or ablate sympathy and empathy through their chosen

vocabulary. This power goes far beyond the frequently cited and often mocked examples of race-

based behavior classifications, i.e. looting blacks compared to food-finding whites (Sommers,

Apfelbaum, Dukes, Toosi, & Wang, 2006 p. 42). As demonstrated by the Gretna mayor's

comments regarding his rationale for blocking the bridge to pedestrian refugees, the power of

media to construct a reality that defines policy is substantial. Complicating and exacerbating this

problem is the well known phenomenon of the "disaster myth," in which news outlets overstate

and misreport the degree of violence and social unrest following natural disasters (Tierny, Bevc, & Kuligowski, 2006). Taken together, these facts highlight the need for increased awareness of and attention to word choice in all forms of news media following "emergencies." As an actionable strategy, the most promising solution seems to be consciousness-raising, which posits:

> [W]hen individuals motivated to be fair-minded are made aware of a potential source of bias, they are often able to avoid discrimination; making conscious the category associations that typically reside outside of awareness is one way to render those associations less influential. (Sommers, Apfelbaum, Dukes, Toosi, & Wang, 2006 p. 51)

Perhaps more importantly, these narratives raise interesting yet disturbing questions about the very nature of citizenship and the guarantee of rights. Just as the notion of place identity allows (or makes?) people recognize themselves as primarily something other than American citizens, so too can the notion of the outsider renegotiate the status of a fellow American. It is difficult to conceive of how Gretna police officers could fire upon fellow American citizens – fellow Louisiana citizens and Katrina survivors, no less – who had committed no crime and who were actively seeking safety in the face of crisis. Reconceived as an invading mass of potential looters and murderers, however, these actions seem almost reasonable. Das and Poole (2004) have shown how the state relies on the "margins" – the spaces and situations that create borders between state and non-state, citizen and non-citizen – to define itself, its sphere of influence, and its range of permissible actions. This process of defining by the margins extends beyond the state and beyond geopolitical margins; any group of people or situation seeking to define itself can do so by identifying or constructing an "other" and establishing itself as explicitly not the other. In other words, the margins are not just spaces or places of exception, but they are also groups, collections of people that are somehow outside. The residents of Gretna used this strategy when turning away New Orleanians: Gretna would not have a Superdome, and Gretna was not New

Orleans. This strategy of "othering" as a way of defining has far reaching implications, and can be seen in both physical actions (as in the Gretna example) and abstract policies. Shortly after opening its Astrodome to tens of thousands of Katrina refugees, Houston reported a sharp spike in violent crime, and was quick to blame that link on the newly arrived outsiders, going so far as to create special police taskforces with mandates to locate and "deport" New Orleansians suspected of crimes (Moreno, 2006). At the same time, Texas lawmakers attempted to introduce "one-strike" legislation aimed at refugees to streamline this process (Inniss, 2007 p. 331). The fact that there was no actual increase in crime (Varanoa, Schaferb, Cancinoc, Deckerd, & Greenee, 2010) makes these actions particularly disturbing, as they again demonstrate the degree to which suspicion and speculation are sufficient "proof" to render the status of fellow citizens negotiable. The individuals involved in all of these incidents were American citizens, but their citizenship in name did little for the functional stripping of citizenship they experienced.

Relegating people to the margins is a particularly nefarious strategy in that it allows the notion of citizenship to be functionally ablated but nominally retained; lawmakers can be "tough on crime" by deporting the filthy New Orleanians even as they emphasize how bad they feel for their fellow Americans. The degree to which these strategies of power and control exercised via the margins appear ubiquitous (Das & Poole, 2004) raises disconcerting questions about the very nature of the human interaction and response to disaster. If there is a solution to these questions, it is likely as Agier proposes:

> Ultimately there is no prospectus, no utopia brought back from this long exploration in the camps and the world of humanitarianism, simply a conviction of the urgent necessity (a real emergency) of changing the focus of our gaze on the world. It is ultimately from the margins that we have to conceive politics, alterity and urbanism. (Agier, 2011 p. 216)

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