

"Them" Coming Home: Third World Redux in America

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The Jazzman Chronicles - Jack Random - It is happening and my heart, like every ordinary American, has broken a thousand times. It does not look like America, no less the soul of America, but it is. Ultimately, it occurred to me that the sorrow of New Orleans bore a striking resemblance to an entry in recent history, one that should still be fresh in every mind and heart: It looked like Port au Prince, Haiti.

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JAZZMAN CHRONICLES: DISSEMINATE FREELY

COLOR OR CLASS?

[CHARGES OF RACISM IN DISASTER RELIEF](#)

By Jack Random

September 3, 2005

?George Bush doesn?t care about black people.? Kanye West, Rapper.

As we witness the never ending tragedy of the sinking of New Orleans, the images of floating bodies, abandoned corpses, rage and madness, a recurring thought emerges from the psyche of virtually everyone who can stand to watch: This does not look like America. This cannot happen in America.

It is happening and my heart, like every ordinary American, has broken a thousand times. It does not look like America, no less the soul of America, but it is. Ultimately, it occurred to me that the sorrow of New Orleans bore a striking resemblance to an entry in recent history, one that should still be fresh in every mind and heart: It looked like Port au Prince, Haiti.

It was so easy for Americans to turn their backs on Haiti, a nation of former slaves, as our government kidnapped at gunpoint President Jean Bertrand Aristide and imposed a token

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government. For ten months, the reality we observe in New Orleans has reigned supreme in Haiti but the cameras left. It is a nation of black people. CNN no longer cares.

Rapper Kanye West made it real on MSNBC's Concert for New Orleans relief. He said aloud what millions of Americans must have wondered for the last five days. If they were white? If they were rich?

It is now almost universally acknowledged that the response of government agencies to this catastrophe (I have never been so tired of the phrase "biblical proportions") was slow, tepid, disorganized and tragically inept. Americans watching the tragedy could not help but observe that the vast majority of those left behind were black. Inevitably, the question had to be asked: Did race play a roll in the government's failure?

If I were the president or indeed the mayor or dogcatcher of New Orleans I would not have slept for the past seven days. Does the president care about New Orleans? According to Greg Palast (has he ever been wrong?), the president played golf this morning. Does he care about black people, poor people, people who are drowning in despair? He cares enough to put his arm around a beautiful black woman in Biloxi for a photo op but not enough to walk with the people in New Orleans ? not enough to cancel a round of golf.

I do not believe the failure to act was a function of indifference to race ? at least not directly. I do believe it was a function of class, indifference to poverty, and poverty is undeniably shaded by color.

We have heard what was supposed to be the heartwarming stories of a midnight rescue of several hundred trapped in the Ritz-Carlton and the Marriot Hotel and a mysterious flight from New Orleans to Atlanta, in which virtually all of the rescued appeared to be white, but against a backdrop of the desperate lives left behind, predominantly people of color, the response was not so simple.

Adding to the duplicity, the inexplicable sense of something out of place, Governor Jeb Bush of Florida issued a perfunctory announcement in the midst of all this horror. With people dying on the streets of New Orleans, the governor quietly requested federal assistance to forego the closure of an undetermined number of Floridian schools. It required some reflection to

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understand why he had chosen the most inopportune time to portray himself as hopelessly insensitive. Then it occurred to me: The governor was speaking to New Orleans. His message was clear: Stay out. We have our own problems. We will not welcome you or your children. We will not open our homes or our schools to your needy.

Does Jeb Bush care about black people?

It is no secret that Jeb Bush is at best indifferent to the needs of the black community. No one has disenfranchised more African Americans since the days of Jim Crow. Governor Bush does not worry about the black vote because he has already literally written them off. Nevertheless, if he does not relent, this is a new low.

I was already wondering why Florida was included in the declaration of a state of emergency. Florida has been hit hard in the past but Katrina hardly touched her.

The defenders of the administration (their numbers seem fewer today) have scarcely broken stride in congratulating themselves for doing everything in their power? but those that have taken pause have pointed blame at the people for staying and denigrated the mayor of New Orleans for his rage.

The first charge has effectively been laid to rest: The abandoned of New Orleans did not choose to be poor. They stayed because they had no means of escape and no resources for survival outside their city if they could.

I do not know if Mayor Ray Nevin asked for help in evacuating the poor before disaster struck. If he did not, he should have. I do know, however, that no mayor has the resources for either mass evacuation or disaster relief. I do know that someone needed to say what the mayor said in the strongest possible terms. He made it real. He abandoned the standard political line and laid it down like fine jazz.

Damn it, man, this is New Orleans. Get real.

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He was living with the people. He was watching his people die of dehydration. He was watching his people starve in unlivable conditions. He was listening as the people cried out in horror, rage and desperation. He was witnessing the city he loves, the city beloved of every musician and artist who has ever dreamed of her, gasp for its final breath.

Was it blatant racism that allowed this open wound to fester without treatment or relief? Perhaps. Perhaps not. Still, the question must be asked: Could it happen in a relatively affluent, relatively white metropolis?

How you answer that question may largely depend on the digits in your bank account or, sadly, on the color of your skin.

Jazz.

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