
New Orleans and Empire

Legacies from the “Age of Revolution”

There is a striking moment in Dave Eggers’s post-Katrina narrative *Zeitoun* (2009) when the principal protagonist, incarcerated in “Camp Greyhound”—a makeshift prison hastily constructed in New Orleans’ bus station in the storm’s wake—realizes that his surroundings remind him of Guantánamo Bay.¹ This moment provides the opportunity to map, across myriad times and spaces, a genealogy of U.S. empire. This genealogy offers insights into the connections between the contemporary “war on terror” and an older history of U.S. imperial designs and territorial annexation, white supremacy and deep investments in the slave system. Guantánamo Bay as it appears here in Eggers’s text conjures a triangular relationship between New Orleans, Cuba and, this chapter argues, Haiti—a nation that has played a surprisingly central role in the imagination of New Orleans on the one hand and U.S. supremacy on the other. That these hands are at one and the same time distinct and indistinct is part of the complexity of the story that binds New Orleans to the United States, as both subject and object of empire.

Just a few days after Katrina George Friedman claimed in a hyperbolic piece for *The New York Review of Books* that the storm’s “geopolitical effect was not, in many ways, distinguishable from a mushroom cloud.”²² His suggestion that Katrina was comparable to a nuclear strike, and that an attack on New Orleans was more significant than an attack on New York or Washington, clearly insinuates 9/11 into our frame for thinking about Katrina. Though not the intention of Friedman’s piece, this frame also enables us to reconsider one of the labels that has policed understandings

of 9/11: “Ground Zero.” Amy Kaplan argues that “like the use of *9/11*, *Ground Zero* is a highly condensed and charged appellation.” For Kaplan, the label Ground Zero

resonates with the often heard claim that the world was radically altered by 9/11, that the world will never be the same, that Americans have lost their former innocence about their safety and invulnerability at home. This way of thinking might be called a narrative of historical exceptionalism, almost an antinarrative, claiming the event to be so unique and unprecedented as to transcend time and defy comparison or historical analysis.³

And yet, Kaplan goes on to explain, the history of the term itself belies this narrative of exceptionalism: “It was coined to describe the nuclear strikes on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.” If, as Kaplan claims, “the term *Ground Zero* [in the context of 9/11] both evokes and eclipses the prior historical reference,” Friedman’s suggestion that Katrina bore similarities to a nuclear strike has the opposite effect.⁴ His controversial piece quite explicitly meditates on the history of New Orleans as an object of empire, as, in his terms, a “geopolitical prize.” Friedman speculates that had the British won the Battle of New Orleans of 1815, “we suspect they wouldn’t have given it back. Without New Orleans, the entire Louisiana Purchase would have been valueless to the United States.” He goes on to claim that Andrew Jackson’s “obsession with Texas had much to do with keeping the Mexicans away from New Orleans.” “If the Soviets could destroy one city with a large nuclear device,” in Friedman’s opinion, it would have been New Orleans. He reaches this surprising conclusion by making the similarly extraordinary claim that “until last Sunday, New Orleans was, in many ways, the pivot of the American economy.” This claim is made on the basis that the city sits at the confluence of a river system that made one nineteenth-century commentator claim “*New Orleans is beyond a doubt the most important commercial point on the face of the earth.*”⁵

Although today the city still boasts the nation’s largest port—based on the volume of cargo it handles—its pre-Katrina reputation as something of an economic backwater motored largely by the tourist trade might make one sceptical about Friedman’s insistence on the city’s economic centrality. Today the Port of New Orleans is a mechanized one that no longer needs a large population to supply it with labor. This was not the case in the nineteenth century when New Orleans was a boom town as a consequence of its unsurpassed location—environmentally vulnerable but economically

indispensable—at the mouth of the Mississippi River. Friedman’s commentary on Katrina is helpful because it reminds us of New Orleans’ desirability as an object of empire, and prompts an examination of the suppressed narrative that Kaplan detects in relation to 9/11.

This suppressed narrative concerns the fact that, as Marcus Rediker argues, “extraordinary violence has always been central to the making of modern capitalism.”⁶ And New Orleans, this chapter argues, is a key site in highlighting the myriad ways in which the United States has participated in—and has been a central agent of—this extraordinary violence. According to Rediker, the plantation and the slave ship are “the two main institutions of modern slavery,” which in turn underwrite the history of capitalism itself. At the start of the nineteenth century New Orleans, surrounded by sugar and cotton plantations, was a key site on the transatlantic slave trade, and after 1810 it became the center of the U.S. domestic trade in human beings. I would like to take these two institutions, the plantation and the slave ship, which crucially inform the history of New Orleans, as examples of containment on the one hand and mobility on the other. Together, I argue, they form a dialectic of empire that refuses the notion that the one is a sign of oppression whereas the other is indicative of liberation; clearly the imperial path of modern capitalism has relied on a flexible process of drawing boundaries to variously include and exclude peoples and territories, in ways that have secured the flow of money as well as its accumulation. And yet the example of New Orleans evidences that this dialectic is also the path to resistance, both in the form of rooted understandings of belonging and in a freewheeling, transnational flux that in the nineteenth century pitted the city against national trends.

This chapter considers contemporary material that I argue offers echoes of late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New Orleans, and which provides us with the opportunity to map New Orleans’ central place in the history of U.S. empire and the city’s ambiguous status with regard to Americanization. This status positions New Orleans on the periphery, if not as the complete inversion, of what this book is calling “American time” as it developed from the revolutionary period and came to fruition in the mid-twentieth century. The first section explores the contemporary transnational prison-industrial complex, glimpsed in Dave Eggers’s post-Katrina text, as an echo of both the plantation and the slave ship. The section suggests that the detention camp at Guantánamo Bay provides the opportunity to begin exploring historical links between New Orleans and Haiti that culminated in the nineteenth century following the first and only successful slave revolt in history. These links are forged in the second section via

comparisons between post-Katrina New Orleans and post-earthquake Haiti. The striking similarity between often racist constructions of the victims of both disasters brings into view a biopolitical regime that works both within and beyond U.S. national boundaries to render certain groups of human beings disposable in the context of neoliberal capitalism. These constructions have a history in the virulently racist responses to the Haitian revolution which threatened the entire slave and imperial system on which modern capitalism was built. The final section offers alternative approaches to “writing revolution,” focusing on Isabel Allende’s 2009 novel *Island Beneath the Sea*. This text might be read as a post-Katrina rendering of the Haitian Revolution which registers its enormous impact on nineteenth-century New Orleans and the legacy of this encounter which survives into the present day: the idea that New Orleans is somehow irrevocably foreign, a city whose Creole culture has partially resisted Americanization. In this sense New Orleans emerges here as a “geopolitical prize” whose contemporary reputation as a “Caribbean city” pays tribute to the myriad ways in which it has resisted colonization by the United States.

Bounding Empire: “Homeland” and the Transnational Prison-Industrial Complex

“Guantánamo Bay” in contemporary rhetoric—and in *Zeitoun*—has become a cipher for the U.S. detention camp that is situated in the U.S. naval base which is stationed at the southeastern end of Cuba.⁷ We have to travel back in time to recover Guantánamo Bay as a vast and stunning natural harbor, one that, as Jonathan Hansen writes, “enjoys a front-row seat along the Windward Passage, one of the hemisphere’s busiest sea-lanes and an integral link in the circum-Caribbean communication system. The passage takes its name from the breeze that blows in off the Atlantic between Cuba and Haiti, hurtling crews and cargo into the heart of the Caribbean basin.” Before becoming a dystopian symbol of U.S. extra-legal authority and shame, the remoteness of this rugged corner of Cuba made it “a land of exile and refuge accommodating marginalized people from within Cuba and across the Caribbean basin.”⁸

Given the superior strategic position Guantánamo commands in the western hemisphere, it is unsurprising that, once the United States had given up “the dream of Cuba”—its long-held goal of annexing the entire island that animated U.S. presidents for more than a century after the nation’s

founding, from Thomas Jefferson onward—it insisted on the Guantánamo lease as a condition of ending its occupation of Cuba. Cuba had seduced successive U.S. presidents for two key reasons: following the Haitian Revolution, Cuba took the former Saint-Domingue's place as the most lucrative colony in the world; it would also secure for the United States control of the Gulf of Mexico, and access to the waterway for what would become the United States's second most important port: New Orleans. Hanging on to Guantánamo thus secured New Orleans and the Mississippi River.

1898 saw similar U.S. interventions in the Philippines, Guam, and Puerto Rico—all of which realized, like Cuba, that liberation from the Spanish, overseen by the United States, did not come without a price.⁹ This year also saw the annexation of Hawaii. Niall Ferguson notes in his book, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (2004), that where many U.S. historians deny that the United States is an imperial power, they will concede that it did succumb to the temptations of empire for a brief moment at the turn of the twentieth century.¹⁰ Ferguson notes more than a brief moment of U.S. imperial indulgence, however. And I suggest that the unfolding of the history of Guantánamo Bay is a poignant reminder of this continuous history, one that does not vindicate the United States as a basically benevolent empire, as in Ferguson's account, but rather tracks its evolution into a power that has claimed porous borders and granted itself endless exemptions from the rule of law.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's conception of "Empire"—at the center of which is the United States—is one that transcends the model created by European powers with their stark distinctions between center and periphery, and which accretes power by blurring, as opposed to demarcating, territorial boundaries. They write:

Thomas Jefferson, the authors of the *Federalist*, and the other ideological founders of the United States were all inspired by the ancient imperial model; they believed they were creating on the other side of the Atlantic a new Empire with open, expanding frontiers, where power would be effectively distributed in networks. This imperial idea has survived and matured throughout the history of the United States constitution and has emerged now on a global scale in its fully realized form.¹¹

Hardt and Negri also claim that as well as having no spatial limits, Empire's temporal horizons are similarly infinite: "the concept of Empire presents

itself not as a historical regime originating in conquest, but rather as an order that effectively suspends history and thereby fixes the existing state of affairs for eternity.”¹²

Guantánamo does not fit neatly into Hardt and Negri’s own rather totalizing and indeed imperious rhetoric. Nonetheless, it might be seen as a crucial node in the complex network of U.S. imperialism, which has shuttled back and forth between the more traditional, territorial model of empire (the plantation) and the uncircumscribed ambition of economic, political, and cultural imperialism (the slave ship). Guantánamo has seen the unfolding and dissolving of myriad forms of U.S. authority, and this process of reimagining American power currently has no end: as in Hardt and Negri’s account of “Empire,” Guantánamo is leased to the United States in perpetuity.

The desire on the part of the founding fathers to make empire work for republicanism—against the tide of contemporary theories that the two were incompatible¹³—is illustrative of the fact that the American Revolution was not a revolt against empire. And yet innocence in relation to imperialism has become crucial to American exceptionalist accounts of U.S. history, with the British Empire emerging in this narrative as an organizing symbol of tyranny and un-freedom.¹⁴ Indeed, this apparent contradiction of U.S. imperial innocence is precisely in keeping with the logic of exceptionalism: the United States claims for itself a category apart, one that is unique and strikingly self-authorizing. Guantánamo, described by Anne McClintock as a “historical experiment in supralegal violence,” is an obscene example of this state of exception.¹⁵ Guantánamo illuminates like no other symbol the curious status of contemporary U.S. empire in the American imagination: everybody knows it exists—it is hypervisible evidence that the United States detains and tortures people who are more than likely innocent, indefinitely—and yet eyes are peculiarly averted, reluctant to peer through the wire-mesh fences to imagine ourselves into the position of those orange jumpsuits.

McClintock writes of Guantánamo inmates:

The men are reduced to zombies, unpeopled bodies, dead men walking, bodies as imperial property. This image is hypermodern and yet, alongside it, unbidden, the history of American slavery rises up—imperial *déjà vu*. When each new prisoner is brought off the plane, his ear muff is lifted and a U.S. marine says in his ear, “You are now the property of the U.S. Marine Corp.”

Called “packages” by the Marines, these men are unpeopled bodies, reduced to subhuman status, mere property of the state.¹⁶

This “imperial déjà vu” returns us not just to the memory of U.S. domestic slavery and its persistent legacy, but to the new forms of social control over the racialized body that have followed in its wake. As Angela Davis, Michelle Alexander, and others have argued, the contemporary system of mass incarceration that can be witnessed across the United States is more than simply an echo of slavery, an expression of the racialized poverty and social exclusion that is its legacy. What Alexander refers to as “the New Jim Crow” reflects a new set of technologies of racialized control that have arisen in response to late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century realities. As Alexander points out in her influential 2010 publication *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, “more African American adults are under correctional control today—in prison or jail, on probation or parole—than were enslaved in 1850.”¹⁷

Nonetheless, Alexander notes “a profound sense of déjà vu,” one that registers the links between this new system and its previous incarnations.¹⁸ As Abdulrahman Zeitoun discovers in Eggers’s text—on release from his incarceration in Camp Greyhound followed by several weeks “lost” in a high security prison—the Louisiana State Penitentiary, Angola, often simply referred to as “The Farm,” was built on a former slave plantation. Inmates from Angola constructed “Camp Greyhound.”¹⁹ Exploitation of the labor of prison inmates, often unwaged and, if paid at all, usually at rates well below the minimum wage, is a common practice in America’s prison system. At Angola, where average prison sentences are about ninety years and African Americans make up 80 percent of the population, every physically able prisoner is expected to perform farm labor for 2–20 cents an hour for a minimum of forty hours a week.²⁰ As Davis explains, prison labor today resembles the convict lease system that operated in the South soon after slavery was abolished, and which guaranteed cheap labor from the pool of newly criminalized emancipated slaves. Black Codes which proliferated in southern states “racialized penalty” while linking “it closely with previous regimes of slavery.” Thus, according to Davis, “southern criminal justice” emerged “largely as a means of controlling black labor.”²¹ Louisiana, which boasts the nation’s largest prison in the form of Angola, stands at the center of a system in which it is still legal to exploit the labor of prison populations which are overwhelmingly and disproportionately black. Angela Davis told a crowd at Tulane University, New Orleans, in November 2013, that

Louisiana “now rates number one in the nation in terms of its incarcerated population. The United States can claim 25 percent of the world’s prison population, both proportionately and absolutely more than any other country in the world. Louisiana claims the highest percentage of incarcerated people in relation to its population than any other state in the nation.” This makes New Orleans the epicenter of “the prison capital of the world.”²²

Alexander’s contention that the evidently racialized nature of mass incarceration amounts to a “new Jim Crow,” though not original, has been the focus of some controversy for a number of reasons. Alexander argues that America’s vast prison populations are largely the result of the “war on drugs” declared in the early 1980s before the so-called crack epidemic swept through America’s inner-city ghettos. Some prominent critics, notably James Forman, have suggested that the war on drugs itself garners disproportionate attention from commentators keen to show that contemporary mass incarceration is a new system of racial caste. This critique is important given the fact that, as Forman points out, “drug offenders constitute only a quarter of our nation’s prisoners, while violent offenders make up a much larger share: one-half.”²³ Forman also notes that prison populations soared immediately following an exponential rise in crime, particularly violent crime.²⁴ Nonetheless, given that the United States currently imprisons more than two million people at any one time, the one-quarter which is attributable to the drug war remains a significant number. Moreover, drug-related offenses account for a significant proportion of the rise in prison populations—that have more than quadrupled since 1980²⁵—as well as being over-represented in Louisiana’s state prison system. New Orleans thus emerges as a key site of the war on drugs.

While New Orleans is testimony to the very real harm done to black communities as a result of drug use and drug-related violence, it is, according to Alexander, the criminal justice system that is largely responsible for the economic and social collapse of many African-American neighborhoods across the United States. Punitive laws in relation to crack cocaine—as opposed to powder cocaine, more commonly used by whites—and unchecked racial profiling mean that staggering numbers of young black people, mostly men, are routinely swept off the streets and into the nation’s prisons. Often with no legal representation, these people are ushered into a system in which stunningly harsh mandatory minimum sentences pressure people to plead guilty regardless of whether they have actually committed a crime. The notorious “three strikes and you’re out” laws—that operate in Louisiana and a number of other states—condemn many to life sentences for nothing more than possession of marijuana.

Alexander shows that the war on drugs, which provides myriad financial incentives to law enforcement agencies that pursue it, has led to the veritable occupation of poor black communities by the police. Because the war on drugs, like the war waged on “terror,” is essentially a never-ending project, with too many potential targets to take on, the police have to be selective as to where the war will be waged. As Alexander writes, “the enduring racial isolation of the ghetto poor has made them uniquely vulnerable in the War on Drugs.”²⁶ Mass round-ups in poor black communities, as opposed to white suburbs, gated enclaves or college campuses—where drug activity is just as likely to take place—engenders no political backlash. Indeed, police have been able to argue that it is more effective to target impoverished communities who rely on an “open-air drug market” than those with access to private spaces which are harder to police. Such “reasoning” is supplemented in the South by a police force that, as Leonard Moore has shown in relation to New Orleans, in the postwar period picked up the baton of “white mob activity”—such as that practiced by the Ku Klux Klan—which was “replaced by police violence as a means of restricting black social mobility.”²⁷ In 2012 the *Times-Picayune* reported that in New Orleans, one out of every fourteen black men are behind bars, and one in seven is either in prison, on parole or on probation.²⁸ In 2013, social justice lawyer William Quigley reported that jail incarceration rates in New Orleans were four times the national average and that African Americans make up 84 percent of the city’s prison population.²⁹

The war on drugs does of course affect white people who come into its net—roughly 10 percent of those rounded up by the police—but for Alexander, these people are “collateral damage” in a system that is designed to target black people.³⁰ This is the price, Alexander suggests, of racial caste in an “age of colorblindness” in which racism dare not speak its name. And yet, as Forman notes, the tendency of the “New Jim Crow writers” to overlook the significance of violent crime in incarceration statistics is in itself troubling, as well as pointing to a potentially larger problem with the analogy. Where black people are no more likely to commit drug crimes than whites, and are dramatically over-represented in conviction rates, this is not the case with violent offenses which African Americans are more likely to commit. Thus the drug war serves the Jim Crow analogy better, given that the difference in treatment between blacks and whites “lies in government practice, not in the underlying behavior.”³¹ As Forman suggests, no serious treatment of mass incarceration can ignore violent crime. Arguably Alexander’s thesis overlooks this difficult statistic because her account, though cognizant of poverty, does not take class seriously as

a category of analysis that might in turn provide a socioeconomic account of violent crime.

In contrast, Christian Parenti's *Lockdown America* (1999), which preceded Alexander's text by over a decade, paints the rise of mass incarceration as a key moment of class struggle.³² Parenti, like Alexander, argues that the origins of the "war on crime" agenda issues from the civil disobedience of the 1960s black freedom movement, describing it as "counterinsurgency by other means."³³ Attacking racialized crime has since become a key electoral strategy for U.S. politicians. But Parenti also identifies another, later critical moment in the "criminal justice build up" which immediately preceded the dramatic rise in prison populations. This is the deregulation of capital in the 1970s, and involves the response to the crisis of overproduction and declining profits that closely followed the postwar boom at the end of the 1960s. Neoliberal restructuring represented an attack on labor in the form of deindustrialization and welfare rollback—which doubly afflicted African-American communities, which both relied on and were employed by the public sector in large numbers. Parenti argues that mass incarceration became a way of managing the consequent surplus population that capitalism both requires and is threatened by. For Parenti, the new zero tolerance policies that fostered the expanding prison population represented a "postmodern version of Jim Crow."³⁴ This is a more slippery understanding of Jim Crow that embraces not just black people but also the "visibly poor." This formulation of the Jim Crow analogy thus allows for the fact that race and class demarcate who falls within the purview of the criminal justice system.

Part of Forman's objection to the Jim Crow analogy is that middle-class blacks are largely free from interference by the criminal justice system and so where the original Jim Crow system targeted *all* black people (in the South), mass incarceration does not. And yet this objection reveals the extent to which Forman's analysis of racism is itself divorced from a consideration of class: it overlooks the fact that Jim Crow itself was designed to subordinate black labor in ways that echoed slavery. It was not until the defeat of Jim Crow and the successes of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s that a sizable African-American middle class came into being. That this section of the black population—a significant minority—is largely exempt from the criminal justice crackdown does not invalidate the claim that mass incarceration is a new system of racial caste. It shows the ways in which racial caste has always been powerfully articulated through class paradigms that have exploited poor whites as well.

This insight applies to the part of Alexander's thesis that Forman and others argue is the most convincing. Alexander contends that in spite of the great harm done to individuals, families, and communities by disproportionately long prison sentences, the greatest harm results not from "prison time" but rather the "prison label," the invisible world of discrimination that follows felons as they exit the prison and attempt to reenter a society that is now overwhelmingly stacked against them. Excluded from public housing, food stamps, and employment opportunities—many of which explicitly exclude felons who are required on most job applications to declare their status—the route into an illegal economy and back to prison is almost inevitable. The fact that most states bar felons from voting compounds Alexander's claim that this system amounts to a new form of Jim Crow. Indeed, the fact that prison populations like Angola are usually concentrated in white rural communities, and are counted for the purposes of political representation of the given district but are excluded from voting, mimics the plantation system which similarly gave disproportionate political clout to slave-holding states within which the slaves, counted as three-fifths of a human being, were denied the right to vote.³⁵ This is also one of the many ways in which predominantly black urban communities, like that which resides in New Orleans, are disenfranchised in an electoral context that skews power in favor of white rural voters who are in the numerical minority.

Prior to Katrina, then, New Orleans, with a 67 percent majority black population, was a key site in the war on drugs, notorious for its levels of crime which have long been linked to pernicious stereotypes linking blackness and criminality. The racial "underclass" that Katrina supposedly brought to the surface of national attention has been fundamentally shaped by this new system of racial caste that makes it more likely that a young black man will end up in jail than college. As Alexander shows, this new system of racialized control, while reserving its most brutal effects for those individuals and families directly affected by the "cruel hand" of the criminal justice system, in fact affects all black people living in the United States. All are shadowed by the stereotype of the "black criminal."³⁶

The unspoken story of *Zeitoun*, ostensibly set against the backdrop of the so-called war on terror, is the war on drugs, the war on crime in general, and mass incarceration. The book's main plot charts the Katrina experience of a Syrian American who remains behind in New Orleans to look after his property and help his neighbors. His heroic record of rescue missions is violently interrupted by an arrest by state police, who initially appear to

suspect him of unstated terrorist activities. His subsequent imprisonment in Camp Greyhound and then at Elayne Hunt Correctional Center, a high security prison, lead to Zeitoun's disillusionment with a national culture and state apparatus that has apparently vilified him on the basis of his ethnic and religious identity. Dave Eggers ostensibly wanted to tell this story to celebrate the "American Muslim hero," a figure that had been eclipsed by post-9/11 Islamophobia.³⁷ And yet, though this is Eggers's stated intent, the text invites an alternative reading.

It offers a glimpse into the workings of a criminal justice system whose failings were merely highlighted by the Katrina moment. Rather than converting the reader to the idea that an American Muslim could be a good citizen, I suggest that the Zeitoun family's middle-class respectability, earned via hard work and enterprise, is precisely the obvious object of identification for the kind of readership McSweeney's can anticipate. This is not to deny the poisonous post-9/11 atmosphere for Muslims residing in the United States, and the important work that a text like *Zeitoun* might do in this regard. But it is to suggest that much further beyond the realms of middle-class identification is the criminalized black male whose unnatural relationship with the criminal justice system has been thoroughly naturalized in the middle-class imagination. The story of a Muslim man being branded guilty, apparently on the basis of his identity alone, allows us to consider a much more entrenched symbol of racialized criminality. As Davis points out, the treatment of the black criminal paved the road for the post-9/11 treatment of suspected Muslim terrorists. Those who argued in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 that national "othering" was a game of musical chairs, and that the vilification of Muslims might paradoxically relieve African Americans of their signature pariah status in U.S. society, wholly underestimated the critical role played by the descendants of slaves in defining the bottom rung of U.S. racial hierarchies.³⁸

Arguably Eggers's stated project in *Zeitoun* has backfired since the real-life character has been held in jail on domestic battery charges and, latterly, charges that he plotted his wife's murder. Eggers has been taken to task for his portrayal of an unblemished hero and family man whose message seemed to rely on this saintly status. Zeitoun was acquitted of the charges against him in July 2013, but his wife's accusations and his association with violence against women are unlikely to go away.³⁹ And yet in some ways, the uncomfortable return of Zeitoun's non-fictional complexity only underscores the text's message about the criminal justice system. No one doubts that Zeitoun was innocent in relation to the vague suspicions—he was never charged—that led to his arrest in 2005. And yet in the eyes of many commentators, he is now "guilty" in a deeper sense, which somehow

renders his original story less powerful, less shocking and disturbing.⁴⁰ Such logic only reinforces that of a system that reverses the “innocent until proven guilty” dictum for subjects branded by race.

Zeitoun also provides a frame through which to trace the links between U.S. prison populations at home and abroad. Where the system of internal colonization of a large segment of the nation’s black population might be compared to the plantation, Guantánamo is reminiscent of the slave ship, and the fact that America’s “rooted” forms of racism are intimately connected to transnational, “routed” iterations. Indeed, Angela Davis argues that the increasingly privatized U.S. prison industry provides a “scaffolding for global repression” as it is transplanted into other national contexts, creating new markets in the denial of human freedom.⁴¹ And yet as Davis suggests, as with the peculiar spectacle of Guantánamo—hypervisible but somehow at a safe distance—“we have all learned how to forget about prisons . . . we have not learned how to talk about prisons as institutions that collect and hide away the people whom society treats as its refuse.”⁴²

Again, Guantánamo functions here as a mirror, the purveyor of “imperial déjà vu”—as a place that has historically detained refugees considered “refuse” by the U.S. government. Guantánamo, now a key site in the war on terror, once a key indicator of U.S. territorial ambition, should also be remembered as a central location of black Atlantic oppression. Throughout the twentieth century, Guantánamo was used to detain Haitian refugees, most notoriously in the 1990s when it became what many regard as the first detention camp for victims of HIV/AIDS. Just as the U.S. domestic criminal justice system treats its victims as “detritus,” here the “diseased” raced body was consigned to what initially appeared to be indefinite detention without charges, legal representation or trial. The backstory to the construction of the Guantánamo naval base into a zone that stripped Haitians of their legal rights is the stream of refugees fleeing persecution from the U.S.-backed Duvalier regime in the late 1970s and early 1980s. When the U.S. policy of deporting Haitian refugees was condemned by the judgment of a district court in a 1980 ruling—as both immoral and racist—Guantánamo came into view as a conveniently nebulous territory, neither Cuba nor the United States. Here Haitians could be intercepted at sea, taken to Guantánamo, and denied due process. This is in stark contrast to treatment of refugees from communist Cuba, who have routinely been granted asylum in the United States. We will return to the particular history that has reserved unusually virulent forms of U.S. racism for Haitians.⁴³

In the same essay that explores the term “Ground Zero,” Amy Kaplan charts the emergence of the term “Homeland” as part of the post-9/11 lexicon for demarcating an embattled United States from the various fronts in

the so-called war on terror. For Kaplan, Guantánamo is the unarticulated site that guarantees the currency and visibility of these other two terms. She argues that “Homeland” in particular marks the peculiar emergence in U.S. nationalist discourse of a term associated with the rooted “blood, soil, and land” brand of European nationalisms that the nation of immigrants, bound for the future, supposedly left behind. While America’s successive systems of racialized control—slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration—testify to the fact that ethnocentrism more than lingered into the history of the New World, the post-9/11 embrace of this apparently Old World rhetoric seems significant. It underscores a previously disavowed imperial logic in which white supremacy has worked internally and externally as a way of policing U.S. boundaries, at once elastic and fixed.

Kaplan suggests though that far from satisfactorily demarcating national boundaries, “the idea of the homeland works by generating a profound sense of insecurity, not only because of the threat of terrorism, but because the homeland, too, proves a fundamentally uncanny place, haunted by prior and future losses, invasions, abandonment.”⁴⁴ If the United States finds its uncanny double in the dystopian image of the Guantánamo detention camp, then this image in turn found its internal double in the dystopian scenes in post-Katrina New Orleans. Here indefinite detention was translated into “Katrina time,” which reflected a criminal justice system no longer concerned with rehabilitation or indeed crime. The following section explores the unfolding of “Katrina time” in New Orleans in the late summer of 2005, and the uncanny echoes that sounded from Haiti five years later. In both instances imperial behavior eclipses the progressive temporality that exceptionalist discourse associates with the United States.

New Orleans, 2005; Port-au-Prince, 2010

In an op-ed piece for the *New York Times* in January 2010, Jonathan Hansen wrote:

Coinciding with the one-year anniversary of President Obama’s unfulfilled pledge to close the American prison at Guantánamo Bay, the disaster in Haiti suggests a new mission for the United States naval base, one that might burnish America’s reputation in the world, if not redeem the base itself. . . . Even as the United States works to close the prison, it should use the base for humanitarian intervention.⁴⁵

Hansen's vision of "Guantánamo to the rescue" is well aware of the deeply paradoxical idea that the naval base might form a real refuge to Haitian victims of the earthquake which struck on January 12, 2010, killing over 200,000 people, injuring and rendering homeless many more, and devastating Haiti's capital of Port-au-Prince. And yet the full extent of the irony of this piece had yet to unfold, as the U.S. army took control of Haitian airspace and flooded the country not with aid—which was in some cases diverted by U.S. forces—but with military personnel. For many who lived through Katrina, however, the militarized response to the worst natural disaster in the history of the Americas would have occasioned something like imperial *déjà vu*. Certainly Abdulrahman Zeitoun could have told the suffering Haitians that a "reimagined Guantánamo" was not the answer.

The story of the disastrous post-Katrina response effort in New Orleans on the part of city, state, and federal authorities is now widely known. The federal government took an incomprehensible five days to reach Louisiana. Meanwhile the places of "last resort," the Superdome and Convention Center, where people who were unable to evacuate were housed, degenerated into unsanitary and dangerous environments in which people lacked access to water, food, and basic sanitation. At this stage the media swooped on the story and stirred up a deeply ambivalent global outcry—that at one and the same time condemned the U.S. government for abandoning its own people and blamed the stranded New Orleanians for the appalling conditions in which they found themselves. When authorities did arrive, their orders were clearly centered on the imperatives of "law and order" as opposed to "search and rescue." There were brief moments of reprieve, like the appearance of General Russel Honoré who memorably ordered his troops to put their guns down. But for the most part, post-Katrina New Orleans was conceptualized as a deeply unstable zone that needed to be contained and secured by U.S. forces and their various, private—unaccountable—offshoots.

As Kathy Zeitoun realizes in Eggers's text, post-storm New Orleans had been flooded with security forces "armed for urban combat": "Kathy added it up. There were at least twenty-eight thousand guns in New Orleans. That would be the low number, counting rifles, handguns, shot-guns."⁴⁶ Zeitoun's experience at Camp Greyhound was arguably unique for the ways in which it highlighted the collision of post-9/11 and post-Katrina "security" strategies. But his story is nonetheless part of a much larger post-Katrina reality which criminalized the storm victims. As one survivor told Rebecca Solnit, "We ended up in this concentration-like camp with barbed-wire fences and snipers, like we did something wrong."⁴⁷ And as Linda Robertson writes, "On September 1, 2005, the State of Louisiana

declared war on the survivors in New Orleans,” as Governor Kathleen Blanco announced:

These troops are fresh back from Iraq, well-trained, experienced, battle-tested and under my orders to restore order in the streets. They have M-16s and they are locked and loaded. These troops know how to shot and kill and they are more than willing to do so if necessary and I expect they will.⁴⁸

Blanco’s statement responds to the idea that New Orleans had been taken over by marauding gangs. Visions of looters, rapists, and killers took hold of a media imagination typified by this CNN report: “On the dark streets, rampaging gangs take full advantage of the unguarded city. Anyone venturing outside is in danger of being robbed or even shot. It is a state of siege.”⁴⁹ As with the logic of mass incarceration, much of the perception of post-Katrina crime turned out to be unfounded, the result of a sensationalist media campaign that criminalized the plight of those left to fend for themselves in a drowning city. While some opportunistic looting did occur—indeed, some of the more notorious examples were committed by the police—the vast majority of cases involved people recovering food and water for themselves and their families, in the face of a massive government failure.

Solnit suggests that instances of “elite panic” in the hurricane’s aftermath “turned New Orleans into a prison city.” This idea might be qualified by the fact that, as suggested above, New Orleans was already a prison city—with an extensive network of city jails surrounded by rural prisons, sometimes ironically referred to as “black suburbs,” filled with large segments of the black urban population. This population had already witnessed and suffered as a result of the transition from community to militarized policing of their neighborhoods. As with many aspects of Katrina’s aftermath, the storm merely exacerbated and brought to light long-term and slow-burning trends that had already done unimaginable harm to the city’s social fabric. The media were able to mobilize a host of stereotypes that had long demonized black urban populations. In addition, commentators were also able to draw on pernicious associations between blackness and “welfare dependency” to castigate poor African Americans for failing to evacuate.⁵⁰ This is in spite of the fact that large numbers of poor people in the city, disproportionately black, lacked access to transport to heed the mandatory evacuation order issued by the mayor’s office—which came with no kind of assistance. This again reflected a scenario in which federal aid programs had been rolled back in previous decades leaving the poor protected by only

the most rudimentary social safety net. As Michael Eric Dyson writes in relation to the racialized and racist responses to the storm, such commentary “battered the victims of Katrina all over again.”⁵¹

These insults were compounded by the fact that, as discussed in the introductory chapter, politicians and media commentators widely adopted the term “refugee” to describe Katrina evacuees from New Orleans. Given the fact that these observers were referring to a group of predominantly black Americans, the understandable reaction from African-American spokespersons was that this was a racist denial of U.S. citizenship.⁵² Certainly the label was technically incorrect; according to international law these were not refugees but rather “internally displaced people.”⁵³ The construction of post-Katrina New Orleans as more akin to a “Third World disaster zone” than the United States further removed the evacuees from the realm of public concern.

But arguably, the post-storm city was an uncanny spectacle within the national imaginary because it revealed the fact that Katrina’s most vulnerable victims were *already* disrespected and disregarded, already at the bottom of a social hierarchy in a society that ruthlessly discards those no longer considered economically useful. The “refugee” label is instructive for the ways in which it conjures the relationship between evacuees and the state—a body that, quite apart from offering protection, treated these U.S. citizens as enemies, and post-Katrina New Orleans as a front for waging war. It is little wonder that many New Orleanians experienced the arrival of U.S. troops as a foreign invasion. According to Henry Giroux,

Katrina laid bare the racial and class fault lines that mark an increasingly damaged and withering democracy and reveal the emergence of a new kind of politics—one in which entire populations are now considered disposable, an unnecessary burden on state coffers, and consigned to fend for themselves.⁵⁴

Giroux is here defining a biopolitical order that has moved on from the one described by Michel Foucault, in which modernity itself was marked by a transition from traditional forms of sovereign power—over matters of life and death—to “more disciplinary modes of confinement and control.”⁵⁵ For Giroux neoliberal postmodernity inaugurates a reality in which the exception becomes the rule, and in which Foucault’s prison becomes a metaphor for the militarized state. The “state of emergency” declared in Katrina’s aftermath might in this vein be seen as an intensified version of the war that had long been declared on New Orleans’ racialized underclass. As Michelle Alexander

explains, this underclass was created by the fact that black neighborhoods in the United States were made to bear the brunt of deindustrialization and globalization.⁵⁶ As manufacturing jobs were outsourced to foreign workers, usually open to grotesque exploitation as a result of the lack of unions and a minimum wage, it engendered “the economic collapse of inner-city black communities” across America. While white workers suffered too, Alexander shows that African Americans bore the brunt of globalization:

In 1954, black and white youth unemployment rates in America were equal, with blacks actually having a slightly higher rate of employment in the age group sixteen to nineteen. By 1984, however, the black unemployment rate had nearly quadrupled, while the white rate had increased only marginally.⁵⁷

At least some of these white workers will have been helped by the explosion in the prison industry, which typically offers employment opportunities to white people living in rural areas. Today in New Orleans, unemployment among African-American men stands at around 50 percent.

For Giroux, Katrina unmask a biopolitical regime that determines the kinds of lives that can be lived, and defines some lives as not worth living. Katrina unveiled some particularly dramatic examples of such a regime: armed police shooting at evacuees trying to cross a bridge into neighboring Gretna; the unpunished murder of possibly hundreds of black men by white vigilantes across the city, and particularly in Algiers. The post-Katrina context was not short of criminal activity, but those responsible for some of the worst crimes walked free.

In contrast, prisoners in the city jails were not only left to drown or drink the sewage-infected water which flooded their locked cells. As Pamela Metzger explains, in a narrative that has much in common with *Zeitoun*, “once evacuated, the OPP [Orleans Parish Prison] prisoners were lost to the known world, just as surely as if they had been among the “disappeared” of a country struggling under a repressive dictatorship.”⁵⁸ Transported with none of their legal documents, personal papers, or identification, many of these prisoners were left in Louisiana prisons for months after Katrina. Metzger’s account shows that the vast majority of these were poor, pre-charge detainees rounded up shortly before Katrina, usually for minor misdemeanors such as drunkenness, traffic violations, blocking the sidewalk (i.e., being homeless). Although the practice violates various legal principles, detainees are not usually granted legal counsel until they have been charged with a crime. This means that poor pre-charge detainees usually lack any legal representation.

As Metzger shows, this is why so many were “doing Katrina time” in a system that openly discriminates against poor defendants.

Even before Katrina, poor precharge detainees had languished in jail for weeks in a kind of jurisprudential limbo: not charged but not free. After Katrina, poor precharge detainees descended into a Kafa-esque hell: not charged, not free, not known.⁵⁹

As suggested in the introduction, “Katrina time” might be appropriated to name a wider condition that transcends Katrina’s temporal horizon, a condition in which so many U.S. citizens were living prior to the storm. This is an unproductive temporality that has no future, a condition that Giroux names “living death,”⁶⁰ Alexander names “civic death,”⁶¹ and Orlando Patterson, who was describing slavery, named “social death.”⁶² This condition was perhaps most disturbingly realized by the bodies that lay on street corners and which floated in the stagnant water and amidst the storm debris for days after Katrina. A number of commentators have compared images of these bodies to lynching photography, which celebrated the disposability of black bodies in the aftermath of the trade that somewhat paradoxically accorded high cash values to the physical lives of slaves. Following Emancipation, the labor of black people became infinitely replaceable. As disproportionately unemployed or incarcerated, the status of poor African Americans as what Giroux describes as “the waste-products of the American Dream” is only intensified.⁶³ Writing of the distinctions between slavery, Jim Crow and mass incarceration, Alexander suggests that “while marginalization may sound far preferable to exploitation, it may prove to be even more dangerous.”⁶⁴

Despite the fact that the national public outcry after Katrina was contradictory and short-lived, it is widely accepted that the criminally inept government response to the disaster was responsible for the steep decline in popularity of George W. Bush, which in turn sealed the fate of the Republican Party in the next general election. When an enormous earthquake devastated Haiti in January 2010, just a year into the Obama presidency, some dubbed the emergency “Obama’s Katrina.”⁶⁵ Reminiscent of “Guantánamo to the rescue,” and in similarly oxymoronic vein, Mark Thompson, writing for *Time* just a few days after the disaster struck, suggested that the presence of the U.S. military in post-earthquake Haiti constituted a “compassionate invasion”:

Louisiana became the 18th of the United States back in 1812,
but you’d never have known it watching the Federal government’s

ham-fisted response to 2005's Hurricane Katrina. The Obama Administration is doing things differently: Haiti, for all intents and purposes, became the 51st state at 4:53 p.m. Tuesday in the wake of its deadly earthquake. If not a state, then at least a ward of the state—the United States—as Washington mobilized national resources to rush urgent aid to Haiti's stricken people.⁶⁶

In the days and weeks after the catastrophe, it was repeatedly suggested that the best solution for Haiti—"the poorest country in the western hemisphere," as media commentators constantly reminded us—might be some form of United States or United Nations protectorate, that could help this ill-fated nation get back on its feet. The ironies of such proposals and this *Time* article are manifold. The ways in which journalists flirted with gross violations of Haiti's sovereignty rides roughshod over Haiti's legacy of successfully revolting against slavery and colonialism to form the first, independent black republic in the New World. Nonetheless, while some objected to the idea that the Haitian earthquake was Obama's Katrina—Haiti was not, contrary to many U.S. actions, a possession of the United States⁶⁷—the label is interesting for what it reveals about the links between post-Katrina New Orleans and post-earthquake Port-au-Prince. Arguably, and contrary to Thompson's suggestion, the Obama administration's reaction to the earthquake was just as damaging as the Bush administration's response to Katrina.

As human rights activist Beverly Bell noted on January 21, 2010, the fact that the United States so rapidly flooded Haiti with troops in the aftermath of the earthquake meant that "more than 1,400 flights of aid and relief workers have been blocked from getting in . . . People are lying on the ground with crushed bones and their response of choice is *guns*?"⁶⁸ One major difference between Bush's and Obama's responses to the storm and earthquake, respectively, is that the latter was able to occupy the affected areas rapidly and efficiently. This is not to suggest that the U.S. military did not do any good in post-earthquake Haiti, but it is to suggest that it was first and foremost U.S. security needs, and not the needs of the earthquake victims, that prompted the invasion. The United States has long had a vested interest in portraying Haiti as a needy, if recalcitrant, child, dependent on the benevolence and paternalism of its powerful neighbor.

Prior to the earthquake Haiti was already known as "the republic of NGOs."⁶⁹ As Paul Farmer points out, in countries like Haiti the presence of NGOs has initiated this "vicious cycle": "aid bypasses the government because it is weak, and then further weakens the government."⁷⁰ The earth-