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The Process of Disaster: Environmental Justice Discourse and Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke*

Ali Brox
University of Kansas

One of the first images viewers see in Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006) is high water lapping near the top of a street sign. The street name is Humanity, and flood waters dangerously threaten to overtake the green rectangular sign. Lee's image succinctly portrays the theme for the next four hours of the documentary: the threat of losing a sense of humanity as a result of Hurricane Katrina and the flooding of New Orleans. The Humanity Street sign becomes more nuanced when considered from an environmental justice perspective: the rising waters that perilously converge on the sign represent the impossibility of separating humans and nature and signal the link between social concerns and climatic forces.

The increasing economic disparity within and between nations and the ramifications this has in relation to the consequences of environmental destruction and degradation make environmental justice discourse relevant to the ways we conceptualize and respond to crises. Environmental justice is concerned with connections between social designations and the distribution of environmental burdens and benefits. The tradition of environmental justice in the United States as a political movement, field of academic study, and policy principle emerged during the 1980s although the roots of the contemporary movement are linked to the Civil Rights efforts of the 1960s. Joan Martinez-Alier associates the tradition with instances of "environmental racism," which he argues are mainly United States and possibly South African

concepts.[1] The history of these movements includes "many cases of local environmental activism in the USA, some with a hundred years' roots in the many struggles for health and safety in mines and factories, perhaps also in complaints against pesticides in southern cotton fields, and certainly in the struggle against toxic waste at Love Canal in upstate New York lead by Lois Gibbs" (Martinez-Alier 171). In *Environmental Justice: Concepts, Evidence and Politics* (2012), Gordon Walker outlines seven characteristics of a U.S. environmental justice frame: it emphasizes a politics of race; it focuses on questions of justice for people; it focuses on siting of waste and risk, and, recently, on access to environmental "goods/benefits" in addition to environmental "bads"; it emphasizes distributive justice; it assigns blame and responsibility to "industry and corporate actors, and on the institutionalised (and racist) practices of the state"; it focuses its struggle within the borders of the United States; and it is rooted in social movements, the work of grassroots activists, and the work of academics (20-23). Walker points out that there has been some evolution of these characteristics in recent years.[2] In addition to being a political and ecological movement, environmental justice is also a cultural concern, "interested in issues of ideology and representation" (Adamson, Evans, and Stein 9). T. V. Reed raises the question of what role representation can play in environmental justice movements: "How can literature and criticism further efforts of the environmental justice movement to bring attention to ways in which environmental degradation and hazards unequally affect poor people and people of color?" (149).

Lee's film represents a recent example of environmental justice discourse that challenges the way people conceive of "natural" disasters. Instead of treating Katrina as a singular event, Lee encourages viewers to think about the hurricane as a process, which aligns with what John Hannigan describes as the "strong version" of the relationship between disasters and politics: "the

strong version asserts that natural disasters are *direct products* of their surrounding social, political, and economic environments" (12). By framing the disaster as a process, Lee represents a different environmental sensibility than many viewers may be accustomed to; he contests the notion that Hurricane Katrina was "natural" or an "act of God" and instead highlights the institutions, policies, and socioeconomic conditions that exacerbate the effects of the climatic disturbance on the human residents of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast.[3] In "The Great Acceleration and the Great Divergence: Vulnerability in the Anthropocene," Rob Nixon argues,

> Stories matter—they matter immeasurably. Measurement, data, metrics, and modeling are the lucrative priorities of universities these days. In the face of this pressure to quantify, it is easy for humanities scholars to lose track of what they do best, like explaining why telling a story one way as opposed to another can have profound imaginative, ethical, and political consequences. In a world drowning in data, stories can play a vital role—for example, in the making of environmental publics and in the shaping of environmental policy.

Nixon's reference to "a world drowning in data" resonates with particular force to Lee's portrayal of New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina. The world watched as an iconic American city drowned beneath the waters of Lake Pontchartrain; the result of ineffective levees and years of ignoring the consequences of erosion to coastal wetlands. Lee's narrative about Hurricane Katrina allows Nixon's watery metaphor to be extended further: the high waters that devastated residents of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast are indicative of an uncertain planetary future where melting glaciers and rising tides reflect the differentiated impact of resource exploitation and environmental degradation in the United States and around the globe.

When the Levees Broke represents two critical, contemporary dilemmas that Nixon addresses: the environmental crisis and the inequality crisis. By challenging accepted conceptual understandings of disasters, Lee's film confronts two delusions associated with these crises: one, human attempts to control the natural world can be done without consequence; and two, that the growing disparity between the über-rich and ultra-poor can be sustained without serious repercussions (Nixon). The residents Lee interviews serve as witnesses to the disparities in agency and vulnerability associated with the storm, and Lee insists that changes in the ways we perceive race, poverty, and ecological assets are required.[4] The film remains salient today because as communities in the U.S. and around the world continue to face the effects of climatic forces and human manipulations of the environment, framing these issues in ways that account for the unequal vulnerability for certain people and places becomes increasingly important.

HBO aired *When the Levees Broke* about two weeks before the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. The documentary is organized in four acts: the first act addresses the situation that led up to Hurricane Katrina and the breaching of the levees.[5] The ensuing acts focus on the recovery efforts and issues that affect the response to the flooding of the city. The ability to release a documentary within a year of the disaster allows Lee to capitalize on the urgency of the situation. The biggest advantages to this genre are the actual voices and images that can be incorporated into the narrative. Lee interviews people who might not otherwise get to tell their stories. Viewers can see these people on screen, which provides the (illusion) of immediacy that fills the documentary with emotion. The visual element takes the destruction beyond the level of abstraction and allows Lee to show residents in the places they are now - FEMA trailers, devastated neighborhoods, and cities in other states. David MacDougall speaks to the power images can add to narrative and history: "'Appearance is knowledge, of a kind.

Showing becomes a way of saying the unsayable. Visual knowledge...provides one of our primary means of comprehending the experience of other people'" (Saunders 11). Environmental abstractions like melting glaciers, thermal expansion, rising sea levels, and computer models can be difficult to infuse with dramatic urgency. Lee's use of the documentary or nonfiction film genre allows him to bring these to life for viewers so they can see and hear what continued neglect of wetlands, soil erosion, climate change, and infrastructure projects causes.

Lee possesses the power and clout to represent the stories of a predominantly African American population in New Orleans that suffered disproportionately as a result of the storm. Like his other films, *When the Levees Broke* "explore[s] the shared national trauma of racism and its continuing social, economic, and political effects" (Massood xxiii). However, for some audiences, Lee is a polarizing figure, and they receive his fiction and nonfiction films differently, often accepting his documentaries more approvingly (Coleman and Hamlet xxvii). Jasmine Nichole Cobb and John L. Jackson argue that this assessment demeans Lee as a fiction filmmaker, but they suggest reasons for the perception that Lee is a better documentarian: "it becomes the nonfiction films' emphases on focus (a single topic), veracity (an actual event or figure), and objectivity (with Spike's individual flourishes relegated to the margins of the text) that result in praise for Spike's work" (262). Arguably the most comprehensive documentary about Hurricane Katrina, *When the Levees Broke* earned Lee the George Polk Award, an Image Award, a Peabody Award, and two Venice Film Festival awards (McCluskey xxvi).

The commonalities among Lee's films, including his focus on race and representation, suggest that he is uniquely positioned to tell the story of Hurricane Katrina. His oeuvre represents the need to understand the past in order to move forward as a society, and in his nonfiction works, "Lee combines contemporary interviews with historical footage to suggest

continuities between past events and attitudes and the present context" (Massood xxiv). Lee uses images of New Orleans before the storm in *When the Levees Broke* to emphasize what was lost, and a feeling of nostalgia runs through the film. Jazz music reflects the city's cultural legacy and causes viewers to confront what will be missed if it does not rebuild. The news footage and other archival images that Lee includes allow him to reproduce images that viewers may have seen already. Lee's framing of this particular moment in the documentary emphasizes that President Bush's plans to help "later on" do not coincide with the devastation in New Orleans and the need for immediate aid. For example, Lee provides footage of President George W. Bush speaking about the situation in New Orleans and the plans for aid in the future. The president's statements are followed by aerial images of the devastation below. Lee's framing indicates that President Bush's rhetoric and the reality on the ground do not coincide. The viewer quickly understands who Lee wants the viewer to sympathize with and who he thinks should shoulder the blame for this tragedy: "'It was a very painful experience to see my fellow American citizens, the majority of them African-American, in the dire situation they were in,' Lee said in an interview. 'I was outraged by the slow response of the federal government.' After seeing the federal government 'turning its back on its own citizens in the manner in which they did,' Lee decided to make the film in order to expose the failure" (Narde 177). Lee does not actively participate in front of the camera, and viewers rarely hear him pose a question, but they feel his presence nonetheless.

In order to understand the conceptual transformation that Lee's film encourages, it is necessary to look at the values associated with other environmental perspectives. David Harvey examines the history and ideology behind four environmental discourses—the standard view, wise-use, ecological modernization, and environmental justice. The standard view is a typical way

many people perceive natural disasters. According to Harvey, proponents of the standard view treat each environmental incident as an individual occurrence, which requires intervention only after the fact. From this perspective, environmental concerns should not stand in the way of progress—economic efficiency, continuous growth, and capital accumulation—and the benefits of growth should not be unnecessarily relinquished for overly solicitous respect for the environment. The standard view assumes that a "remedial science" exists that can step in and cope with any difficulties that arise in relation to irreversible problems. Science can and always will be one step ahead of anything humans can do to the environment and therefore humans do not have to worry about the consequences (Harvey 374).

Lee associates the standard view with the United States government, and his representation suggests the serious limitations this perspective has for dealing with situations like Katrina. In the film, President Bush addresses the frustration people have voiced about the slow federal response by saying, "there will be plenty of opportunities to help later on." This statement relates to the "standard view" that Hurricane Katrina and the flooding of New Orleans represents a separate, individual act of destruction where the best reaction is an after-the-fact clean-up and distribution of aid. Residents Henry Rodriguez and Robert Rocque articulate additional flaws in the standard view approach. Rodriguez, St. Bernard Parish President, points out that the building of the levees started 40 years ago, but they still are not finished. He calls the current situation "payback." Robert Rocque, a resident of the Ninth Ward, echoes Rodriguez's sentiments. Rocque claims that the government believed the levees cost too much money, but he points out that now that the levees have failed, the government will have to spend much more money to fix the problem. He acknowledges that many people prefer the standard view approach but that prevention of the levee breach would have been better than addressing the problem *after*

the fact. Rodriguez and Rocque imply that the nation's attitude about economic costs trumps infrastructure needs and citizen safety. Their testimony highlights the limitations of considering Katrina from the standard view.

Lee also represents an ecological modernization point of view in the film, which emphasizes government-led regulations or collective interventions to prevent problems before they arise. The key word in this discourse is "sustainability": it becomes crucial to demonstrate that ecological modernization can be profitable. This view prefers preventative measures instead of intervention after environmental damage because prevention is cheaper than clean-up. Advocates of an ecological modernization perspective propose a far more systematic set of politics, institutional arrangements, and regulatory practices because economic activity produces environmental harm, and therefore society should adopt an active stance in regard to environmental regulation and controls (Harvey 377). Ecological modernization considers the implications for future generations, and like the standard view, it privileges scientific discourse. An ecological modernization perspective is not as coherent as Harvey summarizes it and dangers of political cooptation exist (378). Because of its emphasis on profitability, it has the potential to be appropriated for economic power by corporations in their desire to manage the world's resources (Harvey 382).

In the documentary, John Barry, author of *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America*, describes an ecological modernization point of view in relation to the events of Hurricane Katrina. Barry explains the power of the Mississippi River and the sediment distribution problems that contributed to the stress on the levees. He claims that the main issue behind the Mississippi River threat is the erosion of wetlands in southern Louisiana. He further contends that the one issue environmental groups and oil companies can

now agree on is the necessity of stopping the erosion and rebuilding the wetlands. Mike Tidwell, in *Bayou Farewell* (2003), explains the oil companies' role in the devastation of wetlands: "Early on, the big companies -Texaco, Amoco, and others- launched the practice of extensive canal dredging that continued for nearly half a century…canals, once dredged through the marsh, trigger disastrous erosion" (35). Economic consequences contribute to the initial reluctance to alleviate the pressure on the wetlands and ecosystem, but now the oil companies prefer to prevent further destruction to the wetlands as opposed to addressing the problem of flooding after it recurs. The prioritization of the economic implications tied to the status of the wetlands corresponds to the ecological modernization focus on the promotion of economic development and profitability.

In contrast to ecological modernization, Harvey considers environmental justice the most able of avoiding cooptation by corporate interests. Environmental justice discourse is radically at odds with the standard view and an ecological modernization perspective because inequalities are the priority (385), which differs from emphases on progress and sustainability. Harvey views the local focus of environmental justice as one of its greatest strengths because it allows for sensitivity to specific concerns and flexibility in intervention strategies. Additional interests that constitute this discourse and differentiate it from other perspectives include attention to instances of environmental racism, exposure to toxins, and skepticism toward expertise and the institutions that produce scientific knowledge.

The history of the levee system used to control the Mississippi River and the effects this has on the wetlands of southern Louisiana help substantiate why Lee frames Hurricane Katrina from an environmental justice perspective. In *The Control of Nature* (1989), John McPhee outlines the attempts to control the Mississippi River for economic purposes. The demand for

more levees to prevent flooding resulted in the government giving swamp land to the states, which in turn sold the land to help pay for the levees. However, the absentee owners who bought up the swamps, which were natural reservoirs that took in flood waters, drained the swamps to make agricultural land, and thus demanded even bigger levees (McPhee 36). In essence, the levees aggravated the problem they were meant to solve because the natural reservoirs for flood waters were choked off (McPhee 42). McPhee's assessments connect continued wetland depletion with increased vulnerability to hurricane surges because a mile of marsh reduces coastal surge by about an inch, so if fifty miles of marsh disappear, then fifty inches of additional water will surge (63). Tidwell elaborates on the destructive impact the vanishing wetlands will have on the area: "It is, hands down, the fastest-disappearing landmass on earth, and New Orleans itself is at great risk of vanishing" (6).

In addition to addressing the effects caused by attempts to control the Mississippi River, such as the increased severity of hurricanes once they reach land, Lee's film represents a fundamental aspect of a U.S. environmental justice frame: the struggle against environmental racism. He produces substantial evidence to support the argument that many residents of New Orleans suffered because of policies and practices that existed long before the storm, which disproportionately burdened African American residents. These burdens were magnified once the immediate crisis of the storm was fully realized. In the documentary, Garland Robinette, host of WWL Radio and resident of Uptown, highlights how he views the correlation between race and national policies. He states that he understands why many people may discount the importance of New Orleans and its residents: they have very little political power and money, and it is mostly a black city. Robinette questions the policy that allows the royalties from oil rigs built three miles off the coast of Louisiana to go to the federal government instead of the state

coffers. He points out that Louisiana controls thirty percent of the country's oil and natural gas. However, unlike other states in the country, Louisiana does not reap the benefits of its energy production.[6] The impact of Louisiana on the rest of the country is apparent, and Robinette argues that if other states are allowed to benefit from oil companies that extract local resources, then Louisiana should benefit too. He says,

> If they'd give us our percentage of oil and gas like Texas gets, like New Mexico gets, Wyoming gets, Colorado gets, Alaska gets, if they'd give us that we can build our own wetlands, rebuild 'em, we can build our category five levees, we can, instead of having to cut out the neighborhoods that are our culture because we no longer can afford 'em, we could bring those neighborhoods back too [...] Give us our oil and gas money. We'll help ourselves.

Robinette clearly believes that given the opportunity, Louisiana residents would take better care of their state than the federal government does. He emphasizes the need for justice in terms of distribution of resources and adequate compensation, and he gives voice to the implication that Louisiana has been politically and ecologically exploited because of its poor and black demographic.

Lee also illustrates the toxic conditions many of the city's most vulnerable residents faced after the storm came ashore. Harvey describes pollution as one analogy for the social order -if pollution is "matter out of place" then it cannot be separated from claims about the dangers and impurities of "people out of place" (368). Certain attitudes toward pollution suggest that Other people (racial, economic, national, ethnic, gender) should accept the presence of trash and toxins because they are accustomed to living in sub-par conditions, and they do not require, or are not worthy of, the same safe and healthy environments. Lee represents the deteriorating and toxic

situation in New Orleans through images of human bodies to highlight the corporeal inequities that certain portions of the population suffered.

In the documentary, Lee includes footage of Soledad O'Brien from a CNN "State of Emergency" program where she tours the Convention Center. The broadcast reports the injustices suffered by the disproportionately black and poor residents of New Orleans and calls attention to the association between "trashy people as the logical recipients of trash" (Harvey 368). In the segment, O'Brien describes the atmosphere in and around the Convention Center: "The first thing you notice: the smell. It smells, like eww, it smells like dead bodies, it smells like urine, it smells like people who've waded through sewage to make their way from their houses." The surging water from the breached levees caused immediate damage and threatens to inflict further health problems with unsanitary conditions and the risk of disease. Lee questions the way certain segments of the New Orleans population were associated with trash after the hurricane in emotionally-charged ways. He frames the situation at the Convention Center in order to expose and undermine the idea that "these" people should be accustomed to conditions like this. Through interviews with people who spent days in the Convention Center or Super Dome, Lee represents the racial and class situatedness of residents who endured horrible conditions that contributed to their feeling unwelcome in their own city.

Lee follows O'Brien's piece with images of dead bodies throughout the city. There is no commentary; only somber music and footage of abandoned corpses. Near the end of the montage, Michael Knight accentuates the personal emotion of the situation in one of the most poignant moments of the documentary: "It's a mess man. Seen a lot of dead people floating. My buddy was over the gate around the corner. He swolled up this big, man. His name was Eddie." The viewer can no longer regard the bodies as nameless victims. Lee's strategy in this scene

reflects one of the most effective tools available to environmental justice movements: "moral force and capacity for moral outrage" (Harvey 387). The inclusion of a named dead body adds a powerful emotional force to the film. Harvey elaborates on the "symbolic politics and powerful media icons" that environmental justice movements rely on:

Doing battle with the lack of self-respect that comes from 'being associated with trash' lends a very emotive symbolic angle to the [environmental justice] discourse and highlights the racial and discriminatory aspects to the problem. This ultimately pushes discussion far beyond the scientific evidence on, for example, health effects, cost-benefit schedules or 'parts per billion' to the thorny, volatile, and morally charged terrain of symbolic violence, 'cultural imperialism' and personalized revolt against the association of 'pollution' in its symbolic sense of defilement and degradation with dangerous social disorder and supposed racial impurities of certain groups in the population.

(Harvey 387)

Lee's documentary challenges the narrative produced by the media that emphasized looting, violence, and a lack of control in the city. Lee shows residents' frustration about the conditions in the Convention Center and Super Dome and illustrates the anger many felt when they were referred to as "refugees" during coverage of the storm: "I'm a U.S. citizen. Did the storm blow away our citizenship too? I thought that was people who don't have countries." The emotional appeals reflect the "symbolic politics" that comprise potent elements in environmental justice discourse.

The moral appeals for redress made by environmental justice differ from other environmental traditions that privilege technological and scientific expertise as evidence for responsibility and blame. Environmental justice considers scientific discourse, like all discourse,

as representing another way of viewing the world that can contain the same subjectivities that any ideology possesses. Byron Caminero-Santangelo argues that recognizing expert knowledge is influenced by social factors does not mean it is "false," but that all forms of knowledge must be understood as "never beyond the shaping influence of ideology" (229). Examples exist of scientific studies being ignored or manipulated, which help explain why environmental justice movements may view expert accounts with suspicion.

To illustrate reasons for skepticism toward institutions that produce and use scientific knowledge, Lee highlights studies that were conducted prior to Katrina but ignored. He represents a lack of immediate concern by those in power when a computer model exposes the problems a mandatory evacuation would cause. In the film, Calvin Mackie reveals that two years before Katrina, FEMA had funded a simulation called Hurricane PAM to determine what would happen if New Orleans were hit by a hurricane. Dr. Ivor Van Heerden, Director of Hurricane Public Research at the LSU Hurricane Center, explains what PAM discovered:

> Hurricane PAM came up with some very, very significant findings and unfortunately these seem to be ignored by many, many agencies as we move forward. One of the most significant was that we had identified through our own research that there were 127,000 people in New Orleans who didn't have access to motor vehicles. In addition, there were a large number of homeless and the disabled, so you were talking about a significant percentage of the population that couldn't evacuate. (*When the Levees Broke*)

Despite studies like PAM that predict a significant portion of the population would be unable to leave the city without assistance, a mandatory evacuation was ordered.[7] Lee presents the scenario for the evacuation through footage of national weather coverage and discussions with Mayor Ray

Nagin, Governor Kathleen Blanco, and head of the Hurricane Center, Max Mayfield. He also interviews Ninth Ward residents Tanya Harris, her mother Chirrie Harris, and her grandmother Josephine Butler. Residents of the Ninth Ward are predominantly African American, and Lee highlights how the mandatory evacuation places a disproportionate burden on this segment of the city's population.[8] Tanya Harris explains that her sister's van had broken down, and her sister did not want to leave because "evacuating can get kind of costly. And a lot of times we always just leave and nothing happens." Harris's narrative illustrates the economic considerations of evacuating, and the difficult decision many people faced. Lee highlights other aspects that would have prevented residents from leaving through images of people with walkers, carrying garbage bags or dragging suitcases with their belongings. Wendell Pierce, actor and resident of Pontchartrain Park, describes the scene: "There were lines of people going to the Superdome. They were holding them back saying this is a place of last resort so don't go yet." Lee shows that for many residents the place of last resort was their only viable option.

The reality that the order will disproportionately affect the poor, elderly, and disabled explains why some people become disillusioned with scientific findings that are used or ignored for the exploitation of others. Studies anticipated that a significant number of people would not be able to evacuate New Orleans without assistance yet contingency plans were not in place for the occurrence of a storm like Katrina. Lee frames the mandatory evacuation section of the documentary to emphasize how race and class contributed to people's inability to get out of the city, and the footage of people at the Super Dome and the Convention Center shows African Americans made up the overwhelming majority of residents who were unable to leave town.[9]

A strength of environmental justice movements rests in their ability to focus on what is morally correct compared to what is legally, scientifically, or pragmatically possible, and Harvey

explains that the foundation of the discourse in sacred and moral absolutes creates a homology among struggles (389). The moral force in their appeals allows different groups to use similar strategies and vocabularies but in ways that are culturally specific to their situations. Rhetorically, Lee appeals to national pride and citizens' rights to make his argument. He maintains focus on the local, contemporary demands of the situation: this is a New Orleans issue, a Louisiana issue, and a U.S. issue. His politics-of-place approach disrupts the typical disaster narrative where a country unites in the face of calamity and encourages the viewer to recognize the unjust effects the hurricane had on particular populations of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. In his assessment of environmental justice discourse, Harvey argues that in order for movements to *progress*, they must consider how to preserve their local, particular focus while simultaneously placing those concerns in a larger, global movement. Lee's film challenges Harvey's prioritization of the global because it represents an example where maintaining a local or national focus may be more strategically effective than linking the struggle to larger coalitions.

The remarkable task Lee undertakes and the convincing means by which he transforms the viewer into understanding a culturally-connected perspective on environmental issues demonstrate what the humanities can add to understandings of environmental crises. His project illustrates key characteristics of environmental justice discourse and challenges some theoretical assertions, like Harvey's, about the best methods available to movements struggling against injustices. Lee's activism and commitment to New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region cannot be questioned. He returned to the area five years after Katrina to make a follow-up documentary: *If God is Willing and da Creek Don't Rise* (2011). It even more explicitly acknowledges the social inequalities in the United States that are connected to environmental concerns. The film opens with the New Orleans Saints Super Bowl victory and revisits many familiar faces from *When the*

Levees Broke to measure the status of recovery efforts after Katrina. While visual progress has been made, many residents refute the idea that the football victory signals the return of the city. There are still too many residents who have not come home and too many areas that have not been able to rebuild. The most disheartening aspects of the documentary are the final two hours, which are devoted to the British Petroleum oil spill in the Gulf. Lee admits that once the disaster occurred he knew he had to include it in his updated project, and as evidenced by the oil spill, the recovery of southern Louisiana is far from complete. But the awareness and dialogue that activists like Lee can create reflect the crucial characteristics cultural productions possess to change the narratives of how we understand people, places, and the nonhuman world.

Notes

1. Ramachandra Guha explains that Martinez-Alier changed his name from Juan to Joan, which causes much confusion for bibliographers and graduate students (*How Much Should a Person Consume?* 29).

2. During the 1990s, scholars began to recognize environmental justice movements worldwide, but even recent scholarship, like Walker's, re-centers environmental justice and its vocabularies as U.S. phenomena. In his book, Walker includes a list of 37 countries where he argues the language of environmental justice has traveled from the United States across the globe. Walker's assertion that environmental justice framing emerged from the United States has been challenged by numerous scholars, like Ramachandra Guha, who have traced the history of environmentalism outside Western nations and indicate that similar movements for environmental and social justice were occurring simultaneously outside U.S. borders.

3. Lee's film illustrates the idea that climatic disturbances cannot be considered isolated events in a city or region that experiences ongoing crises like racial tension, chronic poverty, and ecological degradation. A strong correlation exists between residents' incomes and the elevations at which they live in New Orleans, which corresponds to John Hannigan's "strong version" of disaster as process. John McPhee explains this relationship:

Something like half of New Orleans in now below sea level—as much as fifteen feet. New Orleans, surrounded by levees, is emplaced between Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi like a broad shallow bowl. Nowhere is New Orleans higher than the river's natural bank. Underprivileged people live in the lower elevations, and always have. The rich—by the river—occupy the highest ground. In New Orleans, income and elevation can be correlated on a literally sliding scale. (59)

4. Witnessing represents an important aspect of environmental justice discourse. Witness accounts are stories from those who are most burdened by policies and practices implemented for the benefit of those with more power and privilege. Witnessing challenges the dominant narrative and makes moral appeals that often focus on health, quality of life, livelihood, and survival.

5. For additional reading on human attempts to control the Mississippi River, the destructive impact of the vanishing wetlands, and the risk of flooding associated with both of those topics, please see John McPhee's *The Control of Nature* (1989) and Mike Tidwell's *Bayou Farewell* (2003) and *Ravaging Tide* (2006).

6. In the film, Douglas Brinkley compares Louisiana to a colony from which the rest of the United States extracts resources and from which the revenue for those resources also leaves the state. In the book, *Ravaging Tide* (2006), Mike Tidwell emphasizes the economic importance of Louisiana to the rest of the United States: New Orleans handles more than a fifth of American imports and exports daily, the region produces more oil and natural gas than America imports each year from Saudi Arabia, a third of America's domestic seafood comes from coastal Louisiana, and New Orleans generates $5 billion in tourism revenue based on its unique cultural legacy (18-19).

7. The population of New Orleans in 2005 before Hurricane Katrina was less than 500,000, and by conservative estimates at least 25% of the population could not leave the city without assistance.

8. By some estimates, before Hurricane Katrina, approximately ninety-eight percent of the residents of the Ninth Ward were African American.

9. In *Come Hell or High Water*, Michael Eric Dyson points out that 63% of blacks blamed poverty for the slow rescue efforts during Katrina, while 21% of whites held that view. Lee's film aims to show viewers why black perspectives on the storm may differ from white perspectives.

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