White Apocalypse

Preparedness Pedagogies as Symbolic and Material Invocations of White Supremacy

JOHN PRESTON

Dirty Bombs, Alien Pandemics...

At the time of writing, the British government are waiting to drop an updated version of “Duck and Cover” or “Protect and Survive” through my door. Rather than nuclear war or terrorism, though, the current threat is influenza pandemic. “Swine flu” is the latest alien and racialized fear that we need to prepare for. In Western Europe the “fear” of pandemic in the media and in preparedness materials is transposed onto the “other.” The biology of the virus is transfused with geography. The threat comes from Mexico—like the racialized hookworm scare of the 1930s (Wray, 2006)—as if the ground itself were laced with disease. It might pick up more fatal avian strains in South East Asia. Western media obsesses on what happens if people die in Europe and North America. What happens if White people start to die? Of course, nothing dates more quickly than apocalypse, and the influenza pandemic of 2009 might join the long list of threats that governments have prepared us for (SARS, radiological “dirty bombs”—as opposed to Western “clean ones,” suicide bombers with “clean skins”—British and American rather than “foreign” nationals, and “natural” disasters that overwhelmingly kill the poor and people of color). However, despite these disparate (but unified by racial overtones) threats, preparedness in some form has been a consistent aspect of state policy.

It is a mistake to consider that the apex of Homeland Security and preparedness was that of the Bush administration (2001–2009), particularly after 9/11, which is figured by some as a break in historical continuity. The concept of “homeland security” (albeit expressed in other terms) has historically always been a feature of U.S. and UK state policy. Over time a number of circulating terms around the issue of preparedness in cases of emergency, disaster, or military attack on the civilian population have been used. “National Defense” (prior to WWII in the UK) emphasized the nation state and collective nationhood as the unit of defense. Although defense of the nation, rather than of individual civilians, appears to be central in this term, the citizen as embodiment of nation was paramount. That is, the personhood of (good) citizens was believed to embody “Britishness.”

The move beyond WWII to civil defense stressed the role of community and neighborhood in preparation for war. Pragmatically, this was due to an emphasis on regionalism and local
(feudal) governance of Britain in the event of a nuclear strike. In such an instance, the “Nation” would temporarily cease to exist as an administrative unit although a sense of nationality was to be reinforced through patriotic BBC broadcasts. Both national and civil defense in the UK were primarily concerned with preparation for war, but in some countries (such as the United States and Canada) civil defense became associated with preparation for other forms of disaster such as earthquakes or tornadoes (this was known as dual use). The specter of National Defense has been invoked by the advent of Homeland Security, where the semantic shift from “civil” to “national” invokes a sense of Volk nature summoning the hearth, the Homeland, quasi-spiritual frontier of American(ess).

Homeland Security is concerned with blood (relations of the home, relations of the family) and of the soil, fusing the visceral family with the national. Two circulating terms around homeland security are “resilience” (individuals, families, businesses, and state organizations possessing the strength and back up systems to survive attacks) and “preparedness” (which mainly applies to individuals and families) being ready for “surprise spectacles.” The term “preparedness” implies vigilance, planning, and anticipatory skills in dealing with a crisis. Note that resilience and preparedness only implicitly make reference to notions of the national or the civic; the emphasis is on atomized individuals or families. The terms used show a shifting emphasis on emergency planning from the nation to the family and the individual. This is part of individuation, certainly, but also shows an intertwining of the relationship between the individual and the nation state. In “National Defense” the individual is in the service of the nation and individuals are patterned on the survival of the state whereas in preparedness and resilience, the individual embodies the values of the state, with a covert form of nationalism in evidence. So, homeland security represents the way in which the nation can apportion itself as a function of individuals’ lives. Despite the differing national orientations of homeland security policies, there has been a globalization of the discourse of homeland security, particularly in majoritarian “White” nations.

A common feature of preparedness discourse is that disasters and emergencies are objectified as natural rather than social phenomena. However, disasters are continuous and contiguous to pre-disaster social relations and do not fracture social inequalities:

Previous definitions of “disaster” whether products of everyday thinking or of the “sociology of disaster” contained revealing and hence highly significant elements. To begin they construed disasters as something “sudden”: a break in the continuity of normal events. They proceeded from the premise that disasters (crises) were “events” which elicited social behaviour only in crisis situations. (Clausen, Conlon, Jager, & Metreveli, 1978, p. 61)

As a case in point, the genocidal policies of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and other state agencies leading up to and following Hurricane Katrina were not a significant departure from the history of racism in the United States, although this particular disaster, saturated with meaning, has exhaustively indicated the centrality of race in disaster planning and mitigation. As Ladson-Billings (2006) states, Katrina is like “…a song, an expression, or an image that gets stuck in our brains. As a consequence, we cannot stop singing it, saying it, or seeing it” (p. v). The symbolism of the disaster is, for Ladson-Billings, a repetitive but distressing melody that produces a range of intellectual responses and emotions. Katrina represents the latest transposition of a refrain of racism. As Ducre (2008) states, “I contend that Katrina does not mark a significant departure, as many have suggested. Rather Katrina should be examined as an elaboration on an ongoing theme, another significant note in the sordid history of Ameri-
can racism” (p. 65). For Ducre, the theme that is embellished is the racialization of geographical space.

Although it is tempting to see racism as continuously present, disasters may create resistances to previously existent social relations as well as opportunities for the reinforcement and retrenchment of relations such as White supremacy. The behavior of people of color in disasters is pathologized as aberrant and self-destructive in media accounts of disasters such as Hurricane Katrina. However, Wenger, Dykes, Sebok, and Neff (1975) consider a number of disaster “myths” such as panic flight, looting behavior, martial law, post-impact crime rates, evacuation, and disaster shock. They find that whereas there is no evidence to support these in practice both the general public and emergency planning professionals considered these behaviors to be truisms; “in other words, myths about natural disasters are widespread” (Wenger et al., 1975, p. 33). Emergency planning and preparedness thus represents a form of social science fiction in its production of new subjectivities and identities.

As I discuss in this chapter, emergency planning pedagogies play a central role in maintaining the myth of Whiteness even unto death. They prioritize White characterizations and privilege White normativity even to the extent of providing Whites with the “security” that (White) ethnic homogeneity will be respected after the crisis. In preparedness literature, “Blackness gets constructed as always oppositional to technologically driven chronicles of progress” (Nelson, 2002, p. 1), creating a “myth of black disingenuity with technology” (p. 6). Nelson (2002) further explains:

As Kali Tal has suggested, over a century’s worth of “sophisticated tools for the analysis of cyberculture” already existed in African American thought. These extant theories, Tal insists, provide political and theoretical precedents for articulating and understanding “multiple identities, fragmented personae and liminality”—most notably W.E.B. DuBois’s concept of double consciousness. (p. 3)

As I discuss below, preparedness pedagogies are White supremacist technologies; in pathologizing the reaction of people of color to disasters, we misrecognize the power relations implicit in preparedness.

**Preparedness Pedagogies and “Whiteness”**

Although educational spaces such as schools are currently less frequently used in preparedness activities, compared to 1950s campaigns such as “Duck and Cover” (where U.S. schoolchildren were instructed to duck under their desks on seeing the nuclear flash), there has been a pedagogical thickening of preparedness to include a spectrum of delivery methods. By preparedness pedagogies, I mean the various techniques through which citizens learn to be “prepared” for emergencies—including didactic/non-didactic techniques and formal/informal education channels. It might be expected that the ways in which preparedness is transmitted to citizens would be best expressed through information dissemination, advertising, or public relations models of transmission. However, rather than giving instructions (that are perhaps expected to be stored in case of a crisis), preparedness pedagogies aim not only to alter individuals’ cognitions concerning emergencies, but also their behaviors, the ways in which they make calculations of costs and benefits of following actions or not, their emotions, and their sense of personhood as a citizen. Various pedagogical devices are used to accomplish this. It is only rarely that preparedness pedagogies follow the form of direct instruction (“make your fallout room and refuge NOW”); rather, they make requests and provoke (“Are you prepared?”). For Davis (2007), the
dramatalurgical is key, and rehearsal and performance are used by the state. Families and communities are urged to practice preparedness plans, and re-enactments of terrorist attacks by emergency services emphasize readiness. Airport security plays a role in this process:

Movement for some involves blocking movement for others. (Ahmed 2007, p. 141)

Performance is not ephemeral but it enacts new types of citizenship. With its reliance on uniform, on dressing and undressing (being instructed to take one’s boots, shoes, belt off), of “staging areas” and of front and backstage airport security is one site of the performance of citizen identities where the state experiments with new regimes of rights within the existing citizenship regime. (Preston, 2009, p. 191)

Preparedness efforts rely on a mixture of pedagogies. The use of text-based instructions, memory aids, reconstruction activities, and information technologies are frequently part of the pedagogical mix that becomes part of a fused pedagogy of affect, behavior, and cognition. For example, “Duck and Cover” (FCDA, 1952), the much-cited kitsch answer to nuclear attack, spanned various modes of pedagogical articulation. As a cartoon/live action film, it gave both a gentle and positive message concerning survival and some (comical) examples of the kinds of behaviors that might be followed. This dramatalurgical device was carried forth into the classroom where Duck and Cover exercises were enacted. This was, in turn, reinforced through the Duck and Cover comic, which provided the use of strip cartoons for pedagogical effect. The use of the animated character Burt the turtle produced a comforting (and in its more recent consumption a discomforting and uncanny) Disneyfication of the Duck and Cover routines. The use of animation/comic strip/graphic novel devices is familiar in preparedness pedagogies. The surface reason for this is to provide a rapid means to digest complex information. There is also a latent, affective function at work. The use of cartoon may act to normalize the consequences of a disaster and to mitigate individual fears—cartoon characters do not get hurt in the same way as visceral bodies.

In other work (Preston, 2007, 2008, 2009), I have questioned the neutrality of preparedness pedagogies using critical Whiteness studies as an entry point for this critique. I do not consider Whiteness to be a racial category in a biological sense. Rather, I use it as a political category or racial formation (Omi & Winant, 1994). That is, those people who are designated “White” not only experience White privilege (McIntosh, 1997) but also benefit from a system of White supremacy that secures their privilege at the expense of people of color (Leonardo, 2005). In the context of preparedness pedagogies, “so called” Whites are shown greater survival possibilities in materials that use White people as the “normative” category, pathologize and constrain the actions of people of color, and consolidate White privilege and racial homogeneity.

First, in a number of preparedness materials, the re-referencing of earlier materials in devising preparedness pedagogies means that the same White practices, images, and routines are repeated across time and geographical regions. In planning against nuclear war, for example, the use of the analog White nuclear family resurfaces repeatedly. The analog refers to a discrete image, which in its creation is not implicitly modified (Derrida, 2002, pp. 154–155). Referring to CRT (Critical Race Theory) critiques of the White body as “normalized” (Pugliese, 2005), “the (white) analog of the pathology images is described by its (black) outline and also defined against it” (Preston, 2008, p. 477). Analog images used in preparedness materials of White, heteronormative families normalize them as the objects of survival. The preponderance of the analog implies that deviations from this in preparedness materials are read as illusions or “phantasmagoria” (Derrida, 2002, p. 151). Hence the multicultural images later used in preparedness documentation are read as the exception to what we read (falsely) as authentic (White) images.
of survival. The White analog resurfaces continually in civil defense materials from the animated cartoon Target You (FCDA, 1953), in the booklet and film Protect and Survive (HMSO, 1976) (see Figure 56.1), in the FEMA (1985) film Protection in the Nuclear Age, and most recently in the emergency planning booklets currently produced by the Department for Homeland Security (DHS). Little is known concerning why these analog design choices are made, but Zucker- man (1984) considers that FEMA designers made this choice so that the images did not become dated—“stick figures don’t get obsolete as fashion changes” (p. 101). Hence, White normativity is made eternal in preparedness pedagogies. Moreover, the White analog is heteronormative. (Literally) nuclear families are presented as the normative survival group, and White children are frequently used as the referent in terms of who should be protected.

Second, preparedness materials racialize and re-code geographical space and transpose geographical areas of disaster onto bodies through a process I call “pathogenization,” whereby a particular pathogen or disaster is coded by racist discourse and practice onto a particular minoritized group. For example, Orientalism is invoked in threats from “the East” in terms of SARS or Avian flu, or from Africa in terms of Ebola, and from the developing world more generally in terms of environmental degradation. Most recently, pandemic flu has been associated with Mexican poverty and unclean farming practices. Preparedness materials are part of the pathogenization process, as they both locate the “other” from where pathogens or environmental damage result and define who is to be protected in terms of their Whiteness. With reference to the literature on evacuation practices, there is constant reference to racialized “others” as a threat to Whiteness. For example, with regard to evacuation following nuclear attack, in both the UK and the U.S., people of color were considered to be a threat to Whiteness:

Those trekking from inner, west and north-west London would include a large proportion of the ethnic population of London. The racial tensions within London and beyond could become very apparent. Local resistance to the occupation of deserted housing or facilities in the less densely populated outer suburbs would occur as the exclusion processes normally operating in the housing market broke down. (Clarke, 1986, p. 233, quoted in Preston, 2007, p. 149)

In addition, a 1980 study by FEMA on the evacuation of New York stated that “a half million Hispanic and African-American Bronx citizens moving into rural Ulster County might not be welcome and ‘might experience special problems’” (Garrison, 2006, p. 163). Moreover these “special problems” might require “special solutions.” Louis Guiffrida, FEMA director under Ronald Reagan “laid out a detailed plan to allow military units to control dissent through the detention of blacks in large-scale confinement camps similar to those devised to contain Japanese-Americans during World War II” (Garrison, 2006, p. 162, quoted in Preston, 2007, p. 150).

Fears of “contamination” of White communities and the normativity of Whiteness with regard to these threats can also be found in more recent documents. For example, in the below
quote, minority ethnic groups are coded both as a threat and as a burden (requiring special protection) by emergency planners in London:

20. COMMUNITY COHESION

20.1 Segregation of evacuees on racial ethnic and religious grounds is not recommended. In extreme circumstances it may be necessary to provide protection to some communities within the evacuation shelters or if necessary alternative arrangements may be required after the initial stages. In instances where it is believed that terrorist activity from extremist minority ethnic groups has been the cause of the mass evacuation chief constables and local authorities should liaise to discuss how to deal with these issues. Community mediators who have influence and authority might be used to establish dialogue and reduce tension. (Government Office for London, 2008, p. 24)

Third, White supremacy supports preparedness pedagogies through valorizing White practices of response and evacuation. “Disasters don’t discriminate” is a slogan used by many homeland security agencies (including EUR-OPA, the council of Europe major hazards agreement website). Such a statement speaks to a supposed White audience, perhaps an audience privileged in other aspects of their lives. A simple, alternative reading would be “don’t expect your privilege to save you.” Unlike in other aspects of your (White) life, the disaster would not accept a cookie from the invisible knapsack of Whiteness in exchange for improved life chances. However, racial discrimination is apparent in disaster. In the case of Hurricane Katrina, a systematic and genocidal system of neglect operated against people of color. Marable (2008) considers a number of practices that secured White supremacy. For example, FEMA director Michael Brown ordered emergency vehicles and personnel not to be sent into the area unless local or state officials explicitly requested them. But, due to no working communication systems, there was no way these could be ordered. All FEMA phone lines were busy or disconnected, and proposals to send 500 airboats to aid rescue efforts were blocked by FEMA. As a result, thousands of evacuees had to live in the Superdome with no running water, food, electricity, toilets, or medical help. Hence, White practices of survival, emphasized in preparedness materials, are substantiated through the material force of the state and even limited examples of interest convergence (Bell, 1980)—where “white elites will tolerate or encourage racial advances for blacks only when such advances also promote white self interest” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, p. xvii)—are difficult to come by in the history of civil defense. Preparedness materials create a myth of racial neutrality while increasing racial inequalities.

Afrofuturism: Thinking Through the Apocalyptic

Afrofuturist thought can be used to disturb the normativity of Whiteness in preparedness pedagogies. In Critical Race Theory storytelling and in social science fiction from the African Diaspora, the motif of disaster is used to disturb, rather than to reinforce, race as an eternal construct. In Bell’s (1992) short story “The Space Traders,” included as chapter nine of his book Faces at the Bottom of the Well, the normativity of Whiteness is disturbed by revealing the poverty of multicultural liberalism given the chance to make a “trade” of African Americans. This work follows in the tradition of DuBois’ (1999) The Comet, which Bell himself has quoted. In these writings, disaster is used to highlight social tourniquets that cut across White supremacist societies. This is diametrically opposed to Eurocentric writing, which considers the finality (rather than the narrative possibility) of the post-apocalyptic. For example, Derrida (2007) characterizes the (nuclear) apocalyptic as the end of symbolic capacity:
If, according to a structuring fable or hypothesis, nuclear war is equivalent to the total destruction of the archive, if not of the human habitat, it becomes the absolute referent, the horizon and the condition of all the others. The only real referent is thus of the scope of an absolute nuclear catastrophe that would destroy the entire archive and all symbolic capacity. (pp. 402–403)

In contrast to Derrida’s (surprisingly) definitive statement on the apocalyptic, Afrofuturism presents an alternative view on the “end.” Afrofuturism counterposes the African experience (or the African American experience, or Black experience, depending on the author) with futurism, not necessarily as in the art movement (but with a similar concern with how the human is redefined—not always positively—with and against technological change [Nelson, 2002, p. 2], and certainly not in a manner that fetishizes conceptions that are trans- or post-human), but with a concern for the future possibilities of this experience given techutopianism or dystopianism. Afrofuturism counterposes “African American voices” with “other stories about culture, technology and things to come” (Nelson, 2002, p. 9). For me, there are clear relationships between Afrofuturism and modalities of storytelling used in Critical Race Theory, particularly those which imagine techdystopian or techutopian futures of African experience and techutopian or techdystopian accounts of an African past (see Bell’s 1992 anthology for The Space Traders, a techdystopian account, and The Black Atlantic, a techutopian one). There is a limited academic literature on Afrofuturism, although there are many accounts that refer to Afrofuturism in art, movies, and music.

One of the first proponents, and perhaps the creator of this movement, was Herman Poole “Sonny” Blount, also known as Le Sony’r Ra and more popularly known as Sun Ra. Sun Ra (1914–1993) was band leader of the avant garde jazz group the Arkestra. Sun Ra was also polymath, futurologist, and historian and (simultaneously) Black separatist and critic of “Blacks.” Like Bell and Du Bois, Sun Ra used speculative fiction to critique White supremacy: “Ra’s alignment of the notion of African-American alienation with a utopian vision of interplanetary transplantation qualifies himself as a visionary proponent of Afro-Futurism” (Corbett, 2007, p. 5). Sun Ra’s writings and music (such as “Nuclear War,” 1982) also explored themes of alienation, elimination, the apocalyptic, and the transcendent. In reference to the film Logan’s Run, Sun Ra stated:

I went to see, I went to see Logan’s Run, right? They had a movie of the future called Logan’s Run? There ain’t no niggers in it! I said, “Well white folks ain’t planning for us to be here!” (quoted in Ligon, 2007, p. 12)

To put this quote in context, the dystopian film Logan’s Run (David & Anderson, 1976) postulates a future society in which people over the age of 30 are eliminated to prevent overpopulation. Sun Ra’s comment reflects on the nature of the film (which explores issues of eugenics and human viability) in that the presumption of Logan’s Run is that the “horror” of eliminating (White people) over 30 masks a deeper eugenic message that Blackness has already been eliminated. Similarly, Cooper (1995) and Sharp (2007) use the work of Langston Hughes, particularly his poems and his Simple Stories, which featured a character called “Simple” (Hughes, 1981), to foreground the “Whiteness” of the apocalyptic. Cooper explores how Hughes uses Simple to recount that the atomic bomb is really for the protection of Whites. Simple states that “…the atom belongs to white folks” (Hughes, 1957, p. 83, quoted in Cooper, 1995, p. 84) and that “…my government would use one of them bombs in Mississippi” (Hughes, 1965, pp. 98–102, cited in Cooper, 1995, p. 85). Hughes also imagines the reversal of racial power that would occur if Simple became a form of human atomic bomb in the guise of a giant: “I would be the coolest,
craziest, maddest, baddest giant in the universe. I would sneeze—and blow the Ku Klux Klan plumb out of Dixie. I would clap my hands—and mash Jim Crow like a mosquito” (Hughes, 1965, pp. 26–27, cited in Cooper, 1995, p. 85). Here, the “bomb” in the embodiment of the gigantic Simple becomes an instrument against White supremacy in its most militant and segregationist form. Simple would use his power to fight within the boundaries of the United States rather than against racialized others.

Indeed, the suspicion that the U.S. government would use nuclear weapons against its own population was literally found to be a fear of African Americans in terms of the eugenic purposes of preparedness pedagogies. In 1954, a civil defense exercise called Operation Scat took place in Mobile, Alabama, which has been recounted in many narratives on nuclear civil defense. Operation Scat was designed to test the efficacy of an early version of Crisis Relocation Planning (CRP), under which citizens were required to evacuate the city in order to escape the worst effects of an atomic explosion. The efficacy of CRP was disputed for several reasons, including logistics and the danger of triggering a premature first strike by the enemy. Operation Scat was an object of sociological study conducted by social scientists from the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) to observe the response of Alabama citizens. As in Hurricane Katrina, African Americans were pathologized by the NAS for being unable to follow emergency planning instructions:

According to the NAS report on Scat, low participation rates among black citizens had more to do with local conditions in Mobile than with any inherent black apathy or inability to follow evacuation orders. Observers first postulated that ‘because of economic factors and education (blacks) are not reached by the usual communication media.’ (McEnaney, 2000, p. 138, emphasis in the original NAS report)

NAS researchers also “noted a high rate of black illiteracy and a low rate of ownership of black radios and televisions” (McEnaney, 2000, p. 138). The NAS therefore considered that economic factors were responsible for what they called a “communications breakdown” (quoted in McEnaney, p. 138). I would not necessarily wish to downplay economic factors alone, but it is necessary to understand the centrality of racism to the evacuation. One result of this breakdown that the NAS report on was the spreading of a rumor that “many African Americans thought the purpose of Scat was to bomb Mobile, ‘killing off most of the Negroes so that they wouldn’t have to go through with school de-segregation’” (McEnaney, p. 138). This “rumor” represents not naivety but double consciousness of the true intent of Whites in protecting their own interests through the apocalyptic.

Notes

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References


