

**The
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**'Castaways' Above the Fold
by Bernestine Singley
Guest Commentator**

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Ms. Singley wrote this article as a letter to the Dallas Morning News.

I grew up without TV – the stupid box, my mother called it. Not only didn't we own one, my sister and I were forbidden to watch it, anywhere, ever. Consequently, I survived life in the US for more than half a century suffering from a serious affliction: I am televisually impaired.

Can't stand to hear it; can't bear to watch it; don't even want to hear about it. So I have always been a reader and a writer, eventually becoming a professional who used words, one way or another, to earn a living. Words are my life.

Call it bizarre, then, that I have been sleeping with the media for around twenty years. That's because my husband is a TV news reporter. For two decades, I've watched him race towards disasters others are fleeing.

Over time, my TV–barren past and our TV–flooded present have combined to create a life where this thread of madness registers as normal. Where the spectacularly unusual is business as usual. Where death and destruction are our bread and butter. Immersed so, madness has become our shield against madness.

Until Katrina, the apocalypse that has left me word–ragged, unable to articulate the depths of my rage. Until today when Gracie, our dog, raced inside with the morning paper.

I bent down to grab it and raised up in bobble–headed fury, triggered by a two–inch high headline, above the fold, in the Dallas Morning News:

"GULF COAST REGION AGAIN TAKES IN CASTAWAYS."

Castaways?

Beneath those assault words, a six–by–eight–inch full–color visual: a brown, round–faced, fearful toddler,

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clutching her mother who was watching her husband. The caption identified them as Rebecca, Crissy, and Rosendo Gonzalez.

Mother, father, and child. *Castaways*.

I stood motionless at the front door waiting for my stunned brain to kick back in.

How many people, including editors, would be responsible for that headline blaring its message above the fold? Who are they? What combination of age, ethnicity, gender, professional training, job experience, home training, life experience, worldview could create such breathtaking, arrogant, bigoted ignorance?

Refugees&evacuees&castaways. Whatever. A lawyer and author, it occurred to me that maybe I've become too picky and need a new life. Instead, I went to get the dictionary.

Bad move. *Castaway* in Webster's New Collegiate set me atremble anew: 1) *thrown away: REJECTED;* 2) *a. cast adrift or ashore as a survivor of a shipwreck; b. thrown out or left without friends or resources.*

The phone rang. I handed it to my husband. Instead of heading south to Hurricane Rita, he was being rerouted to a fiery conflagration still underway nearby.

Stumbling past my office, not fully awake, he was already diving into a hard day as it quickly unfolded. So I fell in behind him, waving the newspaper, lambasting the language of subjugation and domination as evidenced by the morning paper's unconscionable headlines, oblivious editors, and headline writers whose mindsets even now I cannot fathom.

He wasn't having it. He didn't see the problem.

He didn't see the problem? My brain slammed into a different gear and careened in a new direction, willing the insane to sanity. It didn't work.

Castaways? A wife with her husband and their child fleeing disaster. Trash? Garbage? Refuse? Washed up on a shore? Compliments of the Dallas Morning News.

Then, suddenly, I got it. Gilligan's Island! That had to be the genesis for this profound insult.

Of course. My husband, like the rest of our generation—except for my sister and me—grew up on the TV sit-com "Gilligan's Island," I reasoned. Seven white folks on a three-hour tour, a three-hour tour. Shipwrecked by a storm that left them stranded, they wandered a tropical island for three TV seasons.

Castaways. Of course.

Katrina&New Orleans&refugees&evacuees&castaways. Rita&Houston& Again?!

Decisions made over many years have created newsrooms' institutional structures that reinforce white supremacy. White supremacy blinds news staffs, making it possible for this photo and caption staring up from the page.

Decisions made in the last 24 hours are today's harsh evidence of a blindness that still lives, casually tagging as castaways *refuse* those who are not white. The shockingly offensive photo and legend are you indicting yourselves.

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Who at any level challenged the picture or the headline? In a city where people of color are the majority of the population what mainstream media has moronically termed majority–minority exactly how does this kind of photojournalism evolve?

Who in the chain of decision–making that led to the photo and headline on the page, acknowledges the chasm between the lip service Dallas only daily paper gives to ideals of racial justice and equality and the institutional structures it uses to preserve white privilege?

Where are the people of color you employ who are not only capable of, but are also willing to and who in fact *do* point these things out to you, routinely and without flinching?

You have an obligation to run stories about racial issues and occasionally you do. That, however, does not absolve you of doing the hard and constant work to get and keep your own race house in order. Rather, it raises your bar higher because you are, after all, the folks in the big glass house. The stones are stacked on your stoop.

Already the images are streaming of the elderly victims fleeing Hurricane Rita and who survived today's bus fatality on Highway 67. In tomorrow morning's headlines, I wonder: Who will they be?

The stupid box is not a life sentence. The key is in the words.

Lawyer and writer Bernestine Singley is editor of the critically acclaimed, award–winning anthology When Race Becomes Real: Black and White Writers Confront Their Personal Histories, (Chicago Review Press 2002). Her recently completed memoir, Bloodwork: My Life Among White Folks, is forthcoming. Visit her at www.BernestineSingley.com.

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