

The James Aronson Award for Social Justice Journalism
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**Post-Katrina Racism, Sexual Politics, Immigration Limbo,
Global Climate Change and “Cartooning with a Conscience”
Highlight 2009 James Aronson Awards for Social Justice Journalism**

Reporters investigating racist vigilantes after Hurricane Katrina, the deaths of undocumented immigrants in federal custody, sinking island nations, and sexual politics from Wall Street to Main Street will receive awards for “social justice journalism” next month.

The five journalists from national magazines, daily and alternative-weekly newspapers—including a “cartoonist with a conscience”—will be on hand to discuss their work at Hunter College on May 3.

The winners of the the 2009 James Aronson Awards For Social Justice Journalism are:

- A.C. Thompson of *ProPublica* for exposing ["Katrina's Hidden Race War."](#) in *The Nation*,
- JoAnn Wypijewski for a career distinguished by [original reporting](#) on the interweaving of social and sexual affairs,
- [Mother Jones Magazine for comprehensive](#), vivid coverage of climate change
- Nina Bernstein of *The New York Times* for [multi-faceted coverage of immigration issues](#).
- And Jen Sorensen's ["Slowpoke Comics."](#) for political satire and popular culture commentary.

They will be honored at a **ceremony open to the public at 6 p.m., Monday, May 3 in the Eighth-Floor Faculty Dining Room in the Hunter West Building**, 68th Street and Lexington Avenue. . Daily News columnist, Errol Louis, who is Hunter College's Jack Newfield Visiting Professor of Journalism for Spring 2010, will add comments on the state of social justice journalism.

The prizewinners were selected for journalistic excellence solidly oriented toward ideals of the common good.

A. C. Thompson's two-part investigation in *The Nation* revealed how white residents of New Orleans's Algiers Point neighborhood in the wake of Hurricane Katrina formed an ad hoc militia. As black residents fled the rising flood waters in search of help and refuge, many were shot, attacked or forced back into the storm.

At the time the two-part series appeared, none of these attacks and killings had ever been investigated. Conducting dozens of interviews with survivors, historians, eyewitnesses, firefighters, forensic pathologists and self-described vigilantes and poring over more than 800 autopsy reports, Thompson was able to document 11 shootings, including several possible murders. His reporting resulted in two grand jury investigations and critical reforms in the New Orleans Police Department.

Through in-depth features for *Harper's* and *Mother Jones* and in her column ["Carnal Knowledge"](#) in *The Nation*, **JoAnn Wypijewski** shreds the clichés that underlie standard media narratives.

A [piece on New York Governor Elliot Spitzer](#) challenges conventional wisdom by suggesting that he and his wife may actually have had the happy marriage they claimed they did and that the infamous prostitute, "Kristen," may have played an important role in maintaining it. Articulating a moral realism and nuance that journalistic discourse rarely permits itself, she writes, "sometimes you don't get from your husband or wife everything that you need. That [Spitzer] himself had scant generosity toward others who are drawn to the forbidden, need not compel us all to be prosecutors."

Wypijewski's strikingly original work follows rarely recognized interconnections between sex, religion, economics, power and freedom, and represents an important extension of a voice for interpretive journalism.

In "Climate Countdown," a special issue of *Mother Jones*, writers spanned the globe, weighing the present-day, human costs of the swiftly warming planet and analyzing obstacles to mitigation. Destinations included the Pacific island nation of Tuvalu, whose residents are the world's first climate refugees; a slice of Brazilian rainforest being used by General Motors to offset its SUV-sized carbon footprint while forcing local people to find somewhere else to live; Alaskan backcountry being flooded by early thaws and California's once-fertile Central Valley devolving into a 21st-century Dust Bowl. Coverage of the Copenhagen climate talks was enriched through cooperative reporting with eight other journalism organizations so that *Mother Jones* was able to field a staff of two dozen reporters, columnists and videographers. The magazine's special issue announces a significant ongoing commitment to expanded reporting on what is arguably the most far-reaching story of our era.

Nina Bernstein's ongoing coverage of immigration issues for the *New York Times* paints a complex picture of people drawn to the American dream and the intricacies of public policy governing their movements. Through her reporting we witness a Burmese refugee's first sight of snow and learn of a Senegalese boy, left from the age of 14 to fend for himself in New York. His lack of documents is only revealed when his skill in robotics helps to win his team an invitation to fly to a national contest in Atlanta.

At the same time, Bernstein, keeps a steady eye on the machinery of law-enforcement and due process. Tracking the patchwork of more than 500 county jails, profit-making prisons and federal detention centers housing half a million noncitizens, she reports that all too often they fail to work as they should. As her stories unfold, we see secrecy and lack of legal accountability shielding operations from independent oversight. Immigrants have no right to court-appointed lawyers. No central body is mandated to publicly track deaths in custody, nor is any independent inquiry required into such tests. The mentally ill receive scant understanding of the difficulties they face. In short, Nina Bernstein's thoroughgoing enterprise reporting brings the human and political dimensions of the immigration issue to life.

The work of cartoonist and illustrator **Jen Sorensen** is noteworthy among alternative weekly graphic artists for branching in two directions. Like many cartoonists, Sorensen satirizes the

contemporary political scene. She notes the ironies of Teabagger activists who despise big government but unquestioningly support the president as "unitary executive." She gives us a character in minute-man hat fuming that there will be hell to pay if "the government usurps my right to crushing medical bills!" Turning to the art of naming political programs ("Name That Plan!"), Sorensen points up a problem with the "public option"-- it "sounds like a restroom." Better to "go macho" with "TOUGHHCARE", promoted by a thug in camo pants and muscle shirt warning that "a strong America needs healthy people!"

But Sorensen also expands the usual pattern by using her strips to parody popular, especially digital, culture. She depicts grandparents of the future, reminiscing to their grandchildren over their Wikipedia page editing battles and the candid videos they posted on YouTube. When the grandchildren criticize them for wasting their lives staring at screens, the elders simply abandon the "virtual front porch" ("with grandkids") they had been viewing. In another strip, Sorensen envisions a time when nostalgic mobile telephone users carry phone booths on their backs so they can get that "soulful, landline feel" and folks slow life down with "TELEGRAM TWEETS" (e.g. a hand-delivered cable reading, "just captured urine sample from my dog STOP").

Grambs Aronson, the widow of James Aronson, [died on March 2 at age 94](#). She was an active member of the nominating committee and, [a masterful illustrator herself](#), suggested the creation of a "Cartooning with a Conscience Award." In honor of her invaluable contributions over the years, the award has been renamed the "Grambs Aronson Award for Cartooning with a Conscience."

The awards were announced on April 2 at Hunter College of the City University of New York, where they have been administered since 1990 by the Department of Film & Media Studies and an organizing committee of journalists, media professionals and activists.

For more information on the award, including a list of past winners, go to filmmedia.hunter.cuny.edu/aronson or contact Peter Parisi, coordinator (212-772-4949 or 914-231-6907; pparisi@hunter.cuny.edu).