

**Stories After the Storm: Narratives of Race and
Criminality in post-Katrina New Orleans**

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Stories After the Storm: Narratives of Race and Criminality in post-Katrina New Orleans

Hurricane Katrina, one of the deadliest natural disasters in recent American history, left more than wind damage, floodwater, and broken levees. As any large event, good or bad, it left behind many stories, especially the tales of those struggling to survive in the days after the hurricane before the government restored order in New Orleans. Certain narratives have survived time and are told again and again, regardless of their veracity. Other accounts have faded from the public discussion soon after being born. Speaking to my peers, it seems the longest-lived and best remembered tales of Katrina are ones of looting, crime, and lawlessness. They stuck in the minds of students who were eight or nine at the time of the disaster.

With the terrorist attacks in France and Lebanon in current events, it is very apparent that the race and culture of victims in the wake of disaster unfortunately affects general society's response to it, and the narratives that exist regarding the event. After Katrina, just as we see in the news in general, stories that told of black criminality were much more likely to garner attention and be retold than those African Americans who reached out to help their communities. To the contrary, whites were often represented as heroes or poor innocent victims. This disparity in coverage based on race led to differences in the responses to stories of hardship after Katrina.

The representation of blacks as criminals minimized the depth of the suffering that black victims of Katrina faced. For every resident in the news who took advantage of the disorder and lack of authority after the storm to commit crimes, there were many others, largely unseen, who were searching for lost family members, seeking shelter after their homes had been destroyed, struggling to meet their basic needs, or reaching out to help others in their community who had suffered losses. In fact, whole communities were lost and never rebuilt (New Orleans now has around 100,000 less residents than before the storm according to the 2010 Census and some

areas are still in shambles). In this essay, I contend that media coverage of the hurricane made it difficult for the American public to empathize with the black victims of Hurricane Katrina, and that both this lack of empathy and negative media coverage stem from ideas of black criminality.

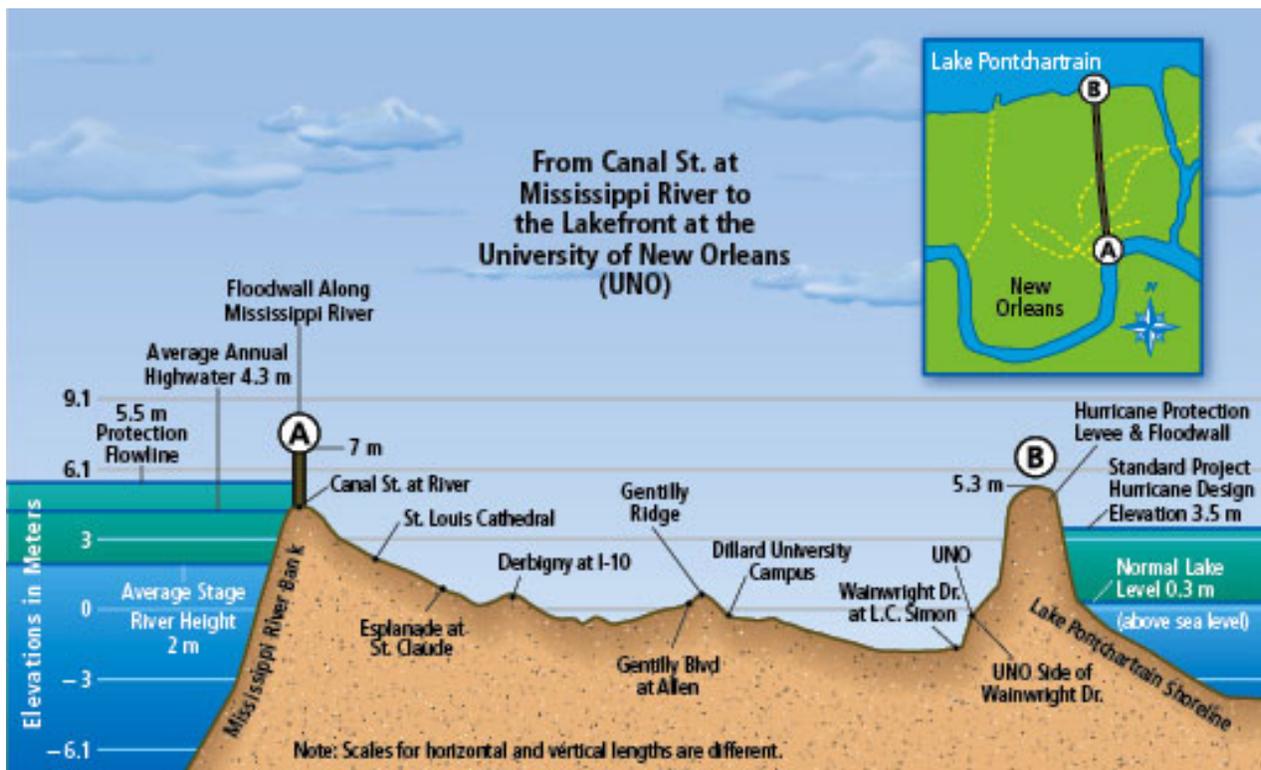
News bias is not unique to Hurricane Katrina. It exists in daily news stories of crime and punishment, in daily articles written about criminals and their backgrounds, and even in stories about black *victims* of crime. In the past few years, activists have grown increasingly critical of the portrayal of minorities in the news, where they do not have their humanity emphasized to the same extent as it is for Caucasians, or where minority individuals are even portrayed with negative biases. The response to Hurricane Katrina merely showcases that this occurs even in the response to a terrible natural disaster.

HURRICANE KATRINA AND THE CITY OF NEW ORLEANS

Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast of the United States early morning August 29, 2005. The Category 3 Hurricane brought sustained winds of 100-140 mph and caused immense damage, especially in New Orleans. The total destruction caused by the storm was estimated to be over \$200 billion worth in damages (Dolfman, Wasser, and Bergman, 2007).

New Orleans, the largest city in Louisiana, was home to about 485,000 people in the year before Katrina, 67% of them African American and around 28% Caucasian (New Orleans's Demographics, 2000). The city has one of the world's greatest international ports, which is a major contributor to the city's economy. New Orleans is also very culturally bright with its mix of French, Spanish, African American, and other American influences. Famous for its French Quarter and yearly Mardi Gras celebration, New Orleans is a popular tourist destination (Jackson, 2013).

“The City in a Bowl,” New Orleans lies 10 feet below sea level, and is constantly sinking farther in its silt, sand, and marshland foundation. Water has been pumped out to create new land for the city, and needs to be continuously pumped out to keep it dry. Walls called levees surround the city and are meant to keep the surrounding waters of Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi River out of the city. In 2005, New Orleans’s poorly designed levees were shorter and weaker than those in surrounding areas, not at all equipped to handle a strong hurricane. The outdated levee design came from 1985, 20 years before the hurricane. Though Katrina did not directly hit New Orleans, the winds caused a storm surge of up to 28 ft., overwhelming the levees and allowing water to pour into the city. The city’s water pumps failed, and the “City in a Bowl” became a city underwater. The resulting floods covered 80% of the city, killed around 1,600 people, and displaced another 200,000 (Brian and Lamb, 2015).



New Orleans: City in a Bowl

Prior to the storm, New Orleans officials were aware of the danger and warned people to evacuate. As the storm approached, about 1 million people were evacuated in Louisiana. However, up to 100,000 others in New Orleans lacked the means by which to evacuate. Over 20,000 people would take shelter in the Louisiana Superdome as a last resort.

In the days following the storm, conditions in the Superdome deteriorated as the electricity and plumbing failed in the storm-damaged building. Another 10,000 people would come to join those already taking shelter in the Superdome for a total of 30,000. Another 19,000 took shelter in the New Orleans Convention center, which had no food, water, or medical supplies, as it was not an official shelter. Outside the two shelters, many of the lower-lying areas of the cities laid in shambles. Families were separated, houses destroyed, and people were left without the shelter and supplies they needed to survive.

Meanwhile, the seemingly unprepared Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) took three days to respond and establish operations in New Orleans. Even then, their response was insufficient (Frontline, 2005). According to Chaudhuri, the federal government did not have enough information on the extent of the devastation caused in New Orleans and the search and rescue teams lacked strategy and organization in their response.

Many claimed that the government's slow response was due to issues of race while other's contended that the government was merely unprepared and had its focus elsewhere, such as on the War in Iraq. Regardless of the source of the government's sluggishness, the biased representation of the New Orleans's black population did not force the government's hand towards a more helpful approach. In fact, the media stories of crime and disorder worked to push the government to punish the survivors, rather than help.

Introduction to Narratives of Race and Criminality from Post-Katrina New Orleans

The images below, taken from two news articles written in 2005, have circulated online for more than 10 years¹. What is so striking about them that they keep returning?

[Image forthcoming. Please see <http://politicalhumor.about.com/library/images/blkatrinalooting.html>]

Looting versus Finding Food: Skin Tone and the Media

In the lower image, two white residents “wade through chest-deep water after *finding* bread and soda from a local grocery store.” In the top picture, a young black man “walks through chest deep flood water after *looting* a grocery store.” From the contrast of these nearly identical captions, it seems that only skin color makes the difference between *looting* and *finding* food. While the white couple gets food from “a local grocery store to survive,” when blacks do the same it is considered criminal activity.

This widely circulated image represents only one example out of the many instances where African Americans, especially poorer blacks who did not have the means to provide for themselves in the aftermath of the hurricane, were portrayed as criminals as they struggled to survive.² The media representation of post-Hurricane New Orleans was very representative of the United States discourse on race and criminality. Even in the wake of a natural disaster, race shaped the stories told after the storm.

When speaking of Katrina, news stories are more likely to tell stories with blacks as criminal and whites as heroes. The stories that are believed and spread are the ones that follow

¹ This image can be found in many places and many online discussions. Examples include:
<http://blogcritics.org/updated-katrina-the-media-looting-vs/>
<http://blogcritics.org/updated-katrina-the-media-looting-vs/>
<http://politicalhumor.about.com/library/images/blkatrinalooting.htm>
http://pt.educationforsocialjustice.org/file.php/1/The_Two-Photo_Controversy.pdf

² Another example comes from *Welcome to New Orleans*. A volunteer clinic was set up in a poor, black area that was receiving no assistance. Government officials showed up, not to help, but to attempt to shut the clinic down for operating without permission.

the nation's discourse on crime and this fact has played into real punishments for perpetrators of crime during Katrina.

The Media and the Criminalization of Blackness

Race. This seemingly innocuous, four-letter word describes a social construct that has touched nearly every life in some way. The tone of our skin, which is created by mere differences in melanin content, shapes the way others may treat us. Other's perceptions of our goals, intelligence, achievements, and failures, and the opportunities offered to us can all be affected by race.

For the last 60 years of American history, race has been a very touchy subject. Though biologists have discovered no biological basis for race among human beings, in America, and throughout much of the world, society still considers racial groups as distinct. Even official reports break down information by race. American demographics, crime rates, disease prevalence, and more are presented using statistics for each race. And these racial breakdowns extend beyond official papers and into residential areas or schools used primarily by members of only one race.

Barack Obama, first black president of the United States, sworn into office in January of 2009, is often heralded as a symbol of America's progress. Indeed, de jure segregation has been demolished, rights are promised to minorities and women, and marginalized groups have gained unprecedented access to opportunities. But, we are not there yet, despite some claims to "colorblindness" or "post-racialism." We still see certain tropes for different races perpetuated online, in books, and in general society. There is the archetypical intelligent, studious, and conscientious Asian, the hard-working, poor Hispanic, the uneducated or criminal black man, and the Caucasian, who is guaranteed individuality and forms the norm by which other races are

judged. These tropes mirror and are mirrored by real-life racial stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination.

This fact is becoming very apparent in the discussion of police shootings of unarmed black citizens, the response to the Black Lives Matter campaign, and recent debates on mass incarceration. The police killings of Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Gardner brought the discussion of black criminality and police brutality to the front of national debates. Activists contend that these men were targeted and killed because of their race, and that the law did not find their killers guilty of murder because of their skin tones. On the other side of the debate, people argue the police were justified in their use of deadly force because the men were resisting arrest and the officers felt threatened, so naturally reacted to protect their own lives.

Unprecedented access to information on the Internet, the ability to connect with billions, and the chance to hide behind online anonymity has allowed public discussions of race to actually include a large percentage of the public. Twitter pages such as #iftheygunnedmedown, #alivewhileblack, and #crimingwhilewhite, for example, found fault with the way news media sources portrayed victims of police shootings. They brought attention to the fact that many news sources, even “unbiased” ones, reported these stories along with photographs of the men who had been shot scowling, “making gang signs,” or doing something that would otherwise seem anti-social or threatening to general American society. References were made to past trouble-making or history with the law. These pages claim that these men would have never been represented in such a negative light if they were Caucasian, and perhaps would have never been stopped by the police in the first place if they were white.

Media bias exists and has profound effects on society. Studies show that the news is much more likely to report stories with African American perpetrators, and also portray black criminals much more negatively and less empathetically than white criminals (Shields et al). Thus black criminals are seen more often and shown in a less “human” way, leading to the assumption that blacks are somehow more criminal and dangerous. In fact, black men are often portrayed as less than human. Black criminals are often shown as being more resistant to pain, very large, and dangerously strong, as well as having almost bestial qualities. This depiction of blacks, especially black men, as animalistic criminals leeches them of their perceived humanity to the point where society loses the ability to empathize with them.

Darren Wilson’s recount of his encounter with Michael Brown highlights this perception in American society. Michael Brown, an 18-year old black teenager, was shot and killed by Officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014. Brown was unarmed. He was confronted by a police officer while walking with his friend, Dorian Johnson. According to Johnson, the officer shouted at them for walking in the street, and then drove so close to them that when the officer tried to open the door he hit them with it. The officer then allegedly grabbed Brown by the neck, threatened him with a gun, and then shot him. Johnson claimed Michael Brown ran once the policeman opened fire, and then turned and put his hands up. At this point, the officer continued to shoot, Johnson claimed, until Brown fell to the ground, dead (McLaughlin, 2014). However, police officer Darren Wilson remembers the event differently. He described Brown reaching for his gun through the car window, and in the subsequent fight, feeling “like a five year old hugging onto Hulk Hogan.” Considering that both men were the same height (6’4”) and that Officer Wilson was a trained police officer, this is an odd account.

Darren Wilson claimed the first bullets he shot through Michael Brown only enraged him to the point where his aggressive face looked “like a demon.” According to Wilson, after a few more shots Brown stopped running away and turned back toward the officer, grunting and snorting in anger. Then, Wilson claimed, Mike Brown charged at him, running through the shots he was firing, bulking through each one. This harkens to the images of black animalism and the strength and size associated with it. From this account, Brown seems like an angry, mindless, charging bull (Sherwell, 2014). Darren Wilson knew he was going to be interviewed so it can be expected that he prepared and used language he thought would be accepted positively by the majority of Americans. Whether or not Michael Brown acted aggressively toward the officer or not is irrelevant. Perceptions of black criminality and the resulting dehumanization blinded America to real human suffering. Some had no sympathy for a young man whose life was ended by an officer with little reason to stop him in the first place, seconds before backup arrived.

Ideas and images of the criminal black feed into police discrimination against African American individuals in general. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2015), black individuals, especially black males, were much more likely to be pulled over in a traffic stop, which was listed as the most common reason for contact with the police. Black drivers were three times more likely to be pulled over than white drivers and twice more likely than Hispanics (Traffic Stops, 2015). This racial bias is not isolated in policing, but exists throughout the whole justice system. It seems the police, media, and government structures may have racial ideas of criminality of which they may not be aware. When did the ideas of blackness and criminality become married in the American mind?

This question is explored in many works. Some look to the Jim Crow era in the early 20th century or to the 1970s when the War on Drugs began. However, other works postulate that the

seeds of the criminalization of African Americans and America's problem with racial incarceration were planted hundreds of years ago, far before the 20th century.

Khalil Muhammad, in *The Condemnation of Blackness* (2010), describes that the large-scale criminalization of blackness began during the late 1800s after emancipation, especially during the Progressive Era. He claims that white America sought to keep blacks as a labor source, so began to arrest them for minor or questionable infractions. This served a dual purpose. Not only did this make African Americans available for unpaid convict labor, but also it allowed white social scientists to "prove" hypotheses that African Americans were incapable of adjusting to being free members of society. When free, the scientists claimed, their inherently inferior and uncontrolled nature led them to commit crimes. Here began some of the tactics of racial criminalization that are still apparent today, including the use of statistics and numbers to present an "objective" and "un-biased" view that African Americans are more criminal and violent than other members of the population.

In *The Color Crime* (2008), Katheryn Russell-Brown agrees with Muhammad that the racialization of crime began long ago, but she argues that it stems from even farther back, from during the height of slavery. White slave masters were not highly punished for crimes against black slaves, and in fact could do nearly anything to them. Black slaves were highly punished for crimes against whites, often with whipping, mutilation, death, or being separated from their families. This began a system in which whether an action was considered a crime became a matter of the skin tone of the actor. This system only became more entrenched and discriminatory during the Jim Crow Era. Many black men were lynched by white mobs with dubious proof of their crimes, and the lynch mobs were hardly ever punished. Mobs could decide which actions by an African American constituted a crime, and commit a much worse crime

themselves as retribution without punishment. The legacy of this era is still apparent today in America's highly racial justice and incarceration system.

While discrimination in the justice system has clearly been an issue for many years, racial disparities have still been growing larger still in the last few decades. As of 2008, America had 2.3 million people incarcerated, over 20% of the world's incarcerated population in a country that is only 5% of the population (The Prison Crises, 2015). While these exorbitant rates of incarceration are debatably a problem for the whole nation, they affect minority individuals disproportionately. Not only are African Americans going to jail more, but they are much more likely to be viewed as suspicious and criminal, to be stopped by the police, or to have the police called on them. American blacks are incarcerated at nearly six times the rate as whites. Just as during the pre-Civil Rights Era, it seems that skin tone plays a role in determining what is a crime. The penalty for crack cocaine, used mostly by blacks is significantly (about 18 to 100 times) harsher than the punishment for being found with the more pure, powdered cocaine used mostly by whites (Fair Sentencing Act, 2011).

Michelle Alexander goes as far to call the current incarceration and justice system *The New Jim Crow* (2010), as her such-named book describes. She argues that after the civil rights and "colorblind" eras of the mid-1900s, it is now not socially or lawfully acceptable to disenfranchise, refuse to employ, or deny housing to someone on the basis of race. However, it is perfectly legal to deny employment on the basis of a criminal record or decide not to sell a home to a criminal. Felons are disenfranchised. Thus through racial incarceration, American society can impose a "New Jim Crow" on African Americans.

With these high rates of incarceration and black criminalization, one would think all of American society would be more willing to reform the prejudiced justice system. However,

Khalil Muhammad and others argue codification of language has led to the issue becoming a very difficult one to tackle.

Lopez-Haney describes the use of racial appeals in politics. He describes how racial imagery has become encoded to the point where many people are unaware of how they react to race. He claims politicians may use images of blacks as illiterate, lazy people who “steal” peoples’ tax money by taking advantage of welfare and food stamps to raise opposition against these programs (Haney, 2014). However, more whites are on food stamps and welfare than any other race (SNAP, 2015). Nonetheless, through racial appeals, politicians can convince the American public to act against their own best interest. In essence, politicians blow a “dog-whistle,” which only certain people react to, and of which even fewer are aware (Haney, 2014).

Insidiously, the codification of language allows racial appeals to seem like harmless statements, and makes those who make the explicit link to race in their criticisms seem like the “racist” ones. It seems we cannot directly tackle the legacy of the criminalization of blackness without complaints of the use of the “race card.” Without discussion these ideas perpetuate themselves, as they did in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

TALES OF POST-KATRINA NEW ORLEANS

After Katrina, New Orleans was in chaos. The very ill-prepared government and law enforcement were nearly unavailable during the crisis. A few policemen stayed behind, but had no chain of command and no proper form of communication (Greene, 2015). Some people began to resort to vigilante justice to protect what was theirs. Many citizens of the city participated in looting, some stealing the food, drinks, and medical supplies that they needed to survive, and others taking more than what they needed such as televisions and sportswear.

In the Superdome, people lived in unsanitary and crowded conditions. People struggled to survive with no supplies in the Louisiana Convention Center. Help took a long time to come to New Orleans, and when it did, it did not help all. During this time, rumors abounded as to what was occurring within the city, to the point where it was impossible to separate truth from myth.

There were horrible tales of lawlessness and violent crime within the Superdome and Convention Center. According to the *Houston Chronicle* (2005), Police Chief Eddie Compass reported rapes and beating happening within the Superdome. Mayor Nagin told Oprah Winfrey that there were dead bodies and hooligans going around killing and raping people. Other wild stories told of children with slit throats and corpses piling up in the Superdome basement (Roberts, 2005). Officials and news sources took up these accounts very readily, and they were disseminated to the rest of the American public as fact, even before their accuracy was determined. Nearly all tales of Superdome rapes and killings were later found to be false, and merely the result of fear spreading within the Superdome, but the national reaction to this story mirrored beliefs about black criminality in the majority black population of New Orleans. America was very ready to believe that bringing thousands of mostly African American refugees together allowed violent crime to run rampant in a population of “hooligans,” and the media fully supported these ideas.

Stories of violent, looting, black criminals taking over the Superdome and the streets of New Orleans spread through news media. In response to stories of a city out of control, government officials now had to appear competent and attempted to reassert control by “taking back the city” by force. State officials set up a temporary booking and detention center for the accused, even before other New Orleans businesses were back up and running. Police guarded stores from looters, even as the perishables inside rotted (Kaufman, 2006). Punishing a few

criminals and protecting store property took precedence over helping people trapped by floodwater and protecting lives. The majority black people of New Orleans were not being seen as victims, but primarily as criminals. Had the news and storytellers focused on those who needed help, rather than those who were taking advantage of the natural disaster, the government response would have been different. Officials would have felt pressured to help the suffering rather than punish the few criminals. However, the media's eagerness to share accounts of black criminality fed into the city's punitive response.

There were other stories of people shooting at the helicopters bringing medical supplies and military personnel to aid them and of police under fire. Those helping claimed they were under attack from residents and thus found it very hard to reach some areas. Many of these reports were proved to be unfounded. In fact, some of the reports of police and helicopters being shot at were the result of a police cover-up.

The book *Shots on the Bridge: Police Violence and Cover-Up in the Wake of Katrina* documents this police cover-up. It tells the account of two families who were crossing the Danziger Bridge the morning of the first Sunday after Hurricane Katrina. Earlier that day, there had been African American shooters on the bridge, and a 108 call (police officer's life in danger) was called in. Thus, when police officers happened upon the black family crossing the bridge, they opened fire, no commands issued and no questions asked, despite the fact that the family did not match the exact description of the earlier shooters. After the shooting, two men were left dead, one of them a teenager who had been visiting with his friends, and the others on the bridge were left seriously wounded or forever crippled by the incident.

The police soon realized they had made a grave mistake and initiated a cover up. The New Orleans Police Department framed three of their victims as shooters (two of whom they had

killed in shooting, the other who was injured and temporarily unable to speak). They made up fake witnesses who described the men shooting at the police and at a National Guard helicopter, and planted guns on the bridge (Greene, 2015). The cover up was luckily discovered, and ten years later, the case is still in court due to another appeal.

In this situation, the police acted out of fear of the black criminal and from previous stories they had heard of helicopters and police being shot at. The perception of a homogeneous African American led the officers to not even attempt to identify if the people walking across the bridge were armed or the same people seen by earlier officers. They did not even consider that the number of people on the bridge did not match the number of people who had been shooting earlier, or that this group contained women (initial description was of black men). They saw black individuals, assumed they were in danger, and opened fire. Had the shooters been Caucasian, more effort would have gone into identifying the victims before opening fire, as their skin color would not have been the primary criteria by which they were described.

Preexisting beliefs about black criminality worked with the media to make narratives of black residents shooting at the police and military personnel who were coming to aid them so believable to American society. It even helped a police cover up. Each of these stories portrayed the ungrateful and violent New Orleans residents illogically firing upon their heroes. These supposed tales of black on white crime became widespread and widely believed during the time of the storm. Even after the police were shown to have contrived some of these stories, it was a long road to justice for the victims of police violence. Even then, the police were still hailed by many supporters as heroes who should not have been punished for “doing their jobs.”

The case of the shooting on the bridge is the epitome of America’s inability to empathize with blacks or even see them as victims at all. Other police officers, as well as many who

supported the officers through social media, believed the officers deserved no punishment for killing two black men, one who was only seventeen, and the other who was mentally disabled, crippling four others for life, and trying to frame another and two others and send them to jail. These black families had been dehumanized to the point where they could be killed without reason and wrongfully accused and still have the perpetrators receive widespread backing. And, this is not the only case where the lives of black victims were viewed as insignificant.

According to *The Nation*, Algiers Point, a largely white community within the predominantly black region of Algiers, reacted to the lack of police presence by assembling a militia to protect themselves from “looters.” Residents were convinced that criminals would overtake the neighborhood, so blocked it off using trees and wood, and collected all the weapons they could (Thompson, 2008).

[Image forthcoming. Please see

http://img.huffingtonpost.com/asset/scalefit_630_noupscale/55e0a6cd1d00002f00146327.jpeg]

Looters Will Be Shot!

In the documentary, *Welcome to New Orleans* (2006), one resident of Algiers Point recalls patrolling the neighborhood with his guns. He proudly proclaims “It was great! It was like pheasant season in South Dakota!” He continues to say “We shot them. They were looters. In Algiers Point we take care of our own.” His neighbor nods in agreement with his statements.

According to the Nation, the men of Algiers Point patrolled the area looking for “looters,” or really anyone who “didn’t belong.” They shot at many people on sight and warned many African Americans to tell “their kind” not to venture there. It seemed that within the Algiers Point community, “looters” became a code word for anyone who was African American who entered the area. One black neighbor even recalls being threatened multiple times with guns

to leave his home (Lee, 2010). In a very racist and scary manner, the militiamen of Algiers' Point saw "black" as synonymous with "criminal" and "shoot on sight."

Reports of Algiers Point, which went against the national narrative of blacks as violent criminals and not victims, did not become well-known for months after Katrina. Some defended the militia's actions as people protecting their own property under Louisiana castle laws. Castle laws allow Louisianans to use all necessary force, even up to deadly force, to protect one's personal safety or property from offense. The force used had to be "reasonable and apparently necessary to prevent such offense" (McGaughy, 2013). This is obviously a very subjective criterion, and could easily lead to profiling.

Even though family members of some of the men admitted that the gun-toting militia of Algiers Point targeted anyone who was black, including black residents fleeing to a nearby National Guard Camp, the NRA and others defended these men's right to protect their property. Even still, only one of these men has been indicted, but was found too "physically incompetent" to continue the trial (Johnson, 2014). Meanwhile, looters were both immediately and retroactively punished. Often new sources did not differentiate between people who were taking food, medical supplies, and other necessities and those who came out of stores with computers, DVD players, and more. Looting was criminalized to the point where the police were told they could shoot looters and some police officers told residents that they could shoot any looters that they saw (Shankman et al). This meant that even residents who were getting necessities could be shot on sight, no questions asked, even if they intended to reimburse the stores from which they were stealing after the disaster ended. After the storm, the law found three people guilty of looting from Katrina and has sentenced them to 15 years in prison for stealing alcoholic beverages (Fox News, 2006).

It seems that stealing goods from stores (even to survive) was much more criminal in post-Katrina New Orleans than shooting black residents under questionable pretenses. Property took precedence over the lives of the poor and black residents of New Orleans. Through the lens of the news media, America “saw” that African American victims were much more likely to be criminal and violent without justification, and white residents were poor, individual victims of circumstance who resorted to violence to protect themselves, if necessary.

A Picture is Worth A Thousand Words

Images that circulated on Google and in the news played a role in undermining any possible empathy that the black New Orleans communities may have received. They supported prevalent narratives in a way that seemed certain to American society, since “pictures do not lie.” However, images also constitute a form of rhetoric, and the images spread after Katrina formed an argument against empathy.

Many photographs in the news showed residents, usually black, walking away from or in the general vicinity of stores holding items, suggesting that looting had just occurred.

[Image forthcoming. Please see <http://www.readingthepictures.org/files/bagnews/images/looters1-1.jpg>]

Whites however, were often represented with photos showing them among their damaged property, hugging their loved ones or looking desolate over the losses cause by Katrina.

Alternatively, they were often shown as heroes, rescuing children, pets, and the stranded. Many of these images were of whites rescuing the black residents of New Orleans.

10-Year-Old Boy Consoled by Neighbor³

[Image forthcoming. Please see <http://img2-2.timeinc.net/people/i/2005/features/magstories/050912/katrina.jpg>]

Rescue-Worker Saves Child

[Image forthcoming. Please see <http://img2.timeinc.net/people/i/2005/features/magstories/050919/katrina5.jpg>]

Perusing Google images, sympathetic photos of black residents tended to be of black children, or if adults were depicted, very large groups were shown. Images of white residents often showed individuals mourning and photos more mixed between adults and children.

Individual photos of Caucasians emphasized the humanity and suffering of those people.

Meanwhile group shots of African Americans made it difficult for individual faces to be derived from looking at the photos. Psychologically, people are much more ready to empathize with and act on individual stories than on the story of a larger group. Many people experience psychic numbing and become indifferent when presented with the story of a person's suffering as "one of many" (Slovic, 2007, p79). Thus photos in which each black face was just one out of a multitude made it difficult to find that one face, that individual story, with which people could empathize

³ Original Caption: *Ten-year-old Sam Miller is consoled by a neighbor after viewing the destruction of his home along Pascagoula*

and act on. While the media could sympathize with and promote empathy for African American children, because they were young, cute, and innocent, they could not do the same for older black residents, whose perceived goodness had been destroyed by criminality. Therefore, coverage and images made it hard for American society to feel the need to move on the behalf of New Orleans's adult black population.

Victims of Hurricane Katrina argue with National Guard Troops as They Try to Get on Buses headed to Houston on Sept 1, 2005

[Image forthcoming. Please see http://www.slate.com/content/dam/slate/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2015/08/150821_POL_Katrina-NatlGuard.jpg.CROP.promovarmediumlarge.jpg]

Conclusion

The media representation of Hurricane Katrina victims perpetuated ideas of black criminality and unruliness, and made it difficult to empathize with the majority black population of New Orleans. Images of blacks did not capture the same scenes of humanity and pain that they did for whites. The accounts of struggling African American families and individuals were often ignored in favor of tales of looting, rape, and murder. Perpetrators of crimes against African Americans during this time were thus seen as doing what was necessary to protect themselves, and were given leniency in the Katrina pandemonium. Stereotypes of African Americans as uneducated, poor, criminals dehumanized blacks to the point where they could be blamed for trying to survive, and their persecutors could be easily forgiven.

News coverage and response to Katrina clearly indicates how ideas and stereotypes can feed into real-world suffering and lack of empathy. In order to achieve a society in which all Americans can identify with one another, racial tropes, ideas, and presentations must be debunked and thrown out. And one way to start shifting paradigms is with the media. While

media can be used to both support and disseminate biased and colored images, it also has great power to affect change. Though social media was not as ubiquitous during Hurricane Katrina, the positive changes that have been made to the coverage of the natural disaster and the representation of black victims on the television today show the positive power of social media sources and online activism. By changing media stories, we can break out of the feedback loop where society's response to media stories works to reinforce them.

Perhaps, one day in the future, news media and social media will work together to discredit ideas of black criminality, thus changing the rates with which African Americans are stopped and arrested, and convincing all to work together to rebuild the justice system. Until then, we need to remember the power of the stories after the storm, and attempt to shape the narrative of the future.

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Even as New Orleans has displayed remarkable resilience, the cultural and racial composition has shifted dramatically, and disparities, from incarceration rates to health care access, abound. Poor black families trickling back post-Katrina struggled to find some semblance of their former lives amid the rubble.Â And through the psychological and emotional storms that continued to rage post-Katrina, black New Orleanians were faced with an already dysfunctional public school system thrust into complete and utter chaos. Children were losing education hours as families struggled just to survive, and the upheaval paved the way for the takeover of the widely touted Recovery School District that today is being heralded across the nation as a model of reform.