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# Race and the Media in Natural Disasters: The Media's Portrayal of African Americans in the Galveston Storm of 1900 and in Hurricane Katrina

Melanie M. Gilbert  
melanieg@siu.edu

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RACE AND THE MEDIA IN NATURAL DISASTERS: THE MEDIA'S PORTRAYAL OF  
AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE GALVESTON STORM  
OF 1900 AND IN HURRICANE KATRINA

By

Melanie M. Gilbert

B.A. Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2010

A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
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Approved By:

Dr. Kay Carr

Graduate School

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

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On September 13, 1900 journalist Winifred Black left New York City and traveled to Galveston, Texas to assess the damage from the hurricane that had made landfall five days prior to her departure. Her assignment was to devise an article that would urge the American people to send aid to Galveston hurricane victims. Upon completion, the article would be circulated in major newspapers throughout the United States. She had no idea of the conditions in Galveston, and when she arrived in the city, she quickly realized that the devastation was far worse than she had expected.

Black composed a letter to the New York Journal during her stay in Galveston. In it, she described how difficult it was to enter the city due to the Martial Law that had been enacted by the police chief directly after the storm. She recalled meeting four men from various parts of the country who had gone to inspect the damage inflicted on their Galveston properties. Each of the four men had been sworn in as deputy sheriffs upon their entrance into the city. Black said this was necessary Martial Law procedure, and because “no human being who could not account for himself to the complete satisfaction of the officers in charge could hope to get through.”<sup>1</sup>

Black also discussed the recovery efforts in her letter. Throughout her stay, she spoke with twenty or so of the richest and most influential men in Galveston. All were representatives of the most important men in the city and each one served as a policeman during the relief work. These men were also the ones in charge of the clean up crews. Black noted that the men had a positive outlook on the reconstruction of the city. According to them, the clean up had gone relatively well thus far, except for the cases of pestilence. She reported, “The city is under Martial Law. A young man well known in the city shot and killed a Negro who was cutting the

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<sup>1</sup> Winifred Black, in *Through a Night of Horrors: Voices from the 1900 Galveston Storm*, ed. Casey Edward Greene and Shelly Henley Kelly (Texas A&M: University Press, 2000), 37.

ears from a dead woman's head to get her earrings out. The Negro lay in the street like a dead dog, and not even the members of his own race would give him the tribute of a kindly look.”<sup>2</sup>

This was just one of the many instances of crime issue that was reported.

In summation, she wrote that the citizens of Galveston were greatly organized and provided a lot of contribution in the removal of the wreckage from the city. However, she referred back to Martial Law and said that it was strictly enforced by the police chief due to the widespread accounts of crime. In her conclusion she noted, “The chief of police is very busy, and he knows his business. He does not care a thing who likes what he does or who doesn't like it. He is really the force behind this fine organization.”<sup>3</sup>

A colossal hurricane struck the coast of Galveston, Texas on September 8, 1900 that killed thousands of citizens and rendered many homeless. Accounts of that fateful day are best told by letters, memoirs, and oral histories that have been compiled over the last century. The letter of Winifred Black provides a descriptive report on the city's conditions a mere five days after the storm. Black's letter is a view on how a predominately white society handled the natural disaster and how the media chose to report it.

Like many other accounts, Black's was used as a plea for monetary contributions to aid the people in Galveston. Although her positive remarks on the recovery efforts were plentiful, they were equally matched by her negative accounts of looting. Her passage is partly devoted to this issue, and while she never directly stated it, Black implicitly expressed that African Americans were to blame for the pestilence. She praised the prominent citizens of Galveston for organizational and leadership roles in the wreckage recover. In other words, she referred to the affluent Galvestonians who, at that time, were whites. At the same time, her only mention of

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

African Americans was in reference to the robbery of a dead woman. This indirect racism was prevalent within the media sources that reported the Galveston storm. Black's letter is an accurate representation of the discrimination that plagued the news in 1900 and that does still today. Thus it is safe to argue that media representations of natural disasters have not changed much over the last century. And although the histories written on these environmental atrocities have improved in the past few decades, they too have failed to investigate the human agency within these events. What I mean to suggest is, that many of them have ignored the role that public figures and the media have played in the treatment of victims after major storms. That is to say that the media (through inaccurate reports) can intensify the affects of natural disasters on people affected by them. This was certainly the case during Galveston and again in 2005 with Hurricane Katrina.

In order to prove this, it is necessary to first examine human involvement within nature's wrath. Historians such as Patricia Bellis Bixel, Elizabeth Hayes Turner, and Ted Steinberg grapple with this issue in their research. Bixel and Turner contend that the 1900 storm was more than just a natural event; it was a cause for social and political change.<sup>4</sup> In *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America*, Ted Steinberg devotes an entire chapter to Katrina. The chapter argues that disasters can be exacerbated through political and economic means. These human agencies expose social and cultural factors that are associated with environmental catastrophes. He also says that New Orleans' susceptibility to environmental disasters, coupled with neoliberalism and a failed political agenda, subjected the citizens of New Orleans to the wrath of Katrina. In this case he is referring mainly to the African Americans who

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<sup>4</sup> Patricia Bellis Bixel and Elizabeth Hayes Turner, *Galveston and the 1900 Storm: Catastrophe and Catalyst*, (Austin, University of Texas, 2000).



were the “poor and dispossessed.”<sup>5</sup> Although Bixel, Turner, and Steinberg delve into the politics of disasters, they fall short of revealing both the experience of the victims of storms (and how they are treated and portrayed in the aftermath of such events).

It is no secret that the most heavily affected people in both the Galveston and Katrina hurricanes were African Americans. Particularly in the case of the Galveston hurricane, the African American experience is one that has been deeply overshadowed in most historical accounts on the issue. As historians have now turned more toward the studies of African Americans within society, they have tried to investigate their roles and responses during the aftermath of the Galveston storm and Hurricane Katrina. However, not enough has been done to reveal how they were portrayed by the national media and the government throughout the cleanup, or why city officials systematically restructured the town’s government to ensure that African Americans would not have political representation throughout the rebuilding of the city. Although Bixel and Turner discuss these issues in their book, they fail to draw a correlation between the role that the national media and the white citizens of Galveston played in the suffering of African Americans after the storm. Then one can see how a similar attitude among the national media affected the people of New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina.

While I would argue that Steinberg’s main assertion is well developed and is right on the mark, his case on Katrina would have been more solid had he conducted additional research on Galveston and then compared the two storms to reveal if progress has been made over the past century in reaction to major hurricanes. However, that was not the aim of Steinberg’s book, but it is goal of this paper. I will argue that over the past one hundred and five years there has been a substantial lack of progress made by the media to present accurate portrayals of people (mainly

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<sup>5</sup> Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 166.

African Americans) in the wake of natural disasters. In fact, it is my contention that the national media discriminates against minority victims in these situations. I say this because in both hurricanes, they reported images of unwilling criminals (again predominately African Americans) who did not assist in the relief efforts. This coverage was all over national newspapers, and (eventually) television channels and the internet. These misconstrued images of African Americans were presented by a racist media and society. I claim that, through these fictitious images, the media heightened the plight of African Americans in both the Galveston storm and Hurricane Katrina. Ultimately, I will prove through the use of photographs, survival memoirs, and books that African Americans did participate in the recovery efforts of Galveston and Katrina and were neither lazy nor unwilling to provide help.<sup>6</sup> But before I proceed with my argument, it is essential that Bixel, Turner, and Steinberg's works are looked at in detail. This is to ensure that one grasps an understanding on the degree to which humans can alter the affects of natural disasters.

With an estimated death toll of 10,000 to 12,000 people, the Galveston hurricane of 1900 was one of the worst natural disasters in the United States. In fact, until Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in 2005, it *was* the worst disaster in United States history.<sup>7</sup> For nearly a century historians have shown how this particular storm affected the country. More importantly, they have been concerned about conditions in the city that may have caused the hurricane to kill and render homeless so many people. In order to grasp a more thorough understanding of the environmental and social effects that result from natural disasters such as this, historians have focused mainly on two factors: politics, and race. It was the specifics of these two variables that

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<sup>6</sup> Although I use Hurricane Katrina as a case study in this paper, it is not my central focus. My goal is to prove that racism is prevalent in the media, as was especially the case in the Galveston storm. I simply use Hurricane Katrina to argue my point that this is still an issue when natural disasters occur today, and that African Americans are still subjected to the same discrimination.

<sup>7</sup> David G. McComb, *Galveston: A History* (Austin: University of Texas, 1986), 121-30.

caused so much suffering in Galveston and, not so coincidentally Katrina. An examination of the interplay of politics and race in 1900 Galveston can, in fact, be used as a template to explain the events of 2005 New Orleans.<sup>8</sup>

The impact of the Galveston hurricane has been debated by many historians. One of the best is by Patricia Bellis Bixel and Elizabeth Hayes Turner. In their book, *Galveston and the 1900 Storm: Catastrophe and Catalyst* (2000), Bixel and Turner discuss the geographic, political, and racial elements of the 1900 storm. They assert that the storm impacted the city as more than just a natural disaster. In fact, it was a catalyst that disrupted the social and political structures of the city.<sup>9</sup> Bixel and Turner argue that, even though Galveston's geographic location brought economic prosperity to the area, it also made it highly vulnerable to natural events such as hurricanes. They delve further into the matter by saying that the city was extremely prone to dangerous flooding because it was barely above the tide level. However, the two historians contend that the Galveston city officials were well aware of this and understood the threat of a large storm in the area. Because city officials did next to nothing to prepare for a major storm, when the 1900 hurricane hit Galveston, it caused a plethora of political and social consequences within the area.

The 1900 hurricane led to a vast transformation in city-wide politics. Bixel and Turner argue that, because the storm devastated nearly the entire city and left thousands of citizens dead, officials opted for a political agenda that would reconstruct Galveston and restore its position in the national economy. Bixel and Turner establish that, in the time of need, Galvestonians

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<sup>8</sup> Although I do not specifically address politics in my argument, it is necessary to discuss it in this instance because Bixel and Turner delve into the political angle in their book. Even though my argument centers on media portrayal, I feel that it is necessary to state now that the relief effort in Galveston was political. In other words, it was systemically set up and run by the prominent members of Galveston (white men only). Consequently, this affected the media portrayals of African Americans because only whites reported news on the disaster. For more information on politics in Galveston see, Patricia Bellis Bixel and Elizabeth Hayes Turner's, *Galveston and the 1900 Storm: Catastrophe and Catalyst*.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 166.

abandoned their democratic process.<sup>10</sup> The authors convey that, even though the disaster highlighted the efforts of women and endowed them with more political rights, African Americans suffered greatly from the new political changes. Policy makers, who were predominately white men, ensured that African Americans did not have proper representation after the storm. Bixel and Turner note that the lack of African American representation in the politics of the city made it nearly impossible for them to receive fair treatment during the aftermath. The unequal distribution of relief aid led to mass protests on behalf of the African American population in the city (many of which were professional African Americans including doctors and educators).<sup>11</sup> In addition to this, they point out that in fact African Americans played an enormous part in the disaster relief and that many were heroes throughout the process. Even though they were central figures in the storm's cleanup, they were portrayed by local media as looters and criminals. In response, African Americans retaliated and formed organizations that attempted to end white supremacy in the city. For this, Bixel and Turner are crucial to the study of race in the Galveston storm of 1900. Their central thesis is important to the study of race and politics in the 1900 storm, and it also reiterates my argument that African Americans were treated unfairly by a racist media and society.<sup>12</sup>

Bixel and Turner's historical account expresses how natural disasters affect not only the environmental landscape of a city, but also how they disrupt and change the political and social aspects of a local area. While many historians focus on the vast effects of hurricanes, Bixel and Turner are important figures because they provide a deeper analysis of the overall consequences that an event such as the Galveston storm can have on a particular city. As a result, they open the

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 166-170.

door for historians to investigate the ramifications of other similar disasters like the 2005 Hurricane Katrina.

Like Galveston, Hurricane Katrina devastated the city of New Orleans. With a death toll almost in near proportion to that of Galveston and with similar environmental repercussions, it is safe to assume that the storm of 1900 was an early analogy for Katrina. For years, scientists and historians argued that, if precautions were not taken to increase safety measures in New Orleans, a catastrophe similar to Galveston would occur. However, for economic and political reasons alike, next to nothing was done to decrease the susceptibility of the city to a natural disaster. This view is widely regarded and can be found in some of the most prominent historical debates on Hurricane Katrina. Recently, environmental historians have grappled about who and/or what is responsible for the loss of life in natural disasters. In order to fully understand the role that humans play in natural disasters it is important to look at another author in particular. Again, Ted Steinberg's point in, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disasters in America* is crucial to understand. Steinberg demonstrates that he is one of the most prominent environmental historians to study disasters, including Hurricane Katrina.

Steinberg does an effective job of looking at natural disasters and arguing that they are derived from predominately human actions rather than just the natural environment. It is imperative to note that Steinberg places the late nineteenth century (right before the Galveston storm) as the time when individuals began to place the blame for natural disasters on the environment. Before this time, they viewed natural disasters as the consequence of God. He presents this argument by saying that individuals interpreted events such as floods and earthquakes as signs of God's displeasure with the world. Therefore, God and nature were solely responsible for nature's wrath. However, Steinberg refutes this notion and provides a well

documented argument that it is people who were accountable for the effects of natural disasters.<sup>13</sup>

Steinberg's three part book reveals how humans play a larger role in disasters than natural forces. He even goes as far to say that events such as Hurricane Katrina can be accurately predicted due to the involvement of human beings in the development of the environmental landscape. Factors that are within the control of human beings such as the location of urban development, structures of homes and various political agendas are some of the main issues that increase death tolls and property damage in disasters. The most crucial chapter in his book is "The Drowning of America: Containing Calamity." This chapter drives home his notion that human choices, mainly political, are the true causes of environmental atrocities. Here, Steinberg illustrates his main contention by discussing the failure of the Bush administration before and after hurricane Katrina. As part of his 2003 political agenda, President Bush chose to defer money for the Southeast Louisiana Urban Flood Control Project to fund the war in Iraq. This political move switched the focus from natural disasters to war and placed the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) under the control of a man with very little disaster relief experience, Michael Brown.<sup>14</sup> This political move turned out to be detrimental for people stranded in the city by the hurricane. These political decisions, coupled with geographic factors such as the location of the lower wards, contributed to the mass devastation wrought by Katrina. Because Steinberg discusses the politics of natural disasters, his book is crucial to the understanding of the role that human beings play in these events. Thus, it will be easy to understand how the media exaggerated the condition of African Americans in the wake of both hurricanes.

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<sup>13</sup>Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America*, xvii-xxv.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 197-211.

In many ways, the national media was greatly responsible for the misrepresentation of the roles that African Americans played in the storm of 1900. Although Galveston was nearly cut off from the rest of the country for a short period of time, major newspapers from cities such as Chicago, Salt Lake City, San Francisco, Houston, and New York rushed to report the news of the most horrific natural disaster in United States history. Through national coverage, the media reported the images of African American pestilence that was taking over the city in the wake of the hurricane. This led to the establishment of Martial Law in the city (as was previously mentioned in Winifred Black's letter).<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, it enhanced segregation and led to the arrest and mistreatment of many African Americans as was seen in the national news reports.

Only days after the storm, newspaper headlines in Salt Lake City and New York read, "Over Score of Vandals Shot Dead in Galveston,"<sup>16</sup> "Famine and Pestilence Add to Horror,"<sup>17</sup> and "Horrors Increase in Stricken City."<sup>18</sup> The titles suggested that victims of the disaster had, in fact, made the situation worse by robbing the dead, stealing from abandoned stores, and causing anarchy throughout the city. However, only a few articles out of dozens mentioned vandalism by people of white decent and when they did, it was simply overshadowed by the reported black crimes. Instead, the media chose to call attention to cases specifically involving African Americans. According to the *The Salt Lake Herald*, Galveston citizens were committing horrendous crimes. Some cut appendages off of deceased corpses in order to acquire fine jewelry while others stole liquor from local stores, got heavily intoxicated, then performed acts of

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<sup>15</sup> Winifred Black, in *Through a Night of Horrors: Voices from the 1900 Galveston Storm*.

<sup>16</sup> "Over Score of Vandals Shot Dead in Galveston," *Salt Lake Herald*, September 12, 1900, 1, <http://www.loc.gov/rr/news/topics/galveston.html>.

<sup>17</sup> "Famine and Pestilence Add to Horror," *Evening World*, September 11, 1900, 2, <http://www.loc.gov/rr/news/topics/galveston.html>.

<sup>18</sup> "Horrors Increase in Stricken City: Galveston is Now Threatened with Pestilence," *New York Times*, September 13, 1900, 1, <http://www.proquest.com>.

vandalism.<sup>19</sup> This situation was very similar to the one that Winfred Black referred to in her letter on the 13<sup>th</sup> of September. In other words, it was common for whites to report this image in the news. In other papers, white reporters referred to African Americans as “ghouls” and, in every instance, said that they were responsible for the majority of the post-hurricane crimes. For example, the *Evening World* newspaper out of New York stated that over fifty cases of vandalism had been reported only four days after the storm. The reporter claimed that robbers “mutilated, desecrated, and held orgies” over the dead bodies. The newspaper determined that “the majority of these men were negroes.”<sup>20</sup> But were the accusations made by the media true? The answer is quite simple. Even though the media suggested that African Americans were too busy vandalizing to work, photographs taken after the storm showed that they carried out the worst jobs during the cleanup.

If it were not for pictures, there would be very little evidence to suggest that African Americans performed the most gruesome jobs in the wake of the 1900 storm. The photograph located in the middle of page twelve shows three black men removing a corpse from underneath a massive pile of debris, while a young white boy oversees their work. The older white gentleman on the right hand side of the picture is simply holding up the board so the black men can dig out the buried body. The second image depicts a similar situation. Although it is hard to tell from the photo, the two at the front of the stretcher are African Americans. Again, they are helping the city by clearing the streets of deceased bodies and keeping disease from ravaging the Galveston population. The Library of Congress website is full of pictures that prove African Americans were more than willing to lend a hand. Photos of black men clearing debris and burning bodies counter the media’s affirmation that they were only looters in the aftermath of the

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<sup>19</sup> “Over Score of Vandals Shot Dead in Galveston.”

<sup>20</sup> “Still Dumping Dead by Scores into Sea,” *Evening World*, September 12, 1900, 2, <http://www.loc.gov/rr/news/topics/galveston.html>.



Galveston storm. However, African American participation did not eliminate racism within Galveston society. This is apparent because, even though African Americans provided assistance, memoirs compiled by white Galvestonians refused to admit that this was so.

The feelings of many prominent Galvestonians can be heard through a series of survivor letters, memoirs, and oral histories in the book *Through a Night of Horrors: Voices from the 1900 Galveston Storm*.<sup>21</sup> This book, which was released in 2000 by Casey Edward Green and Shelly Henley Kelly, is a publication of thirty-three firsthand accounts by witnesses who lived through the disaster. Many of the letters in the book portrayed African Americans as vandals much in the same way that newspapers had done. Other survivors, who did not present a racist tone in their writing, still mentioned witnessing blacks shot and killed for inexcusable acts. Lloyd R.D. Fayling, the manager of a publishing (again media) syndicate and storm survivor, wrote a descriptive story of his experience of the storm. In his narrative, he described an attempt by several white men (himself included) to rescue fellow survivors by boat. His language suggests that he viewed himself as a hero and those he rescued expressed their deepest gratitude to him, all except for the blacks. He claimed that fifteen blacks attempted to overthrow his rescue boat and take it for themselves. In fact, he instituted his right under Martial Law and placed all of them under arrest for the night, writing “The Negroes made an attempt to take possession of the boat but I fortunately had a six-shooter and a Winchester handy, and put them under arrest at pistol point.”<sup>22</sup> He even goes as far to suggest that the African Americans were not interested in working at all. “We drove hundreds of Negroes at the bayonet point to assist in the work of

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<sup>21</sup> Casey Edward Greene & Shelly Henley Kelly. *Through a Night of Horrors: Voices from the 1900 Galveston Storm*. Texas A&M: University Press, 2000.

<sup>22</sup> Lloyd R.D. Fayling, in *Through a Night of Horrors: Voices from the 1900 Galveston Storm*, ed. Casey Edward Greene and Shelly Henley Kelly (Texas A&M: University Press, 2000), 80.

burning and loading the dead on barges for sea burial.”<sup>23</sup> This radical racism is evident not only in these passages, but also throughout his entire account.

A different survival account identifies “niggers” stealing from an open trunk that was found among the debris. The trunk’s components were sprawled all over the side walk and according to Louisa Hansen Rollfing, a group of “niggers passed by and each grabbed something before she could stop them.”<sup>24</sup> Although these stories only represent two opinions, nearly every narrative in the book depicted the same story of crime and laziness when African Americans were mentioned. The language, tone, and content of the letters suggested that deep racist emotions resided within white Galvestonians. And it is evident that this racism intensified after the stories of black pestilence were reported after the storm. However, it is imperative to mention that there were exceptions, and that not all white people in the city were exclusively racist. Clarence Ousley, Clara Barton, and Harry I. Maxson fall into this category.

Immediately following the storm, Clarence Ousley editor for the *Galveston Tribune*, published a 300 page book describing the history of the rise of Galveston. He also provided a detailed list of every school, church, and business that had been destroyed by the storm, followed by a prediction of what he envisioned for the future of the city after the cleanup. He was very optimistic about the recovery efforts on behalf of the citizens of Galveston and was utterly convinced that the city would rebuild to be greater than ever before. As a relatively affluent white member of society, it was easy for him to view the storm as simply a mild set back in the rise of a substantially commercialized port city. Like other white members of Galveston, he was not particularly concerned with the thousands of displaced citizens that had lost everything in the wake of the disaster. He merely saw the cleanup as an effort to rebuild the city as quickly as

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>24</sup> Louisa Hansen Rollfing, in *Through a Night of Horrors: Voices from the 1900 Galveston Storm*, ed. Casey Edward Greene and Shelly Henley Kelly (Texas A&M: University Press, 2000), 116.

possible and restore it to its place in the national economy.<sup>25</sup> And even though Ousley's book was a clear reflection of its time period (he paid little attention to minorities), he recognized African American contributions to the recovery effort, and found it necessary to mention their losses.

Throughout the book, Ousley claimed that there was no distinction of race at the time but the language in his book stated otherwise. Churches and schools were still segregated, so Ousley devoted an entire section of his book on congregations and separated it into categories labeled "churches" and "Negro churches." Even though he was sympathetic toward black people, he still insinuated in this section of the book that there was an apparent difference between what was normal and what was African American. He even referred to African Americans as "an interesting race so intensely religious and so patient and faithful."<sup>26</sup> However, Ousley recognized the fact that black people made some of the greatest contributions to the relief of the city. He noted that workers, who were mainly volunteers and of *all* classes, labored even though they were aware that financial awards were limited or not available at all.<sup>27</sup> The following selection is taken from an excerpt in Ousley's book. It is the account of a priest in Galveston in the aftermath of the storm. His incorporation of Father Kirwin's story showed that Ousley apprehended African American efforts in the cleanup, but it also proved that men like Father Kirwin expressed racism through their treatment of African Americans. His story is as follows:

Only after I made an extended examination of the city, continuing until late Sunday, did I begin to appreciate what had really happened to us. We will never be able to gather and bury all of these people. There is only one thing to do, and that is to put them on barges, take them out to sea and sink them in the gulf. It was decided that this course should be pursued. Bodies were collected from the streets

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<sup>25</sup> Clarence Ousley, *Galveston in Nineteen Hundred: The Authorized and Official Record of the Proud City of the Southwest as it was Before and After the Hurricane of September 8, and a Logical Forecast of its Future* (Atlanta: William C. Chase, 1900).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

and from places where they were partially uncovered. Some of our best men took the lead in this, to set the example. Monday night came. The barges were loaded. An armed guard brought up fifty negroes. The latter were driven on the barges, and the guard went with them. The barges were taken out into the gulf and remained there all night until it was light enough for the negroes to fasten the weights and throw the bodies overboard. When the barges returned those negroes were ashen in color.<sup>28</sup>

The story does show that Ousley was willing to report that African Americans participated in the hardest part of the recovery effort. Although Ousley understood the importance of African Americans to the city, he was not the only person that felt this way.

Red Cross President Clara Barton was another important figure that voiced concern for African Americans. In an address made by Barton on September 23, Barton announced that her main concern was for the homeless people of Galveston. Because the colored population was the majority of the homeless, Barton's statements showed that she was both well aware of the neglect of African Americans and was concerned for their welfare. She proved her devotion to the African American population throughout the storm by providing aid to them.<sup>29</sup> Harry I. Maxson, a wealthy citizen, was also sensitive toward black Galvestonians. In a memoir, Maxson recalled waiting out the storm with several other families in a neighbor's home. He described how a Negro man had held one of the doors through the night to ensure that everyone in the home was safe. He also told of how a woman trapped in a nearby home with her thirteen children cried out for help. Maxson heard these shouts, but could not rescue all fourteen individuals. He called out to several white men who stood nearby in the street, but they did not respond because they were "paralyzed with fear" at the destruction of the storm.<sup>30</sup> However, Maxson stated that "almost immediately a large Negro man appeared with a white baby and I thanked him loud

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>30</sup> Harry I. Maxson, in *Through a Night of Horrors: Voices from the 1900 Galveston Storm*, ed. Casey Edward Greene and Shelly Henley Kelly (Texas A&M: University Press, 2000), 133.

enough for all to hear and here they (referring to the white men) came.”<sup>31</sup> It was only after a black man acknowledged Maxson’s plea for help that the white men responded. Maxson’s story is yet another sympathetic account toward African Americans.

However, Ousley, Barton, and Maxson were not normal characterizations of Galveston society. In fact, they were among a few of the citizens that cared about African Americans to any extent. It is sufficient to say that the media, Fayling, and Rollfing were more accurate representations of the white population. Here, it is important to remember that the Civil War was a relatively recent event, and racial tensions were still present in every aspect of society. And even though emancipation was a result of the Civil War, I would argue that racism was still present in the media immediately following the Galveston storm. The same can be argued of today.

Essentially, nothing has changed since the Galveston storm of 1900. The media (and society for that matter) remains at fault for the suffering of African Americans during natural disasters. Even though they tried to hide it, racism was still there and could be seen in the national media coverage of Hurricane Katrina through a series of newspapers, and on the internet. Reports of severe vandalism plagued the national coverage of the hurricane in 2005 which made it harder for African Americans to cope with an already taxing situation.

After Katrina’s landfall, articles in major newspapers stated that New Orleans was in desperate need of assistance due to anarchy that faced the city. A *Chicago Tribune* headline stated, “A Desperate SOS’; New Orleans Mayor Pleads for Help from Washington as Rescuers, Survivors Face Gunfire, Anarchy.”<sup>32</sup> The account referred to the city as “lawless” and unsafe. It reported that evacuation efforts had been slowed by criminals in the city who had shot at several

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Martinez and Howard Witt, “‘A Desperate SOS’; New Orleans Mayor Pleads for Help from Washington as Rescuers, Survivors Face Gunfire, Anarchy;” *Chicago Tribune*, September 2, 2005, 1, <http://www.proquest.com>.

rescue helicopters. Later on, it mentioned several instances where the police chief had to enact special measures to deal with major crime in the city, and also inside evacuation shelters such as the Convention Center. The article referred to the violence by saying, “The police chief said refugees diverted to the Convention Center were being beaten and raped while angry mobs forced back the officers he sent in to try to stem the chaos.”<sup>33</sup> While the national media never explicitly stated that African Americans were to blame for the cases of pestilence, photographs surfaced on the internet that pictured black New Orleans’ citizens (who were the hardest hit population in the city) at the center of the crimes.

Hundreds of photographs such as the one at the left, can be found on the internet. In almost every case that involved looting, African Americans were seen taking items such as clothes, alcohol, and appliances from vacant stores. Out of dozens of pictures, only one showed a white male who had stolen items from an abandoned store.<sup>34</sup> The rest of the images were reflective of the two above where white citizens waited with guns, while African Americans looted stores. This kind of reporting was not only in photos and in newspapers, but it was also in one of the largest media sources on the internet, You Tube. You Tube is viewed by millions of people across the world. Anyone can post videos on the website, and everyone who has access to a computer with the internet can watch videos placed on the site. Hundreds of videos pertaining to Hurricane Katrina are available on You Tube, and it is one of the best showcases of racism in the media and in society.

Videos of national and local news coverage surfaced on You Tube after Hurricane Katrina. One of the accounts was titled, “WBRZ and WGNO Hurricane Katrina Coverage on

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> “Hurricane Katrina Looting,” *Google Images*, <http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&biw=1276&bih=635&gbv=2&tbm=isch&sa=1&q=Hurricane+Katrina+looting&aq=f&aqi=g10&aql=&oq=>.

Looting 2005.” The video was taken from a local ABC news reel. The news reel revealed a dozen or so shots of black men and women thrown out of abandoned stores by white policemen and National Guard officers. The panel of anchormen (two whites and one black male, and one white female) discussed the footage while they also commented on the severity looting in New Orleans. They stated that Martial Law was in effect in the city, but that this was necessary so that citizens could defend their property from vandals. The anchors went on to report that scenes such as these “always appear in the wake of natural disasters.”<sup>35</sup> The news video was just one of dozens that can be found on You Tube pertaining to African American crime in New Orleans.

Other videos like this flooded the internet shortly after the hurricane. Many of them were made up by ordinary You Tube members. What I mean is that, regular viewers of You Tube compiled images from New Orleans together with racial songs, to make videos. The short clips were then broadcasted on the site for anyone to view. One example of this is the “New Orleans Looter Video.” This clip combined the lyrics, “They blamed George Bush and they blamed the head of FEMA, because nobody came to get their sorry asses out” with photos of black vandals stealing from dilapidated buildings.<sup>36</sup> The song also said this about African Americans in New Orleans, “They shot helicopters; they stole things and raped women, all for attention on CNN. Yea they got no jobs and they got no money, but they are no better off than they were before the storm.”<sup>37</sup> This video has received 58,196 hits since it was posted on the site.<sup>38</sup> This goes to show how infatuated the American public was, and continues to be, with racist images in natural disasters.

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<sup>35</sup> “WBRZ and WGNO Hurricane Katrina Coverage on Looting 2005,” *You Tube*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4N26AYdDH3g>.

<sup>36</sup> “New Orleans Looter Video,” *You Tube*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jIVmjP8nmzY>.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

However, African Americans were not the only vandals in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and they were certainly a part of the relief efforts. There are images available on the internet that show white vandalism, but they are very rare.<sup>39</sup> Also, not all of the media discriminates against minorities. Several journalists raised awareness of racism against African Americans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. One article from the *New York Times* argued that the majority of Katrina's victims were left by the government to die because they were African American.<sup>40</sup> In a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center (a nonpartisan organization), two-thirds of African Americans said the government failed to react sooner because most of the victims were black, while "77 percent of whites disagreed."<sup>41</sup> While these reports shed light on racism, others contended that African Americans were just as much a part of the relief effort as white men and women. In a letter to the editor, one doctor wrote:

My experience as a doctor treating evacuees from New Orleans at the Dallas Convention Center did not confirm the general impression of masses of poor indigent people. I met many professionals, by and large African-American---teachers, hospital technicians, engineers, and midlevel administrators, as well as skilled tradesmen and even medical students. Many had good health and evidence of good health care.<sup>42</sup>

In many ways, the media was wrong about African Americans (with few exceptions like the ones above). And, through their racist reports, they made it hard for African Americans to cope with the impact of Hurricane Katrina.

To conclude, it is essential to recap the ways in which humans have responded to natural disasters. As insinuated throughout this paper, human beings have worsened the affects of environmental catastrophes on certain populations. In order to understand how this happens, it is important to examine the modes through which society exacerbates these situations. Bixel,

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<sup>39</sup> "Hurricane Katrina Looting," *Google Images*.

<sup>40</sup> John Broder, "Amid Criticism of Federal Efforts, Charges of Racism Are Lodged," *New York Times*, September 5, 2005, A9. <http://www.proquest.com>.

<sup>41</sup> Elisabeth Bumiller, "Gulf Coast Isn't the Only Thing Left in Tatters; Bush's Status with Blacks Takes a Hit," *New York Times*, September 12, 2005, A17. <http://www.proquest.com>.

<sup>42</sup> "Survivors and Victims of Katrina," *New York Times*, September 14, 2005, A28. <http://www.proquest.com>.



Turner, and Steinberg are monumental figures in this aspect, as they outlined the role of human agency in the wake of natural disasters. From there, it is easy to derive how disasters have been exaggerated through social and medial resources.

It has been my contention that the media is a dominant force which inhibits African Americans from coping with natural disasters. This was certainly evident in the 1900 Galveston hurricane and in Hurricane Katrina as the media focused almost exclusively on black men and women when they reported cases of exploitation and vandalism. Again, this makes African Americans appear as criminals in society; thus, racism is intensified, causing more hardships for them in the wake of disasters. And the exclusion of media reports on African American contributions during both storms shows that little improvement has been made to eliminate the inherent racism within society.



Figure 1- African Americans Assist in Galveston Recovery. Photo from Primary Source. Greene, Casey Edward, & Shelly Henley Kelly. *Through a Night of Horrors: Voices from the 1900 Galveston Storm*. Texas A&M: University Press, 2000.



Figure 2- African Americans Carry Dead from Ruins of Galveston.  
Photo from Primary Source. Greene, Casey Edward, & Shelly Henley Kelly.  
*Through a Night of Horrors: Voices from the 1900 Galveston Storm*. Texas  
A&M: University Press, 2000.



Figure 3- Media's Portrayal of African American Looters in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina. Photo from Primary Source. Google Images. "Hurricane Katrina Looting." <http://www.google.com>.



Figure 4- Residents of New Orleans take Looting into Own Hands.  
Photo from Primary Source. Google Images. "Hurricane Katrina Looting."  
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## VITA

Graduate School

Southern Illinois University

Melanie M. Gilbert

melanieg@siu.edu

Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
Bachelor of Arts, History, May 2010

Special Awards and Honors:  
Certificate of Academic Excellence by the Department of History, January 2008

Research Paper Title:  
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Major Professor: Dr. Kay Carr