

# Introduction: The Cultural Visualization of Hurricane Katrina

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It has been nearly six years since Hurricane Katrina ripped through the Gulf of Mexico cutting a swathe of devastation and shock through the psyche of the American people. Exacerbated by the recent BP oil spill in the region, the storm and its aftermath remains an open wound for local residents and others affected by the disaster, leaving many in the Gulf Coast facing an uncertain future. Between August 23<sup>rd</sup> and September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005, at least 1,836 people lost their lives in the hurricane and subsequent floods. Mass-scale human suffering and overwhelming property damage and losses ensued in the wake of government uncertainty and inept relief efforts. The most severely affected area, New Orleans, which flooded as the levee system buckled to the might of the Category 4 hurricane, continues to reel from the storm and its deeply political consequences today. While tourist attractions do their best to convince us of the city's recovery, high-water marks scar the exteriors of abandoned buildings, reminding visitors and residents alike of the uncomfortable truths about Hurricane Katrina and the many displaced people who continue to wait to reclaim their homes. This issue of *Invisible Culture* seeks to explore how our hypervisual world visualized Hurricane Katrina, from 24-hour news networks' live coverage to home videos made into documentaries, from personal photos posted on blogs to the work of photojournalists on the front pages of newspapers all over the world, and from individual memorials to state-sponsored ones.

In order to chart the evolution of the cultural visualization of Hurricane Katrina, it is worth returning to the complicated aftermath of the storm, when the national and international media focused on the social trauma left by the disaster. New Orleans, in particular, captured the media and public's attention not only because of its high level of devastation but also as a result of its history of racial and cultural diversity. This city had long been a tourist mecca, famous for jazz, voodoo, and loose liquor laws. In the wake of the storm, the world looked on in horror at the sight of hundreds of thousands of

mostly poor, African-American people crammed into the New Orleans Superdome and the city's Ernest M. Morial Convention Center, stranded on rooftops, or isolated on patches of high dry land without food, water, or shelter. Grotesque images of bloated corpses floating in the putrid waters that flooded through the streets of New Orleans came to dominate hypervisible post-hurricane news coverage. The inability of federal, state, and local authorities to respond rapidly and effectively to Hurricane Katrina quickly became a major scandal in the United States and sent shockwaves through the international community.

Nevertheless, sympathetic news coverage of the bodies of the dead and the walking wounded in New Orleans soon gave way to reporting that characterized disaster victims as opportunistic looters and vicious criminals and that presented the disaster-stricken city through the lens of civil unrest and lawlessness. On the pages of national newspapers, headlines announced "The Looting Instinct"<sup>1</sup> and "Thugs' Reign of Terror,"<sup>2</sup> and deigned those stealing for survival to be senseless thieves, "the lowest form of human being haunting the earth."<sup>3</sup> Lurid, salacious reports of murder, rape, and acts of random violence framed New Orleans in a turmoil of war-like anarchy, and characterized those trapped in the city as deadly threats to emergency responders.

These media frames unraveled challenging race- and class-based stereotypes and narratives in the days that followed the levee breaches. As Michael Eric Dyson states in his book, *Come Hell or High Water* (2006), the media—whether consciously or not—played a pivotal role "in framing blacks as outlaws and savages."<sup>4</sup> Dyson goes on to contend that "the media also framed the black poor when it helped to spread rumors about violent and animalistic behaviors in the shelters to which they fled."<sup>5</sup> The racial "frames" to which Dyson refers ensured that the early outburst of public sympathy for those affected by the disaster would soon give way to a more critical viewpoint. Race-based bias, which previously simmered below the surface of many Americans' views of low-income black people, now bubbled to the surface, shattering the U.S. fiction of a color-blind

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<sup>1</sup> *The Boston Globe* (September 4, 2005), E11.

<sup>2</sup> *The New York Daily News* (September 4, 2005), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Shankar Vedantam and Allison Klein, "You wonder why it didn't kill a million; officials upbeat in view of what might have been as survivors recount horror of what is," *The Washington Post*, (September 3, 2005), Sec A.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2006), 166, 170.

<sup>5</sup> Dyson, 170.

society. An outpouring of highly simplified and racist stereotypes so often recycled in the name of the vulnerable African-American poor—welfare dependency, crime, and familial dysfunction to name but a few—subsequently dominated news coverage of Hurricane Katrina.

These racist representations provided justification for the following heavy-handed action taken by the military and police in response to the disaster. On September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco issued a controversial order authorizing soldiers to shoot to kill looters in an effort to restore calm. On September 2<sup>nd</sup>, the New Orleans-based *Times-Picayune* reported: “Governor Kathleen Blanco called the looters ‘hoodlums’ and issued a warning to lawbreakers: Hundreds of National Guard troops hardened on the battlefield of Iraq have landed in New Orleans. ‘They have M-16s, and they’re locked and loaded,’ she said.”<sup>6</sup> Government officials increasingly reacted to the catastrophe—a tragedy that was in large measure of their own making—as if New Orleans faced, not an appalling disaster, but an armed insurgency. An image of a tank rolling through the streets near the Convention Center and photographs of heavily armed National Guardsmen became front-page newspaper stories all over the world on September 2<sup>nd</sup>. This image helped to solidify the impression the public had of the Guard’s role in the disaster—while the military assisted by bringing food, supplies, and support, they *also* supplied guns to control the anarchy in the city. At the same time, victims of the storm, such as Reverend Issac Clark, told the Associated Press, “We are out here like pure animals. We don’t have help.”<sup>7</sup> Journalists and public figures alike began referring to the survivors of the storm as refugees, as though the storm had swept away not only their homes, but also their citizenship.

Later inquiries, however, reveal that the stories about the city’s supposed “anarchy” were greatly overstated.<sup>8</sup> *Times-Picayune* journalist Brian Thevenot was one of the reporters who helped to dispel the myths that spread about the violence in the Superdome and Convention Center: “What I later confirmed is that occasional

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<sup>6</sup> Allen Breed, “National Guardsmen pour into New Orleans,” *Times-Picayune* (September 2, 2005). [http://www.nola.com/newslogs/breakingtp/index.ssf?/mtlogs/nola\\_Times-Picayune/archives/2005\\_09.html](http://www.nola.com/newslogs/breakingtp/index.ssf?/mtlogs/nola_Times-Picayune/archives/2005_09.html).

<sup>7</sup> “Anarchy disrupts US storm relief,” *BBC News* (September 1, 2005). <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4205074.stm>.

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Rosenblatt and James Rainey, “Rita’s Aftermath; Katrina Takes a Toll on Truth, News Accuracy,” *Los Angeles Times*, (September 27, 2005), A16.

gunfire, stampedes and terror did indeed plague the Convention Center. But only one death could be called a suspected homicide...Widespread reports of rapes could not be confirmed.”<sup>9</sup> Thevenot believed that these kinds of stories, “may have started with some basis in fact [but] got exaggerated and distorted as they were passed orally—often the only mode of communication—through extraordinarily frustrated and stressed multitudes of people, including refugees, cops, soldiers, public officials and, ultimately, the press.”<sup>10</sup> Thevenot misses the point, however, that by mislabeling those displaced by the hurricane as refugees, stories of terror and violence are all the more believable. Slavoj Žižek argued that, “what motivated these stories were not facts, but racist prejudices, the satisfaction felt by those who would be able to say: “You see, Blacks really are like that, violent barbarians under a thin layer of civilization!”<sup>11</sup> Confronted with images of life in the Superdome, it was hard to believe that such squalor was possible in a civilized American city. It was not the orderly relief work the country was used to seeing, with lines of cots and people in uniform. It was easier to displace these images by calling those in them refugees and imagining New Orleans to be some far off country without law and order, than to acknowledge that this tragedy could happen in the United States.

Two photographs that appeared on Yahoo news and other Internet news outlets on September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2005 solidified the racial fault lines underlying the disaster, and prompted a debate about race and the mainstream news media in its aftermath. One photo, taken by Dave Martin, an Associated Press Photographer in New Orleans, depicted a young African-American man wading through chest-deep water. Clutching a case of Pepsi soda and pulling a floating bag behind him, Martin describes him as “looting a grocery store.” Another photograph, taken by Chris Graythen for Getty Images and distributed by Agence France-Presse, shows a white couple up to their chests in the same dirty water. Next to a photograph of a woman holding some bags of food, Graythen characterizes her actions as “finding bread and soda from a local grocery store.”

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<sup>9</sup> Brian Thevenot, “Myth-Making in New Orleans,” *American Journalism Review* (December 2005/January 2006), 36.

<sup>10</sup> Thevenot, 37.

<sup>11</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Katrina: Rumors, Lies, and Racist Fantasies,” *In These Times* (October 31, 2005).



Figure 1. Juxtaposition of Dave Martin's and Chris Graythen's photos

Soon after these photos appeared on Yahoo, a user of the photo-sharing website Flickr connected the images and captions on a single page, which attracted links from numerous blogs. Quite unexpectedly, this juxtaposition became one of the first powerful symbols of the different treatment of New Orleans' African-American and white residents by the media—a phenomenon Dyson describes as “the color of disaster”—and, in a broader sense, a metaphor for the state of race relations in America.<sup>12</sup> These photographs came to encapsulate the power disparities (re)produced by ideologically-based news imagery, which repeatedly sanctions some groups' actions while negating and dehumanizing others. The images' presence on blogs highlighted the issue of race as the pivotal concept for thinking about Hurricane Katrina in the realm of public debate. People were no longer willing to accept the producer/consumer binary implicit in traditional mass media journalism. Of Yahoo's

<sup>12</sup> Dyson, 166, 170.

looting photographs, the blog *Daily Kos* commented, “It’s not looting if you’re white,” while *Boston Globe* correspondent Christina Pazzanese posted the following inquiry on media commentator Jim Romanesko’s blog: “I am curious how one photographer knew the food was looted by one and not the other?”<sup>13</sup> Many journalists and celebrities began to ask the same question.

Musician Kanye West addressed the issue raised by the two photographs during a live fundraiser broadcast of “A Concert for Hurricane Relief” on NBC for the victims of Hurricane Katrina. A visibly nervous West, ignoring his scripted dialogue with Mike Meyers, used his few moments on live television to lambaste President Bush and criticize the press. “I hate the way they portray us in the media,” he said. “You see a black family, it says they’re looting. You see a white family, it says they’re looking for food.” He went on to proclaim, “George Bush doesn’t care about black people.” Angered by the portrayal of African-Americans on television and the way that the National Guard enforced martial law, West seemed ashamed of his own reaction to the disaster: “I’ve even been shopping before even giving a donation.” NBC cut West’s unscripted comments from the rebroadcast of the show for the West Coast, but they nevertheless had made a huge impact in the news.

It was not only Kanye West who “removed the filter” from his public statements in the days after the hurricane made landfall. Occurring just before the fourth anniversary of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, Katrina garnered a similarly emotional response from other public figures. Newsroom anchors were brought to tears as they reported on the damage the city had incurred. Anderson Cooper, in particular, came to represent a different kind of response from reporters to the disaster. In the aftermath of the storm, reporting from Louisiana, Cooper gave voice to the frustration of survivors of the Hurricane and the resulting flood—survivors who were still fighting to stay alive in the wake of the storm. Cooper could not manage to adopt the familiar fatherly guise of the traditional American reporter, reassuring his audience with an even tone and cadence. Instead he displayed his sadness, disbelief, and rage live on air.

Cooper was not the only reporter who expressed his despair while covering the Hurricane. A video compilation of news coverage of the Hurricane created for the exhibition *Covering Katrina* at Washington, D.C.’s Newseum shows a number of reporters breaking

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<sup>13</sup> Aaron Kinney, “Looting” or “Finding”?, *Salon*, [http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2005/09/01/photo\\_controversy](http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2005/09/01/photo_controversy) (September 1, 2005).

down while covering the storm. Cooper, though, seemed to tap into a particular mix of anger and sadness that connected him to his audience. In a profile in *New York* magazine during the days following the Hurricane, Jonathan Van Meter writes that Katrina was the first disaster “we’ve had to endure without the three sonorous authority figures—Tom [Brokaw], Dan [Rather], and Peter [Jennings]—who explained unfathomable events on the nightly news for a quarter century.” Van Meter explains that through his impassioned reporting, Cooper “became a proxy, both for the victims of Katrina and for his viewers, building a bridge between the two. He reacted the way any of us might have—raging against government officials when help didn’t come fast enough, and weeping when it all got to be too much...He connected to those in the hurricane’s path, and to the people watching at home. He removed the filter.”<sup>14</sup>

The “filter” and the removal of the “filter”—the operational space between seer and seen—serves as a central guiding philosophy of this issue of *Invisible Culture*. We begin with Brian Greening’s consideration of the Superdome in “Spectacular Disaster: The Louisiana Superdome and Subsumed Blackness in Post-Katrina New Orleans.” Greening explores the home ground of the New Orleans Saints as a site of intense visual contestation, marked by the many problematic and falsifiable world news narratives of “roving murderous hordes, pedophiles raping infants, and makeshift morgues storing bodies by the hundreds.” Employing images and narratives garnered from *inside* the Superdome, as opposed to the media frenzy *outside*, Greening unearths an alternate vision to this constructed mythology, which serves to refute pejorative representations of blackness. In doing so, Greening problematizes the symbolic resonance of the Superdome’s spectacular 2006 reopening as a sign of New Orleans’ “rebirth.” Charles Gentry presents an unconventional take on another temporary communal shelter for the victims of the disaster via an interview with Ashley Sabin and David Redmon, makers of the documentary *Kamp Katrina*. Unlike many of the much-publicized documentaries and movies released in the wake of the disaster, which are comprised of a compilation or re-framings of other people’s footage, Sabin and Redmon compose *Kamp Katrina* solely out of original material gathered during their time in the tiny tent village in New Orleans’ Upper Ninth Ward. “The *Kamp Katrina* Project: A Conversation with the Filmmakers” depicts a vision of life

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<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Van Meter, “Unanchored,” *New York* (September 11, 2005)  
<http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/features/14301/>

on the ground of post-Katrina New Orleans from the vantage point of the survivors, offering personal insights into the emotional turmoil, dedication, and hope of their eclectic fellow campers as well as their determination to be re-born after massive death, destruction, and displacement.

Maria Brodine provides insight into another kind of counter-narrative surrounding the events of the Hurricane—one that took place in the virtual space of blogs. Her article examines the ways the New Orleans bloggers reacted to media coverage of the storm, using their online space to dispute the narratives being created on television, radio, and in newspapers. She also chronicles the relationships formed between the bloggers, both online and through face-to-face meetings at conferences in the years after the storm.

William Taylor's article offers an examination of the numerous photographic images of the damage caused by Katrina. His work considers art photographs taken by Robert Polidori alongside photographs taken for insurance purposes. Placing these recent archives of photographs in the context of historical representations of disaster stretching back several centuries in the Jan T. Kozak Collection at the University of California at Berkeley, Taylor questions the photographer's role as an eyewitness and the role of photographs as evidence. The materialization of Katrina's legacy forms the basis of Lindsay Tuggle's analysis in "Flooding, Enclosure, and Invitation: Strategies of Incorporative Mourning in the Memorialization of New Orleans." Through a formal examination of the labyrinthine design of the 2008 Katrina Memorial, which appropriates the form of the hurricane as its architectural structure, Tuggle poses complex questions about the paradoxes of mourning trauma, the ethics of national mourning strategies, and the haunting produced by the bad conscience of a fraught collective psyche. As Tuggle argues, the Katrina Memorial functions not as an attempt to remember those lost in the disaster or even as an effort to alleviate the suffering of survivors but as an exercise in architectural and cultural whitewashing. The Katrina Memorial erases the buried history of poverty in New Orleans in order to concertize and memorialize a so-called natural disaster for the sake of disaster tourists.

Through the insights provided and the questions posed by Greening, Brodine, Taylor, and Tuggle, this issue of *Invisible Culture* contributes a critical counter-vision to dominant mass-media interpretations of the devastation surrounding the events of August and September 2005. The work of these scholars reveals the

continued efficacy of the methods and tools of Visual and Cultural Studies for thinking about the politics of representation and the crucial role it has to play in understanding and appreciating world events. Our analysis of the visualization of Hurricane Katrina is particularly apt in the wake of the current revolutions in the Middle East. Regardless of where and when they occur, we now experience historical events interactively through the user participation enabled by new media, reorienting the producer/consumer binary of traditional media, and creating an enlightened arena for community formation and creative interaction.