27. There were no race-related differences (HBI–PWI, Black-White, or Black-Other Ethnicity) in the amount of liability assigned to the New Orleans and Louisiana governments. Consequently, mediational analyses for this variable were not included.

28. For example, the National Guard arrived soon after the winds subsided, FEMA officials were given two days to arrive in New Orleans, and buses arrived to evacuate the Superdome and Convention Center on Friday. We suspect participants' memories of the arrival of assistance reflect the time that elapsed before buses arrived to evacuate emergency shelters.

29. We computed relative responsibility in the same way that we computed relative liability (cf. Endnote 26).

30. Note, in Table 1.9, the most efficient explanatory model for overall dissatisfaction with the government response also included identification with Katrina victims. Because this index was marginally significant, its effects are not discussed further.

31. Participants' memories of the numbers of White, wealthy, and middle-class pre-Katrina evacuees were negatively related to their confidence judgments. However, this effect was only marginally significant and consequently is not discussed further.

32. Participants were assumed to hold greater uncertainty about local government officials' behaviors because (1) city and state officials were the focus of less media attention than Katrina victims and the federal government, especially FEMA; (2) participants' responsibility attributions for local officials increased as their exposure to Katrina media coverage increased; and (3) factor analyses revealed participants did not differentiate city and state officials in their judgments.

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Chapter Two

The Color(s) of Crisis

How Race, Rumor, and Collective Memory Shape the Legacy of Katrina

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From Learning from Catastrophe: Quick Response Research in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina 2006

> We black folk, our history and our present being, are a mirror of all the manifold experiences of America. What we want, what we represent, what we endure is what America is. If we black folk perish, America will perish. If America has forgotten her past, then let her look into the mirror of our consciousness and she will see the living past living in the present, for our memories go back, through our black folk of today, through the recollections of our black parents, and through the tales of slavery told by our black grandparents, to the time when none of us, black or white, lived in this fertile land.
>
> —Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*

By the time Hurricane Katrina crashed ashore on August 29, 2005, *part* of the story had already been written; certain facts were already known: the levee system built to help protect the New Orleans area was inadequate and had been largely neglected for years, thousands of people were either stranded in the path of the storm or had chosen to attempt to ride it out, the Gulf Coast comprises perhaps the poorest region in the United States, meaning many residents would be hard-pressed to relocate and later, to recover, National Guard troop levels in the area were lessened by the demands of the war in Iraq . . . the list goes on. What was known as the first of the punishing winds and rain made landfall was that this was going to be a devastating storm.[2] What was not known was how everyone—from first responders, to survivors, to journalists, to government officials—would respond.

In the time since Katrina hit, discussions have focused on the storm as a physical *event*, with wind speeds and flood levels documented, casualties estimated, and economic costs still being debated. The authors of this chapter propose that perhaps the "story of Katrina," also rests in its *stories*. That is to say, that to understand how Katrina was experienced by many who lived through the storm, we must investigate the stories—particularly the *rumors*—that evolved and influenced people's actions.

Hurricane Katrina sparked countless unsubstantiated stories, many promulgated by the mass media and most telling for their racialized aspects. The authors traveled to the Gulf Coast after Katrina (and Hurricane Rita[3]) and spent weeks collecting numerous media accounts and conducting dozens of interviews with evacuees, aid workers, government officials, and survivors who were stuck in the storm. Almost every interviewee cited rumors they had heard, and in most cases, (a) the rumor influenced decision-making and (b) race played a part in how the rumor was received. During and after Katrina, Blacks and Whites[4] experienced two different realities in large part due to their differing negotiation of rumor—and the mass media played to and exploited this.

METHOD

The authors spent just over three weeks in the Gulf Coast region following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, spread over two separate research trips. The first began one month after Katrina had hit and lasted eleven days. We returned to the New Orleans area roughly six months after Katrina had hit and spent another eleven days in the area. In the interim, we continued to collect media accounts of the initial crisis as well as coverage detailing the experiences of evacuees.

During the first trip, we spent two days at a National Guard base where evacuees from both hurricanes were being housed. From there, we traveled south, conducting research in four Louisiana cities and towns. We spent six days in New Orleans, where we visited every major neighborhood. At each of these destinations, we spent as much time as possible becoming acquainted with the surroundings and local concerns, collecting and recording Katrina-related media accounts, and gathering interviews.

We conducted our second research trip in March 2006 and spent the entire eleven days in New Orleans. Again, we spent time in every major neighborhood of the city, observing what had changed, speaking with local leaders, monitoring media coverage, and gathering interviews.

In total, we conducted fifty-three in-depth, formal interviews with evacuees and survivors, National Guard soldiers, Red Cross volunteers, and Federal Emer-

gency Management Agency (FEMA) workers. Formal interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes, and we took every effort to find a location for the interviews that was comfortable for both the interviewee and the interviewer. In addition, we have made every effort to ensure the anonymity of the respondents when recording and analyzing their interviews. We digitally recorded the interviews except when, on rare occasions, our digital equipment was not functioning.

In addition, we conducted twenty informal interviews with members of the same populations. Informal interviews differed from formal interviews in that the respondents in the informal interviews were unwilling or unable (due to job restrictions) to sign the consent form or have their words recorded. Nevertheless, those who gave informal interviews were very willing to answer questions and share their experiences. Information gathered through informal interviews provides background information for this work, but has not been directly quoted.

While it was impossible to contact persons who were not visibly present at the sites we visited, every attempt was made to select respondents from a wide range of demographic backgrounds. We completed this task by visiting a variety of shelters, relief centers, and affected neighborhoods and actively approaching persons who appeared to be from demographics that had yet to be represented in the study. Therefore, we collected a purposive stratified sample from a wide range of available respondents in order to prevent a simple confirmation of existing ideas about the racial world.

Respondents were grouped into two categories. The first category consists of evacuees and survivors, and the second consists of rescue, relief, and reconstruction workers. Since the primary research questions deal with race, equal numbers of Black and White respondents were selected. An attempt was made to select an equal number of males and females, although males from the evacuee/survivor category outnumber females almost two to one. In sum, 29 Blacks were interviewed (11 females, 18 males), 39 Whites (18 females, 21 males), 4 male Latinos, and 1 male who identified as multi-racial (White-Hispanic-Asian). Of these, 58 were evacuees and survivors of the hurricanes and 15 were rescue, relief, or reconstruction workers.

While recognizing our role as social actors in the reification of race as a social category, we used our own racial identities as tools in the gathering of data. One member of our research team is a Black female and the other is a White male. Often in ethnographic research, respondents show reticence to speak across racial lines, especially when discussing the topic of race. Consequently, we matched the race of the respondent with that of the researcher whenever possible. This proved especially useful for the purposes of this research since interviewees often "othered" members of a different race when narrating their experiences. For example, respondents spoke freely about "them" (members of the other race) when speaking with someone of their

own race. Given the entrenchment of race as a social category, we feel that the benefits gained from racial matching outweigh the cost associated with their individual reification of race.

FINDINGS

Race Relations, Collective Memory, and Rumor

TV news and talk radio airwaves were filled in the days following Katrina's initial blow with citizens across the United States expressing shock and outrage at what they saw happening along the Gulf Coast, especially in New Orleans. They could not believe that so many of their fellow citizens were in such peril. However, many of these commentators were *White*. Many Blacks, on the other hand, expressed outrage, but not shock. Why the dissonance? Because despite the shared values of many U.S. citizens across racial lines and regardless of the successes of the Civil Rights Movement, cultural narratives continue to be greatly informed by race.[5] These narratives are based not only on a sense of contemporary shared experience, but more important, perhaps, on the collective memory of a group over generations. Blacks did not convey the same sort of shock as many Whites over the perceived neglect of poor Blacks after Katrina because the historic and systemic disenfranchisement of Blacks in this country is a pertinent, permanent, and *living* part of their collective memory. As a forty-three-year-old Black man told us in an interview: "Business as usual for this country. When is the last time America lifted a finger to do right by a Black man? We were worth more when we were slaves."

White observers, on the other hand, may not have been as quick to connect the disproportionate poverty among New Orleans Blacks and sluggish governmental response after the storm, for instance, to a pattern of treatment from White authority that has included the institution of slavery and the Jim Crow era. According to scholars such as Michael Eric Dyson, the collective memory for many Whites in the United States does not emphasize the oppression and exploitation of Blacks. Dyson cryptically suggests that "USA" actually stands for "United States of *Amnesia*" when it comes to analyzing contemporary conditions for both the urban poor and the suburban rich.[6] Because an ahistorical approach melds best with the myth of meritocracy, White collective memory births cultural narratives that support today's status quo as normative. Thus, when something like the first O.J. Simpson verdict is read, the Rodney King rebellions break out, *or* Hurricane Katrina occurs, otherwise like-minded and similarly situated Whites and Blacks often have very different perspectives.

Perhaps where this peculiar dichotomy is best illustrated in day-to-day life (and exaggerated in highly charged circumstances such as a deadly hurricane) is in the negotiation of rumor. Rumors, understood as unsubstantiated stories, have long been a part of U.S. culture, and have long served as commentary on U.S. race relations. As far back as 1775, rumors persisted that Lord Dunmore, then governor of Virginia, was secretly enticing Blacks to murder their slave owners in order to help the British win the Revolutionary War.[7] Rumors served a pivotal role in bringing about the Civil War, as allegations of a "Slavocracy" helped unify the North[8] and allegations that Abolitionists ultimately sought the annihilation of the South unified the Confederacy.[9] And certainly rumors catalyzed and/or fueled many of the prominent "race riots" of the twentieth century, including in Chicago in 1919, in Harlem and Los Angeles in 1943,[10] and in Watts in 1965.[11]

Rumors are often propagated along the lines of long-standing, cultural narratives (i.e., that "Blacks are inherently violent" or that "Whites want to 'keep Blacks down' at all costs") that remain viable, if not as visible, as in years past. Though integration in public schools was introduced over fifty years ago and the workplaces across the country have undoubtedly become more racially diverse, statistics suggest U.S. neighborhoods and public schools are slightly *more* segregated than thirty-five years ago.[12] With limited direct experiences with large numbers of people from a different racial group, rumors (and media representations, which will be addressed shortly) often serve to fill in the gaps of "knowledge" one group has about another. Gary Alan Fine and Patricia A. Turner[13] suggest that

> even seemingly innocuous legends reveal much about how people cope with bothersome and distressing aspects of their day-to-day life. Rumors and legends address those aspects of life about which we receive mixed or ambiguous messages. Given that matters relevant to race remain charged and divisive in many corridors of U.S. society, it is not surprising that rumors and legends that reflect racial misunderstanding and mistrust frequently circulate.

So rumors, even in relatively calm times, have a tendency to further, rather than challenge, race-based prejudice and racial mistrust.

Complicating this already complex dynamic is the evolving nature and pervasiveness of the U.S. mass media. If, as James Carey[14] suggests, communication is "a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed," what are we to make of the "realities" conveyed through our venues of mass communication in regards to race and rumor? Several commentators, including but not limited to, Michael Eric Dyson,[15] bell hooks,[16] Donald Bogle,[17] Herman Gray,[18] and Vincent Rocchio[19] have analyzed and argued the ways in which Hollywood movies and primetime TV

programs have negatively portrayed Blacks and what this cultural imagery has meant in terms of racism, race relations,[20] and public policy.[21]

Robert Entmann and Andrew Rojecki found the negative stereotyping carried over to *news* programming as well. In *The Black Image in the White Mind*, Entmann and Rojecki[22] summarize:

> The news presents a face of Black disruption, of criminal victimizing and victimization, that compares unfavorably with Whites. Such depictions may increase Whites' fear of entering Black neighborhoods, as it reduces their sympathy for Blacks—who are in fact far more afflicted by violence and crime than most Whites. In our Indianapolis interviews, only those who had prolonged personal contact with Blacks in arenas beyond the workplace failed to make comments that touched on the deep-seated fears and anxieties attached to Blacks as a social category. Ambivalent Whites spontaneously associated Blacks with poverty and welfare cheating, even where their lived experiences taught otherwise. The respondents expressed parallel frustration with Black leaders perceived as opportunistic and whining (Jesse Jackson), extremist (Louis Farrakhan), or corrupt (Marion Barry)—neglecting the many White politicians who match those descriptions. As suggested by our own audience research and that of others, such thinking finds nourishment, if not its origin, in images and implicit comparisons constructed in the news.

The Entmann and Rojecki study suggests that an acknowledged authority—the nightly news—reifies White cultural narratives defining Blacks, as a group, as generally criminal and needy.

While such portrayals in entertainment and "factual" media productions may not be new, the changing character of mass mediated journalism might be. With the advent of 24-hour cable news programming came increased competition for advertising dollars and an evolution in the mindsets of programming directors from viewing news as a service of their stations to viewing news as a profit-making proposition. With that has come an emphasis on a different type of "news"—that of *speculative journalism*.[23] As news programming has become more popular and pervasive, the accepted standard of evidence before going to air (and also to print) has decreased. Subsequently, much of what is reported is actually guesswork or speculative. Take any of a number of high-profile crime cases of recent years as an example. Entire shows have been built around the premise that *guessing* what will happen at the next arraignment or press conference will sell as *infotainment*. Guesses as to the number of dead after a catastrophe now scroll across the TV screen on the CNN crawl, ostensibly as "news." Speculation now ranks as part of the journalist's craft. Couple this development with the ever-increasing saturation of mass media in daily life and an established pattern of "othering" if not demonizing Blacks,[24] and the conditions are rife for the mass dissemination of racially tinged rumor—as was the case during and *after* Katrina.

Marauding Gangs and Blown Levees: The Rumors of Katrina

Hurricane Katrina gave life to numerous rumors, many if not most having racial implications. These can generally be placed into one of two groups: (1) those rumors "othering" Blacks as somehow "less worthy" due to their criminal, violent, or welfare-driven natures, or (2) those rumors suggesting that White authority (i.e., "the government") purposefully acted to the detriment of Blacks in need. From those two categories, we will introduce and analyze the two rumors most discussed by our interviewees as illustrative of the ways in which the race-rumor intersection impacted how survivors experienced the storm and its aftermath. These rumors include the "Marauding Gangs" rumor and the "Blown Levees" rumor.

Marauding Blacks: What Whites Perceived as the Real Threat

The early stories were terrifying: with flood waters still covering most of the city, gangs of heavily armed and clearly dangerous young Black men were roaming the streets of New Orleans, shooting and stabbing people, taking over their homes and stealing everything in sight before firing upon military and rescue helicopters.[25] In the Superdome, where citizens had been erroneously led to believe they would find safe shelter, similar gangs were raping little girls and beating up old men. Shocked citizens across the country watched, listened to, and read the accounts of the chaos *The New York Times's* Maureen Dowd[26] described with much shame: "America is once more plunged into a snake pit of anarchy, death, looting, raping, marauding thugs, suffering innocents, a shattered infrastructure, a gutted police force, insufficient troop levels and criminally negligent government planning." For many of our White interviewees who evacuated, who had been told stories from various others, there was no mistaking who the perpetrators of this anarchy were. As one fifty-five-year-old White male explained: "And, one policeman explained to me, he said, 'Don't stop because they had car-jacked twelve people—because they knew that was the only way out of the city—they'd stop you.'"

This respondent spoke in coded language, but it was clear to the interviewer what he meant when he spoke of "them." When asked to clarify who "they" were, the respondent described Black men. Regardless of the validity of the claim that "they" were car-jacking motorists, both the actions of the police officer and the respondent reflected that "reality." As a result of the police officer's belief in the dangerous Black man,[27] he took to telling others about the danger. Similarly, the respondent sped out of town with the windows rolled up despite the heat. In an attempt to ascertain whether there was

a first-hand experience with car-jackers, the researcher asked a follow-up question and received the following response:

> *Did you see anything when you were getting out? Any car-jackings? Any . . .*
>
> No. There were people on the road, you know what I mean? This was about eleven or twelve o'clock during the day, so I guess the people that do that sort of thing don't strike too much during the light of day. And, I think the police were getting up to it.

In this quote, the respondent resolves dissonance concerning his hyperreality[28] of dangerous Black men with his lack of viewing any of "the people who do that sort of thing" by explaining that car-jackings don't happen during daylight hours and that the police had probably suppressed the incidents. How or why the police would disclose this information to the respondent but keep it from others was not discussed.

The rumor of the car-jackings rang true not just with our respondent, but also with Fox News. On the evening of August 30, Fox issued an "alert" as talk show host Alan Colmes reiterated reports of "robberies, rapes, car-jackings, riots and murder. Violent gangs are roaming the streets at night, hidden by the cover of darkness."[29] The race of these alleged marauders was never in doubt—words like "gangs" and "hidden by the cover of darkness" accompanied visuals of distraught, often desperate victims, most of whom were Black. If one missed the association, several reports were more blatant, including the now infamous *Yahoo! News* photographs that showed a Black man after he had "looted" supplies as opposed to a White couple that had "found" free groceries.[30]

Rumors did not merely circulate about Blacks in the city or at the much-publicized Superdome and convention center sites. White evacuees at other shelters often expressed concern over the Blacks in their midst. The following forty-six-year-old White male told another variation of the "dangerous Black man"[31] narrative in recounting this rumor he had heard. When the researcher asked if there had been anything at the National Guard base requiring an abundance of military and civilian police officers, the respondent reported that many people had been robbed and that some people had gotten out of hand. When pressed, the only problematic activity that the respondent had actually *witnessed* was complaining about the conditions on the base.

> There have been some things here. They had some people who got out of hand.
>
> *Who got out of hand?*
>
> Some of the evacuees did.
>
> *What did they look like?*

> They were Black. I'm not prejudiced or anything, but a lot of them were Black. They complained quite a bit.
>
> *What happened?*
>
> They had various things. There was arguing, that kind of stuff. And, a lot of people were fussing.
>
> *What kind of things have you seen?*
>
> There's been some thefts, there's been some, uh, a lot of complaints.
>
> *Have you seen any thefts?*
>
> I have not seen it myself, no, but I heard a lot about it.

Despite this respondent's statement that he is not prejudiced, his perception of reality seems to be shaped by the long-standing narrative that Blacks are criminals. He witnesses Black people complaining and "fussing," and has also heard of some thefts. He believes the stories about thefts despite not having first-hand experience of them. His reality of thefts was likely buoyed by both a cultural image of the Black man as criminal[32] and also by his witnessing of what he describes as fussing on the part of Black evacuees. It should be noted that Black evacuees at the same shelter did not repeat the same rumor; for them, the blatant military presence was unwarranted.

In the instance of Hurricane Katrina, the cultural narratives suggesting Blacks are inherently dangerous led to rumors that fed, and were fed by, media reports. Several joined *The New York Times* and Fox News in early misreporting. The *Herald Sun News* wrote, "Gangs stalked the tourists and women were threatened with rape."[33] The *Los Angeles Times* reported that the National Guard was being positioned on rooftops because the snipers had become such a problem.[34] While there may be some truth to these stories of lawlessness, after several months of investigation, the majority appear to be baseless rumors; reporters and researchers alike have had difficulty in finding people with first-hand reports of violence. Now, in retrospect, many media outlets have corrected the assertions they made in the days following the first storm. For example, Carr, of *The New York Times,* found the following:

> But many instances in the lurid libretto of widespread murder, carjacking, rape, and assaults that filled the airwaves and newspapers have yet to be established or proved, as far as anyone can determine. And many of the urban legends that sprang up—the systematic rape of children, the slitting of a seven-year-old's throat—so far seem to be just that.[35]

In contrast, the "gangs of Black men are running amok" rumor mill did not seem to work the same way for many of our White respondents who remained

in New Orleans. Several spoke of cooperation even though they were in the city where the bulk of violent and lawless stories were being reported. The following seventy-six-year-old White male speaks of a neighbor who evacuated people by boat: "He said he could help people. He had a boat full of gasoline cans. The first responders were really the volunteer boat-people of New Orleans. Those were the first ones that did some good there with their boats loaded up."

Whether or not the respondent believes that there exists a close association between violence and Black men is not entirely obvious.[36] He did, however, feel that the media reports of violence were exaggerated, and he believes they were exaggerated at the expense of New Orleans's image. He is quoted as saying:

> That, that really bugged me. And, I'm blaming the media. But, look, it's their job to report, number one. Number two, what you going to report? Dull stuff? But, that's not the whole story. That really bugged me. It made an image, a terrible image, worse than it really was.

Most of our White respondents who did not evacuate had responses that were similar to the one quoted here. White evacuees were much more likely to articulate narratives of dangerous Black men than were White survivors who stayed in New Orleans. We believe the difference occurred because those who were in the city had to negotiate their first-hand experiences of cooperation with the contrasting images they saw in the media. The White respondents who left were more likely to let racialized rumors and second-hand knowledge influence the construction of their reality. These were the stories, after all, that—quite unlike the dominant rumor in the Black community that the levees had been intentionally blown—resonated with the media and took on lives of their own. In *Rumors, Race and Riots*, Terry Ann Knopf explains that racial bias in the media has implications for the reception and regurgitation of rumors. According to Knopf, the press has often shaded the news:

> Numerous instances were uncovered where the "white version" of events was impulsively, if not automatically, adopted by the press—thereby becoming the only "official version" of those events. All too often, and on the basis of virtually no evidence, blacks were incorrectly faulted as the aggressors and main perpetrators of the violence. The tendency on the part of the press, as well as other groups in positions of authority, to echo rumors found in the white community—in the face of no evidence, insubstantial evidence, or even contradictory evidence—amounts to a clear and unmistakable bias.[37]

Because the rumors involving dangerous Black men at large were easily reconciled with the collective consciousness of a largely White-owned and -staffed mass media and members of the White community, these unsubstantiated stories convinced White evacuees there was much to fear and journalists there was much to "report."

They Blew Up the Levees: Black Reality Concerning White Authority

In our research, nowhere did we see as decisive a racial divide as when the topic of the levees being intentionally destroyed came up. It was widely reported by the mainstream media that the levees in and around New Orleans had failed and/or been breached. However, while the image of dangerous Black men haunted the White imagination during and after Hurricane Katrina, Blacks were negotiating a similarly frightening narrative: that of an abusive and racist government taking aim at the city's Black residents. Perhaps nowhere was this concern more clearly articulated than in the belief, held by many Blacks in the New Orleans area, that the levees protecting the city—especially those protecting Black neighborhoods—had been intentionally destroyed during the storm.

To most Whites, including those in the state and federal government and corporate mass media, this contention was a manifestation of hyper-paranoia on the part of a devastated populace. They immediately dismissed the idea as ludicrous. However, for Blacks in the Mississippi Delta region, the thought of government officials blowing up the levees above the Lower Ninth Ward in order to protect the central business district and richer, Whiter neighborhoods was more than idle conjecture; it was history repeating itself.[38] Though most Blacks in the Delta were not alive when the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 occurred, the majority have heard or read about the devastation. Black communities were destroyed and Black lives were lost due to the decisions of those in power.

In 1927, ineptitude, greed, and neglect fostered the conditions that eventually allowed the Mississippi River's floodwaters to do the damage they did. For example, New Orleans was never in any danger of flooding since many levees had broken upstream. Nevertheless, bankers and businesspeople of the city dynamited the levees downstream of their city in order to protect their investments. As a result, 10,000 residents of New Orleans, most of them Black, were flooded from their homes. With only a few exceptions, the displaced residents were never compensated for their losses.[39]

The flood of 1927 is a marker in terms of collective memory for Gulf Coast Blacks. The stories of Blacks being rounded up and forced to work at gunpoint on broken levees along the Mississippi River have been told for generations.[40] Blacks today know that many of their ancestors lost their homes or their lives in that flood and that levees around New Orleans were blown in order to protect the business district—resulting in the displacement of thousands.[41]

Just as racial stereotypes informed how Whites negotiated rumors during Katrina, history influenced how Blacks responded. The following

forty-two-year-old Black male demonstrates how his knowledge of the previous flood influences his interpretation of stories around Hurricane Katrina. "I heard they blew up them levees. You know, they did that before, right? But, I tell you what, ain't no accident them levees broke [following Hurricane Katrina] and it ain't no accident Black folk were left to die."

In this case, the respondent is able to believe that the levees were intentionally destroyed in 2005 because of the documented intentional destruction in 1927. His experience of current events is informed by what he perceives as plausibility: to his mind, the systematic targeting of Blacks by White authority (blowing the levees) and the deadly disenfranchisement of Blacks (leaving them behind to die) make sense because they align with historical facts.

As with White respondents and dangerous Black men, we were unable to find a Black respondent with conclusive first-hand experience of the dynamited levees. We did, however, interview the following forty-something-year-old Black man who reports having heard the explosion that destroyed the levee protecting the Lower Ninth Ward.

> I'm telling you, I heard it blow. It was an explosion and the water rushed in. I couldn't get out anymore. I ended up on my roof. But no . . . no one's gonna tell me they didn't blow them levees. I was there! I heard it. I was there. And no levee breaking sounds like that. They blew 'em before, and they blew 'em now. And they don't give a damn 'cause they know no one's gonna listen to us.

The above respondent concludes his comment with an important point: he feels that beyond a shadow of a doubt, he *knows* the levees above the Ninth Ward were blown and that those in authority are not likely to consider his claims. Despite the assumption that the U.S. mass media will jump on any sensational story, that is not actually the case. With the exception of when Louis Farrakhan announced he believed the levees had been destroyed on purpose, the levees-blown rumor circulating in Black communities barely registered on the radar screen of the mainstream media.[42]

While conspiracy theories are often attributed to the most destitute (and therefore desperate) members of a society, one of the more striking attributes of the levees conspiracy theory is that it seems to cross class lines. For instance, the following interviewee, a fifty-four-year-old Black female, is highly educated, solidly middle-class to upper middle-class, and a leader in the New Orleans Black community, yet she finds the conspiracy theory quite believable:

> Oh, I don't know [if the levees were blown], but it wouldn't surprise me. From what I've seen and heard, yeah, they very well may have. See, this is New Orleans and we have a unique history, a unique culture, lots of different people mix here. But never forget. This is still the South. And when it comes down to it, who do you think they're going to protect?

For many Whites, the contention that the levees were intentionally destroyed is absurd and is not supported by factual evidence—the rumor was a non-starter in White communities. It's non-relevance, then, with the mainstream press is hardly a surprise. Nevertheless, the Blacks we interviewed were not nearly as quick to dismiss the idea. If it happened before, they wonder, and the same power relations are in place as were in place eighty years ago, why not this time?

What both Blacks and Whites shared with us was not only their acceptance of these racialized rumors as "fact," but also their willingness to base decisions on these unsubstantiated stories. In the case of Whites negotiating the "dangerous Black men rumors," many White respondents spoke of areas they avoided at shelters and actions they took as a direct result of fearing what they had heard about in the rumors. They had not witnessed this violent behavior themselves but articulated such strong belief that it was occurring just beyond their purview that their actions were dictated by it. One young White woman had agreed to pretend she was engaged to one of our White male respondents because she had been told some young men of color (three Blacks, one Latino) might rape her. By claiming to be engaged, she was allowed to be housed with the White respondent and gained a protector. For many White respondents, the fear reflected in the dangerous Black man rumor was profound and persuasive.

Similarly, some of our Black respondents voiced skepticism about attempting to rebuild in their predominately Black neighborhoods because they believed White authority flooded those areas on purpose to force them out and would, therefore, never provide the assistance they needed to reconstruct their lives. A twenty-five-year-old Black woman formerly residing in the Lower Ninth Ward claims, "They cracked those levees. They knew what they were doing. And now I don't know what I'm going to do. My house is gone—how do I rebuild on $2,000?"[43] For this young woman, and many of her neighbors, their frustrations and their reticence to rebuild is informed by their conviction that the levees *were* intentionally destroyed, that New Orleans is a city that doesn't really want her kind.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have attempted to examine how race, rumor, and collective memory collided during and after Hurricane Katrina and how that collision

helped define the catastrophe. To our minds, whether or not respective rumors are eventually legitimized as primarily factual or written off as mostly fictional is not the point. The point, rather, is that the chaos of Katrina was heightened by race-based speculation and that much can and should be learned by the negotiation of that speculation. For a number of our White interviewees, this dynamic often resulted in "othering" Blacks as menaces and as threats. This image of Blacks, especially Black men, has a long history—as long as the history of the country itself—and despite progress in race relations, that cultural narrative appears to still be well ingrained in the collective memory of the White community. For Blacks, rumors supporting the "need" to fear White authority quickly arose and despite relatively little attention from the media, remain on the minds of many Blacks in the area. The collective memory of victimization at the hands of White slaveholders, politicians, and law enforcement officials have shaped Black perspectives in the wake of Katrina.

These findings highlight the need for consideration—and possibly further investigation—of at least two points:

The mass media played a *major* role in propagating certain rumors and mitigating others, consequently presenting the concerns of the White community as both real and normative and once again neglecting the concerns of the Black community. We only addressed two of these rumors in any depth here; there were dozens of others. Speculative journalism is probably not going away anytime soon[44] but perhaps the type of race-based rumor-mongering we saw with Hurricane Katrina can be curtailed. If the journalists themselves are not going to demand a standard of evidence before reporting something as "news," it rests with us—the consumers, researchers, and politicians—to view news with an increasingly critical eye before relying on what is reported to make decisions.

Rumors and catastrophes, together, may provide a good litmus test so far for race relations in the United States. With Hurricane Katrina, we saw examples of tremendous cooperation but also of considerable tension and anxiety across racial lines. Crises strip away the illusions of politeness in which the post–Civil Rights era of "tolerance" has cloaked us, as a society. In a crisis, one rarely has the time, energy, or motivation to be polite. As a result, people who had convinced themselves and others that they held no preconceived assumptions about a race different from their own found themselves paying heed to, and propagating, racialized rumors. Rumors rely on deep-seated cultural narratives to survive; crises bring such raw narratives to the surface.[45] One of the stories of Hurricane Katrina, perhaps, is that our emphasis on tolerance has inadvertently lead us away from the difficult discussions that foster true understanding.

NOTES

1. We would like to thank the Natural Hazards Center and the Department of Sociology the University of Colorado at Boulder, for funding this research. Also, thanks to Kathleen Tierney, Tom Mayer, Polly McLean, and Elizabeth Skewes for your guidance, assistance, and support.

2. *Associated Press*, September 1, 2005.

3. For the purposes of this chapter, we are focusing primarily on the media coverage of, and rumors surrounding, Hurricane Katrina. However, the scope of our overall research into the crises affecting the Gulf Coast in the fall of 2005 includes examining Hurricane Rita.

4. The authors acknowledge that those directly impacted by Hurricane Katrina represent a multiplicity of races and ethnicities other than "Black" or "White." The purpose of this research, primarily, is to investigate Black-White relations during and after Katrina, and how those relations were impacted by the decisions of media organizations. However, we do not wish to imply that this was an event that impacted Blacks and Whites exclusively, or that the experiences and concerns of other racial and ethnic groups do not merit investigation.

5. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 4–11.

6. Michael Eric Dyson, "Denying a racist past slows US policy," *The Age*, December 28, 2002, <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/12/27/1040511174476.html>, (September 9, 2004).

7. David J. Jacobsen, *The Affairs of Dame Rumor* (New York: Rinehart, 1948), 64.

8. Terry Ann Knopf, *Rumors, Race and Riots* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2006), 18–20.

9. Kenneth M. Stamp, ed. *The Causes of the Civil War* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Spectrum, 1961), 5.

10. Knopf, *Rumors, Race and Riots*, 33–44, 48–58.

11. Gary Alan Fine and Patricia A. Turner, *Whispers on the Color Line: Rumor and Race in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 50.

12. Charles J. Ogletree, *All Deliberate Speed* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 290–94.

13. Fine and Turner, *Whispers on the Color Line: Rumor and Race in America*, 11.

14. James Carey, "A Cultural Approach to Communication," *Communication* 2 (1975): 1–22.

15. Michael Eric Dyson, *Race Rules: Navigating the Color Line* (New York: Vintage/Random House, 1997), 111–15.

16. bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 69–76.

17. Donald Bogle, *Prime Time Blues: African Americans on Network Television* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 32–41.

18. Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 73–79.

19. Vincent F. Rocchio, *Reel Racism: Confronting Hollywood's Construction of Afro-American Culture* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000), 23–25.

20. David R. Roediger, *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 56–67.

21. K. Sue Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of US Social Policy* (New York: 1993), 183–207.

22. Robert M. Entmann and Andrew Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 209.

23. Speculative journalism as a practice is not new. However, the acceptance of, and time (in television and radio) and space (in print and on the Internet) devoted to reporting composed primarily of speculation have reached new proportions. For a discussion of the changing news culture in the United States, see Richard Campbell, Christopher R. Martin, and Bettina Fabos, eds., *Media and Culture: An Introduction to Mass Communication* (Boston/Bedford: St. Martin's, 2005), 156.

24. Entmann and Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America*, 81–84.

25. *Associated Press*, September 1, 2005.

26. Maureen Dowd, "United States of Shame," *The New York Times*, September 3, 2005.

27. Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 107–28.

28. Jean Baudrillard, *Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

29. Susannah Rosenblatt and James Rainey, "Katrina Rumors," *Los Angeles Times*, September 27, 2005.

30. Aaron Kinney, "'Looting' or 'Finding'?" *Salon.com*, September 1, 2005, <http://dir.salon.com/story/news/feature/2005/09/01/photo_controversy/index.html> (September 7, 2006).

31. Glassner, *The Culture of Fear*, 107–28.

32. Glassner, *The Culture of Fear*, 107–28.

33. Chris Tinkler and Daryl Passmore, "Rape Threat to Our Women," *Sun Herald News*, September 4, 2005.

34. Rosenblatt and Rainey, "Katrina Rumors."

35. David Carr, "More Horrible than Truth: News Reports," *The New York Times*, September 19, 2005.

36. At the beginning of the interview, this respondent volunteered that his opinions are a little bigoted. He had seen the media reports of violence in the Superdome, the stadium where many evacuees fled immediately following Hurricane Katrina, and in the surrounding areas. Still, he appears to balance his understanding of race and the reports he had seen on TV with his first-hand experiences during the storm.

37. Knopf, *Rumors, Race and Riots*, 69.

38. Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2006), 196–97.

39. John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 412–22.

40. Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water*, 196.

41. Pete Daniel, *Deep'n as It Come: The 1927 Mississippi Flood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

42. The authors collected well over 100 storm-related articles from sources such as *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), *The Washington Post*, the *Houston Chronicle*, *Time* magazine, and *Newsweek* and also reviewed hours of coverage from CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC. From the coverage produced by these mainstream media organizations, we found very few reports regarding the contention that the levees were intentionally destroyed. For example, on September 12, 2005, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that Louis Farrakan had made allegations that the levees surrounding predominately Black, poor neighborhoods in New Orleans may have been blown up on purpose.

43. The respondent is referring to the initial "FEMA check" victims of Hurricane Katrina had been promised. It should be noted that as of the date of the interview, a full seven months after the storm, this respondent reported she had not yet received any government assistance.

44. Compbell et al., *Media and Culture*, 156.

45. Knopf, *Rumors, Race and Riots*, 149–51.