

Evacuees, Refugees, or Internally Displaced Persons: How Labels Perpetuate Dominant Ideological Hierarchies in the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina

Killian Kueny
Dickinson College

Introduction

One of 2009's highest-grossing pictures was Roland Emmerich's science fiction disaster film, *2012*.¹ In the final scene of the film, fifteen minutes before a megatsunami is predicted to hit one of the four massive safety ships constructed to survive the end of the world, a room full of world authority figures is faced with a moral panic. Should they open the ships gates to the general public, saving the hundreds of people begging for safety outside? Or should they stick to the original policy of only allowing people who bought the \$1 million ticket onboard? As a result of their decision to open the gates, humanity is saved, "overturning" the classist notion that survival is based solely on the financial status of the individual. The moral of the story? While mankind stands on the brink of extinction, at least we have eliminated classism. However, while science fiction films typically portray the world on the edge of collapse—as a utopian site where racial and class tensions are eliminated—in reality, the mechanisms of division and justice that exist within American society can be seen most predominantly during climate crises. Specifically, the racist and classist hierarchies that prevail within day-to-day American life are catapulted to the overlooked forefront of who is most deeply impacted by natural disasters and why.

Such hierarchies, while portrayed in 2012 as class strife that could easily be resolved, often play out differently in real-life situations such as hurricanes and floods. Many times, the problems faced in climate catastrophes disproportionately impact minority groups, and often are handled with less urgency. And while 2012 seemed like just another apocalyptic disaster film when I saw it in the movie theater, it was not until

much later that I recognized the film as a potential vehicle for diving deeper into natural disasters and their specific relationships to social hierarchies. The 2005 Hurricane Katrina initiated my interest in the environment and its direct impact on American society. After hearing about the damage and destruction that ravaged New Orleans, my best friend and I ran a lemonade stand to raise money to go to those impacted by Hurricane Katrina. Little did we know that we would raise over \$5,000. Compared to the costs of the damages of Hurricane Katrina, this was not much, but it was something. In following the American Red Cross' designation of aid to the victims of the hurricane, I understood that the lower income black communities of New Orleans faced the most damage from the storm. Even at a young age I was able to recognize the racist and classist hierarchies that existed within American society.² Years later, my college coursework in both Environmental Studies and American Studies helped me place societal hierarchies in conversation with climate catastrophes. The questions that drive the research for this project come out of this conversation. For example, who is most impacted by natural disasters? Who has the ability to leave and who is forced to stay put in such situations? What are the racial and classist implications of these movements or lack thereof? In what ways is subjectivity incorporated into conversations of social hierarchies and natural disasters? What labels are used by the media, and what are the different cultural and legal implications of these labels?

Hurricane Katrina is the focal point of these research questions. Through my research, I became aware of the media's use, or misuse, of labels like "refugee" to represent victims of Hurricane Katrina. Specifically, those whose lack of resources prevented them from evacuating New Orleans prior to the Hurricane's arrival on the Gulf Coast. I contend that this misuse of the label "refugee" to represent the Hurricane's victims unmasks both classist and racist hierarchies existing in New Orleans, and by extension, the United States. This mislabeling also unmasks the reasons for the federal government's failure to aid the victims in a timely fashion. To explore how labels used by the media represent structures of power relations, I analyze the following primary sources: (1) *The*

1 *IMDB.com*, "Released between 2009-01-01 and 2009-12-31," accessed February 5, 2019, https://www.imdb.com/search/title?-year=2009,2009&sort=boxoffice_gross_us,desc.

2 *DoSomething.org*, "11 Facts About Hurricane Katrina," accessed February 6, 2019, <https://www.dosomething.org/us/facts/11-facts-about-hurricane-katrina>.

New York Times articles on Hurricane Katrina; and (2) Spike Lee's documentary series *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*.³ I also examine international treaties and U.S. laws and policies regarding subjectivity, labeling, and government input, including The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and the legal definitions of Internally Displaced Persons and Refugee(s).⁴ Through my analysis of these primary sources, I complicate the often ignored and undermined conversations and conceptualizations of racial and class formation and their tightly knit relationship with and transcendence through natural disasters, namely Hurricane Katrina. Consequently, I maintain and sustain a dialogue that touches on the implications of the way natural disasters disproportionately impact minority communities and those of lower socio-economic status in America.

In my first section, I outline the theoretical context that forms the backdrop against which my analysis takes place, and the lens through which I analyze my primary sources—*The New York Times* articles and Spike Lee's documentary series chronicling Hurricane Katrina. I use:

- (1) Critical Race Theory as outlined by Richard Delgado, Jean Stefancic, and Kimberlé Crenshaw in *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* and *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*;⁵
- (2) Cultural Hegemony as outlined by Lee Artz and Bren Ortega Murphy in *Cultural Hegemony in the United States*;⁶
- (3) Racial formation as outlined by John E.

Baptist in *The Half Has Never Been Told*;⁷ and

(4) Race and Subjectivity as outlined by Robert Bernasconi and Tommy Lee Lott in *The Idea of Race*.⁸

In the second section of my thesis, I outline the historical contexts of the climate catastrophe, including the federal government's involvement, or lack thereof, in the events leading up to and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. In addition to the statistical damage of Hurricane Katrina, I discuss prior natural disasters in New Orleans to contextualize the federal government's historic role during climate catastrophes like Katrina. For this section I look at (1) Susan Parrish's *The Flood Year 1927*; and (2) The U.S. Flood Control Act of 1965 following Hurricane Betsy.⁹

In the third section of my thesis, I explore the difference between the legal definition of the label "refugee," and the way the media chose to redefine this label. To set up my argument that the media's use of the term "refugee" unmasks pre-existing racist and classist hierarchies in New Orleans and the way the federal government's response to natural disasters sustains racist and classist hierarchies, I outline international and domestic law definitions of "refugee" and "internally displaced persons" using:

- (1) the 1951 [international] Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its associated 1967 protocol;
- (2) the Refugee Act of 1980;¹⁰ and
- (3) the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.

In the fourth section of my thesis, I turn my attention to my first set of primary source documents—*The New York Times* articles reporting on Hurricane Katrina. I also look at a few articles published by other news broadcast organizations such as *The National Public Radio*. Specifically, I focus on the way these

7 John E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

8 Robert Bernasconi and Tommy Lee Lott, *The Idea of Race* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2000).

9 Susan Parrish, *The Flood Year 1927* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).; *Revolvy.com*, "Flood Control Act of 1965," accessed December 16, 2018, <https://www.revolvy.com/page/Flood-Control-Act-of-1965>.

10 *archivesfoundation.org*, "Refugee Act of 1980." <https://www.archivesfoundation.org/documents/refugee-act-1980/>.

3 Spike Lee, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Parts*, directed by Spike Lee (United States: HBO, 2006).

4 *ohchr.org*, "1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (aka 1951 Refugee Convention) and 1967 Protocol," <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/ProtocolStatusOfRefugees.aspx>.; *IDMC.org*, "Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement," <http://www.internal-displacement.org/internal-displacement/guiding-principles-on-internal-displacement>.; M. Francis Deng, "Introductory Note by the Representative of the Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons," *UNHCR*, www.unhcr.org/protection/idsps/43ce1cff2/guidingprinciples-internal-displacement.html.

5 Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).; Kimberlé Crenshaw et. al, *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (New York: The New Press, 1995).

6 Lee Artz and Bren Murphy, *Cultural Hegemony in the United States* (California: Sage Publications Inc., 2000).

articles use the label “refugee” to represent those impacted by Katrina. I look into how journalists’ specific use of language, rhetoric, and tone created an image surrounding the victims of Hurricane Katrina that distanced the disaster from mainstream American society and justified delayed attention and response from the federal government.¹¹

In my conclusion, I explain how analysis of my primary sources, against the backdrop of Critical Race Theory, racial and class formation theory, and hegemony expands the current conversation of racial and classist hierarchies in America specifically to communities hit hard by climate catastrophes. I do so by outlining the ways in which the media’s use of the term “refugee” differs from its legal definition under international and domestic law. I use Critical Race Theory as the canvas on which I analyze my primary sources to illustrate the ways in which the U.S. federal government continues to perpetuate the racial/classist hierarchies and conditions that benefit the United States’ dominant white population. In light of the analysis of these primary sources, I argue that people of color and of lower socioeconomic status faced the brunt of the impact, risk, damage, chaos, and death before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina. I further argue that primary sources pertaining to Katrina unmask both racist and classist hierarchies existing in U.S. society and in the federal government’s responses to climate catastrophes.

Theory

In order to consider the ways in which the U.S. federal government acts to perpetuate racial and classist hierarchies—specifically in times of natural disaster—we must consider how the following theories of racial formation work together to form the backdrop against which my analysis of my primary source documents unfold. Specifically, the theories forming this backdrop include:

(1) Critical Race Theory as outlined by Richard Delgado, Jean Stefancic, and Kimberlé Crenshaw in *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* and *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*;

(2) Race in Robert Bernasconi and Tommy Lee

¹¹ Throughout the fourth section of my thesis, I will draw on Spike Lee’s documentary series, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, as Lee refers to numerous articles published by *The New York Times* during and after Hurricane Katrina.

Lott’s *The Idea of Race*; and,
(3) John E. Baptist’s *The Half Has Never Been Told*.

With these theories of race and racial formation in mind, we will see that racist and classist hierarchies illuminated by a federal history of inaction and mismanagement of disaster relief and by the labels used to represent Katrina’s victims, did not result from the Hurricane. Rather, these discriminatory societal hierarchies have been in place since the founding of the United States and continue to function as the ideological structures shaping behaviors and values of Americans in the twenty-first century, and how we relate to and treat each other. In addition, I will also discuss Lee Artz and Bren Ortega Murphy’s theory of cultural hegemony as this theory provides me with a salient a lens to analyze the media’s use of the label “refugee” to represent the victims of the Hurricane and of government inaction or mismanagement in the days and weeks following Katrina’s landfall.

The United States was built on mechanisms of division and separation; ideological structures have existed for centuries as a means to understand and construct subject identities of people from various backgrounds, as well as the way they relate to each other across their differences. Specifically, these formations were designed to maintain the superior and inferior positionings of individuals based on their race and class. In *The Half Has Never Been Told*, author Edward E. Baptist writes about the formation of race as a social construct and the proceeding methods through which white people used these constructs to their own benefit. Slaves and “inferior” individuals of color or lower incomes worked for “superior” wealthy white families, a system in which the profits of the slave’s labor directly benefitted those in power. This slave-labor based economy, and its formulaic and racist social order, became ideologized and seen as natural and inescapable. Exploited slave labor created the foundation of American society as we know it today. Historically, these ideologized social positionings and relationships between black and white people have dominated American culture and consistently work to maintain white superiority.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a lens to analyze and critique the continuation of racist hierarchies in the United States. Critical Race Theory developed during the mid-twentieth century. Some of

the most prolific critical race theorists include Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic.¹² According to these theorists, CRT is best described as problematizing the concept that race, as a function, centers around whiteness. In the context of my research, CRT provides the framework through which we can denaturalize the ideological functions of whiteness in climate catastrophes like Hurricane Katrina. CRT is “the view that race, instead of being biologically grounded and natural, is socially constructed and that race, as a socially constructed concept, functions as a means to maintain the interests of the white population that constructed it.”¹³ Furthermore, while Baptist’s theory explains how racial formations and structures developed, CRT intends to dismantle these ideological structures by unmasking the structural and institutional system that benefits white individuals and maintains white supremacist values. This system has created a subjective, subordinating, and unjust structure within society that routinely targets individuals of color or lesser income. In all, CRT “uncovers the ongoing dynamics of racialized power, and its embeddedness in practices and values which have been shorn of any explicit, formal manifestations of racism.”¹⁴ Additionally, Critical Race Theory maintains the idea that the “racial inequality [that] emerges from the social, economic, and legal differences that white people create between ‘races’...” strategically oppresses many minority communities.¹⁵

Critical Race Theory is a framework that unmasks mechanisms of dominance. Specifically, in relation to my thesis, it allows us to understand how whiteness and its ideological functions exist within climate catastrophes. Against the backdrop of Critical Race Theory and Baptist’s racial formations theory, I analyze my primary sources to demonstrate that the racist and classist ideological structures undergirding American society are starkly illuminated by natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina. First, Critical Race Theory allows us to understand who has the privilege of leaving their immediate surroundings, and who does not. When looking at Mayor Nagin’s announcement of a mandatory evacuation prior to Hurricane Katrina, which groups of people had the ability and

resources to leave? It was largely the wealthier, mostly white, communities of New Orleans. Second, Critical Race Theory allows us to conceptualize the historical context of natural disasters in New Orleans. The dynamiting of the New Orleans levees to protect the city’s wealthy white neighborhoods during the 1927 flood is a perfect example of how racism and white privilege as ideological structures work to benefit white individuals while deeming people of color disposable. Furthermore, the government’s lack of urgency in completing the projects enacted by The Flood Control Act of 1965 points to the ideological pattern throughout American history that overlooks the safety of black lower class American citizens. Such a pattern has marked, and continues to mark, the safety of these individuals as less important than the safety of white citizens. Later in my thesis I will provide more detail regarding the historical context leading up to Hurricane Katrina. I will explain how racism and classism persist throughout United States law—how legislation enacted by the Federal government works to maintain white supremacy and subordinate communities of color. Specifically, I will look at how these legal mechanisms of division, separation, and privilege played out during Hurricane Katrina.

To understand how ideological and structural hierarchies of racism and classism continue to order American Society, it is important to explore Lee Artz and Bren Ortega Murphy’s theory of hegemony as outlined in *Cultural Hegemony in the United States*. In their book, Artz and Murphy define hegemony as the “process of moral, philosophical, and political leadership that a social group attains only with the active consent of other important social groups.”¹⁶ In other words, hegemony is a relationship in which one “superior” group maintains authority over the “other” “inferior” group through some perceived mutual agreement. Now, when put in the context of how dominant and subordinate race and class relations have existed historically in America, it is hard to ascertain how such terms might be marked as a mutual agreement. Critical Race Theory allows us to unmask and bring forward these ideological, racist and classist hierarchal formations that seem inescapable. These ideological structures of racism and classism are so embedded in American society they are often overlooked.

Critical Race Theory not only helps us recog-

¹² Delgado and Stefancic, 4.

¹³ Tommy Curry, “Critical Race Theory,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/critical-race-theory>.

¹⁴ Kimberlé Crenshaw et. al, xxix.

¹⁵ Curry, “Critical Race Theory.”

¹⁶ Artz and Murphy, 71.

nize the ideological structures of racism and classism that shape our society, but also helps us to recognize how the hegemonic relationships between wealthier, white groups and lower class, and/or minority groups. This is particularly true in times of natural disasters, like Hurricane Katrina, when hegemonic relationships determine resource allocation as well as allocation of government assistance (or the lack thereof). As Artz and Murphy explain, ideological structures of racism and classism are the cornerstone of race and class relations: “racism occurs in practice and structures that enforce and reinforce distribution of resources and opportunities according to racial preference which are, of course, ideologically coded.”¹⁷ These racial preferences and ideological codes are a part of the hegemonic relationships that we see playing out in natural disasters.

My usage of Critical Race Theory and discussion of hegemony within climate disasters points to the transcendence of racial and class hierarchies, and racial privilege today. The structures of racism and institutions that undergird these hierarchies work to perpetuate uneven and unjust freedoms among American citizens of different racial and financial sectors. Later in my thesis, I will use these theories to ask how we can see these formations in different social and cultural settings, and perhaps more importantly, how the federal government assists in the perpetuation of these hierarchies in climate catastrophes through official legislation.

History

Hurricane Katrina

On August 29, 2005 one of the worst hurricanes in American history made landfall on the Gulf Coast. Starting off as a tropical storm and later garnering a Category 4 rating, Hurricane Katrina “brought sustained winds of 100-140 miles per hour and stretched some 400 miles across.”¹⁸ Being the costliest natural disaster in U.S. history, Hurricane Katrina reaped over \$160 billion in damages and took over 1,800 lives.¹⁹ While Hurricane Katrina impacted a number of coastal cities, I find it most beneficial

for my thesis to analyze the ways in which the storm impacted New Orleans, Louisiana.

New Orleans is a unique city in terms of its geographic relation to bodies of water, as well as its communal division based on economic status. The city’s “average elevation is about six feet below sea-level and it is completely surrounded by water,” which makes it extremely susceptible to storm devastation.²⁰ While levees have historically been constructed to minimize the potential for storm damage, they have proven to be insufficient in times of climate catastrophe. For example, along Lake Pontchartrain, to the north of New Orleans, the levees were constructed based on a design storm of 101-111 miles per hour.²¹ Along with a storm surge of 26 feet, Hurricane Katrina quickly surpassed this design threshold—something city officials did not predict. As Katrina surpassed the design, the levees failed and mass flooding ensued.²² “Neighborhoods that sat below sea level, many of which housed the city’s poorest and most vulnerable people,” were ultimately the communities that would face the most damage and devastation.²³ While the storm itself was powerfully impactful, with “some twenty percent of the city underwater... by the afternoon of August 29th,” a majority of the issues and problems related to Hurricane Katrina occurred in its aftermath.²⁴

Before I move forward to discuss the repercussions of Hurricane Katrina, I want to make note of the mandatory evacuation issued by Ray Nagin, the mayor of New Orleans at the time. I find it important to include this bit of information here as it pertains to my initial thesis questions: who gets to leave in emergency climate disasters, and who has to stay? Why can’t individuals who stay, leave? Are there racial and class implications that ground one’s agency to leave (or lack thereof)? What happens to those who cannot leave?

Nagin relayed this message across the city less than a day before Hurricane Katrina was expected to hit.²⁵ As a result, 1.2 million people were able to evac-

¹⁷ Ibid, 81.

¹⁸ History.com Editors, “Hurricane Katrina,” *History.com*, 2009, accessed February 20, 2019, <https://www.history.com/topics/hurricane-katrina>.

¹⁹ Encyclopedia Britannica Editors, “Hurricane Katrina,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2018, accessed February 20, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Hurricane-Katrina>.

²⁰ History.com Editors, “Hurricane Katrina.”

²¹ Lawrence Roth, “The New Orleans Levees: The Worst Engineering Catastrophe in U.S. History—What Went Wrong and Why,” *American Society of Civil Engineers*, 2007.

²² Encyclopedia Britannica Editors, “Hurricane Katrina.”

²³ History.com Editors, “Hurricane Katrina.”

²⁴ Encyclopedia Britannica Editors, “Hurricane Katrina.”

²⁵ History.com Editors, “Hurricane Katrina.”

uate ahead of the storm.²⁶ However, “tens of thousands of residents” and tourists did not have the cars or resources to leave, and those who believed they could safely wait out the storm were forced to witness what became complete chaos. In addition to the reasons already stated, many of the people who remained did so because they did not want to leave their families or belongings.²⁷ Understanding this, we see who was able to avoid the impact of the storm and who was not. This separation follows the racist and classist hierarchies that exist within larger American society. I address these hierarchies and their pertinence to Hurricane Katrina through both theoretical and analytical lenses later in my thesis.

Equally as important as who remained in the city after the evacuation order is the federal government’s reaction to the Hurricane’s aftermath. Particularly important is the impact of government action and inaction on the people Katrina stranded in New Orleans. By August 30th, a day after the storm hit, New Orleans was at a standstill—80% of the city was under water.²⁸ People began seeking safety on rooftops, with “no relief in sight [as] many local agencies found themselves unable to respond to the increasingly desperate situation, as their own headquarters and control centers were under 20 feet of water.”²⁹ At this time, people began to question the federal government’s response to the natural disaster, claiming that they were “slow to meet the needs of the people affected by the storm.”³⁰

By September 1st, an estimated 30,000 people were seeking shelter under the damaged roof of the Superdome [alongside his mandatory evacuation, Mayor Rob Nagin had designated the arena as a shelter for those who could not leave New Orleans]... shortages of food and potable water quickly became an issue, as daily temperatures reached 90 degrees Fahrenheit. An absence of basic sanitation combined with the omnipresent bacteria-rich floodwaters to create a public health emergency.³¹

As dead bodies floated around the city of New Orleans, the government still had not moved to improve the situation. The Federal Emergency Management

Agency (FEMA) took days to establish a presence in New Orleans, with the National Guard arriving to provide and assist in the distribution of food and water on September 2nd.³² “Even then [they] did not seem to have a sound plan of action,” and much critique was put on President George W. Bush’s administration for their lack of awareness, aid, and assistance.³³

Government Involvement: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 & The Flood Control Act of 1965

Historically, Hurricane Katrina was not the only time that the federal government’s response to natural disasters shifted the outcome and devastation felt by those directly impacted. In 1927, during the Great Mississippi Flood, after months of relentless rainfall, the Mississippi River began to “swell to unprecedented levels.”³⁴ In attempts to protect New Orleans, specifically in order to prevent the wealthy quarters of the city from being flooded and damaged, “authorities dynamited the levee thirteen miles below the Crescent City at Caernarvon.”³⁵ As a result, lower income, predominantly African American neighborhoods were flooded. Even more to this point:

in the aftermath, authorities were severely criticized for favoring the white population during rescue and relief operations. Thousands of plantation workers, most of them African Americans, had been forced to work, in deplorable conditions, shoring up the levees... As waters rose, they were left stranded for days without food or drinking water, while white women and children were hauled to safety.³⁶

I make note of this as I believe it is crucial to understand how racial and classist hierarchies play out in natural disasters, and how the government perpetuates and assists in their maintenance.

Thirty-eight years after the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, Hurricane Betsy hit New Orleans. This Hurricane stands as yet another example of how the federal government’s response to a natural disaster perpetuates racist and classist hierarchies by engaging

³² History.com Editors, “Hurricane Katrina.”; Encyclopedia Britannica Editors, “Hurricane Katrina.”

³³ History.com Editors, “Hurricane Katrina.”

³⁴ Encyclopedia Britannica Editors, “Mississippi River Flood of 1927,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2018, accessed February 20, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Mississippi-River-flood-of-1927>.

³⁵ Susan Parrish, *The Flood Year 1927*.

³⁶ Encyclopedia Britannica Editors, “Mississippi River Flood of 1927.”

²⁶ Encyclopedia Britannica Editors, “Hurricane Katrina.”

²⁷ Spike Lee, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Parts*.

²⁸ History.com Editors, “Hurricane Katrina.”

²⁹ Encyclopedia Britannica Editors, “Hurricane Katrina.”

³⁰ History.com Editors, “Hurricane Katrina.”

³¹ Encyclopedia Britannica Editors, “Hurricane Katrina.”

in practices that ensured Hurricane Betsy's impacts were disproportionately felt by communities of color and lower-income communities. In this case, the statistics resulting from Hurricane Betsy do not matter as much as subsequent federal legislation passed to mitigate impacts of future climate catastrophes. The Flood Control Act of 1965 was passed by Congress and "authorized the United States Army Corps of Engineers to design and construct numerous flood control projects... in the New Orleans region of South Louisiana."³⁷ After the levees failed during Hurricane Betsy, and the 9th Ward and lower-income neighborhoods were inundated, The Flood Control Act was designed to assign civil engineers in their efforts to rebuild the levees, but this time using a storm model that would replicate the worst-possible conditions. Theoretically, the project outlined by this law was to be completed in 1978.³⁸ However, forty years later, when Hurricane Katrina hit, "the project, including about 125 miles of levees, was estimated to be from 60-90 percent complete in different areas."³⁹ The new "estimated completion date for the whole project [was] 2015," more than 37 years later than the project was initially supposed to have been completed.⁴⁰ Even more, when Hurricane Katrina hit, parts of the levee broke below design-threshold as "the storm exceeded the design, but the constructed project [also] did not meet the design intent."⁴¹ I highlight The Flood Control Act of 1965 as a failure by the U.S. Federal Government to properly take action in a timely manner in responding to natural disasters that were affecting American citizens.

Legal Implications

Labels and Subjectivity

It is important to understand both of the following terms from a legal standpoint: "Internally Displaced Persons (IDP)" and "Refugee." In doing so, we are able to understand the duality of these labels

37 *Revolve.com*, "Flood Control Act of 1965."

38 Anu Mittal, "Lake Pontchartrain and Vicinity Hurricane Protection Project," United States Government Accountability Office (testimony before the Subcommittee on Energy and Water Development, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives, September 28, 2005), accessed February 20, 2019, <https://www.gao.gov/new.items/d051050.pdf>.

39 Mittal, "Lake Pontchartrain and Vicinity Hurricane Protection Project."

40 Mittal, "Lake Pontchartrain and Vicinity Hurricane Protection Project."

41 Lawrence Roth, "The New Orleans Levees: The Worst Engineering Catastrophe in U.S. History—What Went Wrong and Why."

as both legal and cultural terms. Based on the 1998 Guiding Principles on Internally Displaced Persons, the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugee, and The Refugee Act of 1980, I outline the legal definition of the terms "refugee" and "IDP." Later in the paper, I juxtapose these legal definitions with the media's use of these labels.

Internally Displaced Persons

According to the Guiding Principles on Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) published by the United Nations in 2004, the international community defined IDPs as

persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situation of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized border.⁴²

In the 1990's, a large number of individuals across the globe were being "uprooted" within their own countries due to various factors such as "armed conflict, ethnic strife and human rights abuses."⁴³ As fitting with the above definition, the number of displaced persons internationally was almost twice that of the reported number of refugees. To add to the complication of handling such displacement issues, at the time there stood no international law that laid out specific guidelines pertaining to reconciling, mitigating, and ensuring the safety of domestic migrants.⁴⁴ Subsequently, the 1998 Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement was a "milestone in the process of establishing a normative framework for the protection of IDPs."⁴⁵ As outlined by the United Nations,

The Principles identify the rights and guarantees relevant to protection of the internally displaced in all phases of displacement. They provide protection against arbitrary displacement, offer a basis for protection and assistance during displacement, and set forth guarantee for safe return, resettlement and reintegration. Although they do not constitute a binding instrument, these Principles reflect and are consistent with international human rights

42 *ohchr.org*, "Questions and Answers About IDPs," <https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/idpersons/pages/issues.aspx>.

43 *IDMC.org*, "Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement."

44 *IDMC.org*, "Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement."

45 *IDMC.org*, "Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement."

and humanitarian law and analogous refugee law.⁴⁶

The 1998 Guiding Principles consist of 30 principles outlined by Dr. Francis Deng (diplomat of South Sudan) that address and work to resolve issues within the migratory process of displacement, including protection against displacement, protection during displacement, protection during return, humanitarian assistance, integration, and resettlement in another location within the country.⁴⁷ The principles also strictly allocate responsibility and accountability to domestic organizations and state governments in their proper handling of internally displaced individuals. Written to be non-discriminatory, the Guiding Principles for Internally Displaced Persons establishes that IDPs “must not be discriminated against simply because of their displacement, or because of their race, sex, language, religion, social origin or other similar factors,” and correspondingly, they must not face displacement based on religious, racial or ethnic grounds.⁴⁸ Under the guidelines of these principles, Internally Displaced Persons maintain basic rights to “food, water, shelter, dignity and safety,” in addition to any rights held prior to their displacement regardless of their previous location within the country.⁴⁹ In all, the principles work to maintain and reserve the individuals rights as they migrate.

In relation to my thesis, it is of utmost importance to note that an Internally Displaced Person has not crossed an internationally recognized border. Doing so would redefine the individual a refugee. In relation to Hurricane Katrina, American citizens displaced by the hurricane were IDPs not refugees.

Refugee

Based on the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (also known as the 1951 Refugee Convention),

a ‘refugee’ is a person who, ‘owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country;

or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.’⁵⁰

To better understand the initial legal context and connotations of the label “refugee,” I look to the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. This Convention stands as a multilateral treaty that defines who is a refugee, outlines the rights reserved for individuals who are granted asylum, and determines responsibilities of the nations that grant asylum. While the 1951 Convention made great strides in mandating concrete definitions, situations, and methods of action surrounding individuals deemed refugees, its shortcomings came in the form of its geographic exclusivity as well as its timeline: the provisions of the Convention were only applicable to European individuals who had sought asylum prior to January 1, 1951.⁵¹ Consequentially, “considering that new refugee situations [had] arisen since the Convention was adopted and that the refugees concerned may therefore not fall within the scope of the Convention,” the 1967 UN Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees removed the timeline and applied the provisions of the 1951 Convention to any individual who fit the initial definition of refugee (outlined by the Convention), regardless of their geographic location.⁵²

It is important to note that the United States did not sign the 1951 Refugee Convention. However, the United States not only signed the 1967 Protocol, but also passed domestic legislation implementing the Protocol into U.S. law in 1980. Prior to 1980, refugees were protected under U.S. domestic law by the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) and the Migration and Refugee Act (MRAA). Under both the 1980 U.S. Refugee Act and the 1967 Protocol to the Refugee Convention, a refugee is a person who leaves his/her country of origin and crosses an international border into another country seeking asylum and protection. Again, legally, the victims of Hurricane Katrina were internally displaced persons, not refugees. Additionally, it is extremely important to highlight the notion that in order for an individual to be legally labeled a refugee, they must have crossed an interna-

46 Deng, “Introductory Note by the Representative of the Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons.”

47 IDMC.org, “Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.”

48 IDMC.org, “Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.”

49 IDMC.org, “Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.”

50 ohchr.org, “Questions and Answers About IDPs,” <https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/idpersons/pages/issues.aspx>.

51 ohchr.org, “1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (aka 1951 Refugee Convention) and 1967 Protocol.”

52 ohchr.org, “1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (aka 1951 Refugee Convention) and 1967 Protocol.”

tionally recognized border. I accentuate this point to compare the terms “internally displaced persons” and “refugee.” The following section of my thesis analyzes the ways in which news media broadcasters and social documentarians misused these terms, specifically “refugee,” to describe American citizens impacted by Hurricane Katrina.

Social and Cultural Implications

Media Representations

I include the legal definitions of the terms “internally displaced persons” and “refugee” as a central part of my thesis because, in the following section, I illuminate the use of the term “refugee” by news media and other media outlets to refer to American citizens displaced by Katrina. In doing so, I unpack the media’s problematic use of the term “refugee” and the term’s use to justify the federal government’s delayed response to Hurricane Katrina. In addition, I analyze the ways in which the media’s use of the term “refugee” perpetuated racist and classist hierarchies in American society in 2005. Throughout this section, I will use the term “other” or “othering” to refer to marking a group as inferior and/or perceived to be separated from larger American society.⁵³

In his September 5th, 2005 opinion piece published on the *National Public Radio’s* (NPR) website, journalist Mike Pesca describes Hurricane Katrina and its impact on New Orleans in a similar manner as other news broadcast systems and outlets. Working to separate and “other” the victims of the natural disaster from larger American society, Pesca claimed that “Hurricane Katrina created thousands of refugees who were forced into states” throughout the American South. His use of the term “refugee,” while shocking and inaccurate, was not unique; many news media

outlets quickly began labeling those displaced by Hurricane Katrina as “refugees.” Quite rapidly, this label began to stand out as an extremely problematic subjectivity. Namely, these American citizens were simply relocated to different U.S. states to protect them from the damage and destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina. They did not cross an internationally recognized border, which under both U.S. domestic and international treaty law is required before a person can be identified as a “refugee.”⁵⁴

In order to understand the weight of the labels used in the news coverage of Hurricane Katrina, it is extremely important to unpack why news outlets found it acceptable to use the term “refugee” to represent American citizens. To do so, I argue that the designation and use of the label “refugee” was due to the “media’s perception of a lack of control [within New Orleans], both at the individual and governmental level.”⁵⁵ If we look at media representation of victims and IDPs as refugees chronologically from August 29th, 2005 through mid-September of that year, we can see that media labels changed from “evacuees” to “refugees” early on. Furthermore, at no point is the label “IDP” used to represent American survivors and victims of Katrina. The news media used the term “evacuees” to describe displaced New Orleans residents while the Hurricane aftermath had not escalated and the federal government still maintained control over the city. The term “refugees” began to be used when the situation became more chaotic, generally due to lack of food and water, the subsequent public health epidemic, looting, and lack of aid and government assistance. Specifically, in the days following Hurricane Katrina, *The New York Times* “did not immediately use refugee as a news actor label in its reports;” instead they used “evacuee:” “entry into the dome stadium was difficult, with ‘long lines of evacuees... waiting in the rain,’ and other ‘residents’ found ‘refuge’ in the city’s hotels.”⁵⁶ However, shortly thereafter, the atmosphere and connotations connected to titles and word usages within news broadcasts and newspaper

54 Furthermore, pointedly at news media and journalists, what determined whether an individual was an “evacuee” or a “refugee” in this natural disaster? In this case, which I will discuss later in this section, there seemed to be serious racial and classist undertones to such terminology.

55 Peter R. Petrucci and Michael Head, “Hurricane Katrina’s Lexical Storm: The Use of *Refugee* as a Label for American Citizens,” *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 25, no. 2 (2006): 23.

56 Ibid, 29.

53 Spike Lee’s documentary series, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, works to critique the narratives created by news media regarding the subjectivities of the victims of Hurricane Katrina. Through real time footage and interviews throughout Hurricane Katrina, Lee asks how the victims of the storm feel in their being labeled as “refugees.” Lee makes a continuous point to clarify that the victims are not refugees—they are American citizens who are relying on their federal government to assist them in their time of need. His documentary showcases how such labeling, specifically by *The New York Times*, impacts the morale of the victims, as well as their allegiance to the Bush administration. A few of the articles that I use throughout this section are mentioned within Lee’s documentary series, although he goes into more detail on the responses of the victims to their labeling as “refugees.”

articles began to shift to a more hierarchal and “othering” style. Two days after Hurricane Katrina initially hit, *The New York Times* “saw its first use of refugee as a representation for people in New Orleans—primarily those stranded at the Superdome—as water poured into the city.”⁵⁷ In another article published by *The New York Times*, individuals seeking shelter and protection at the Superdome, a location clearly outlined by the New Orleans mayor as a space of safety, were described in a more hopeless manner: “officials began planning for the evacuation of the Superdome, where about 10,000 refugees huddled in increasingly grim conditions as water and food were running out.”⁵⁸ This usage directly coincides with the reality of the situation on the ground in New Orleans. As flooding increased, food and water shortages increased, deaths increased, and with the federal government still observing the situation from a removed position, the labels used to describe those directly impacted by Hurricane Katrina began to worsen. *The New York Times* article “New Orleans Mayor Says Hurricane May Have Killed Thousands” reveals this point. “Towards the beginning of the article, [the] people [who] remained in New Orleans after the storm are represented as evacuees,” but, as the article slowly works to explain the planned mass exodus from the New Orleans Superdome—which had lost sections of its roof in the storm—to the Astrodome in Houston, Texas, the labels slowly began to change.⁵⁹ Later in the article, the term “refugee” is used to describe the same set of people previously described: “Authorities planned to move at least 25,000 New Orleans storm refugees to the Astrodome.”⁶⁰ The first implementation of the term “evacuees” within *The New York Times* article

is used when there is some semblance of order, some official control over the situation [in New Orleans]... The other extract [usage of “refugees”], by contrast, describe[s] situations of little or no control... reports of lawlessness in the streets and of overcrowding, heat, unsanitary facilities, and a lack of food and water in the Superdome.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Ibid, 29.

⁵⁸ Joseph B. Treaster and N. R. Kleinfield, “New Orleans is Inundated as 2 Levees Fail,” *The New York Times*, August 31, 2005, 1.

⁵⁹ Petrucci and Head, 23.

⁶⁰ *The New York Times*, “New Orleans Mayor Says Hurricane May Have Killed Thousands,” August 31, 2005.

⁶¹ *The New York Times*, “New Orleans Mayor Says Hurricane May Have Killed Thousands,” 29.

Shortly thereafter, the label “refugee” became an umbrella term used by *The New York Times* to describe those displaced by Hurricane Katrina. Within a few days of the storm hitting New Orleans, headlines were published reading, “Refugees from New Orleans arrived Thursday at the Houston Astrodome,” and a week later, *The New York Times* continued their reporting with inclusion of the term “refugee” in providing the number of people in shelters throughout neighboring states.⁶² These articles showcase the news media’s implementation of labels that had the effect of separating and “othering” the victims of the natural disaster from American society. Specifically, the use of the label “refugee” had a direct correlation to the changes in control over the situation in New Orleans and was used to describe American citizens. We know from the legal definition of “refugee” that it was not the correct label to describe the victims of Hurricane Katrina as they had not crossed an internationally recognized border; “IDP” would have been a better fit.

But while *The New York Times* is perhaps the most useful source to analyze in relation to the usage of the label “refugee” within news media during Hurricane Katrina, specifically in relation to order and chaos, it was not the only media outlet that inaccurately “othered” those impacted by the storm. The following examples are taken from various newspapers and broadcasts that used rhetorical styles similar to those of *The New York Times*, employing various animalistic, helpless connotations around the labels they used. In one article that described New Orleans five days after the storm hit, the author portrays the city and its inhabitants as distraught and hopeless:

On some of the few roads that were still passable, people waved at passing cars with empty water jugs, begging for relief. Hundreds of people appeared to have spent the night on a crippled highway. In one east New Orleans neighborhood, refugees were loaded onto the backs of moving vans like cattle...⁶³

This “othering” worked to further the ideas associated with labels such as “refugee.” Once this label became widely used to represent the victims of Hurricane Katrina, the adversity, damage, and destruction that people in New Orleans were facing became marked as an image of despair and of people in need of

⁶² *The New York Times*, “New Orleans Mayor Says Hurricane May Have Killed Thousands,” 32.

⁶³ *The New York Times*, “New Orleans Mayor Says Hurricane May Have Killed Thousands.”

aid—“something that Americans often associate with refugees from or in other countries.”⁶⁴ The image of helplessness that is tied to American understanding of the label “refugee” was also furthered by news media outlets describing refugees who were lined outside of The Superdome, the city’s airport, and at various highway overpasses, waiting for help.⁶⁵ These examples of the usage of the label “refugee” to represent American citizens in a demeaning manner demonstrates how the news media “othered” the victims of Hurricane Katrina. They also allow us to understand the problems attached to “othered” subjectivities, and how such labels can perpetuate racist and classist structures.

Labels within news media are extremely important as they help represent certain messages and ideas to their audience; as a result, it is important that the labels employed are being used in the correct context. Within coverage of Hurricane Katrina, the labels used by newspapers and news media outlets worked to send a message of disaster and destruction, yet they simultaneously distanced the issue from their audiences by using labels that did not accurately portray the situation. According to the term’s legal definition, a “refugee” is someone who has crossed an internationally recognized border. The people in New Orleans who were impacted by Katrina and were seeking shelter, perhaps attempting to seek this shelter in a neighboring state, were migrating domestically, not internationally. Understanding this, we know that the term “refugee” is not the correct label for these displaced people. However, news outlets continued their usage of this term in their articles and coverage of the event as it helped to perpetuate and build the image that they were working to create. The term has an incredibly negative connotation of an often involuntary, sizable movement of individuals in dire need of aid, shelter, and safety. Such images that portray these types of situations are usually included in international news coverage as existing outside of the United States. As a result, in using the term “refugee,” news outlets created an atmosphere that surrounded the domestic situation and marked it as distant. There is debate that news media outlets, knowing the legal definition of the term “refugee,” used the Merriam-Webster’s New World College Dictionary definition of “refugee” that defines the term as a “person who flees from home or country to seek refuge elsewhere, as in a time of war

or of political or religious persecution.”⁶⁶ This definition is incorrect, and assisted the news media with their portrayal of Hurricane Katrina by conveniently leaving out the important legal requirement of a “refugee” crossing an international border. The Merriam-Webster definition does not match the legal term of “refugee” and leaves loopholes for interpretation. A better label, if news media outlets felt the need to use labels other than “victims” and “people,” would have been “internally displaced person.”

Instead, the news media’s use of the label “refugee” not only created a certain image surrounding the natural disaster, but it also allowed for the perpetuation of societal hierarchies. Examples of this can be seen in the specific language and tones that journalists and reporters employed in their capturing of Hurricane Katrina and its destruction. In his report on the status of New Orleans, Mike Pesca states that the dynamic that he “witnessed was clearly of the dirty masses on one side and the soldiers and police on the other. There was justification for this separation because security was a concern in New Orleans and law enforcement was on edge.”⁶⁷ There are two interesting points in this section of his article that I argue assisted in Pesca’s “othering” of the victims: first, that Pesca makes a conscious point to describe the victims as “dirty masses,” and second, that these people were in stark opposition and contrast to the law enforcement on scene. These two points highlight the hierarchy that news media outlets created in their use of the term “refugee” between the victims, the federal government, and outsiders.

Such language and tone alongside the usage of the label “refugee” also worked to justify the government’s delayed response in providing aid and assistance to those stranded in New Orleans. Later in his article, Pesca continues to “other” the Hurricane’s victims, saying, “[i]f you watched this situation on television, you might not realize how dirty and foul-smelling these people were. There was a reluctance on the part of the rescuers to touch the people. There was a total unwillingness to walk among them.”⁶⁸ His choice to describe the victims as disgusting and as people that

66 Ibid, 24.

67 Mike Pesca, “Are Katrina’s Victims ‘Refugees’ or ‘Evacuees?’,” *NPR*, September 2005, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4833613>.

68 Mike Pesca, “Are Katrina’s Victims ‘Refugees’ or ‘Evacuees?’.”

64 Petrucci and Head, 31.

65 Ibid, 32.

you would not want to be around, as well as his recollection of legitimate avoidance on behalf of rescuers, tells the audience that they too should feel appalled by the state of the victims. Pesca's writing also justifies the delayed response by the federal government simply because those in New Orleans, who were facing a week of dirty water and a lack of food and shelter, were not particularly hygienic. Pesca locks in this message when he continues on to write that, "[t]heir reaction was understandable. Many of the people they were trying to help had swum through sewage water to get here, and no one was showering any time soon." Through the addition of these details within his description of the situation, Pesca further "others" the victims of Hurricane Katrina, plays into the images surrounding the label "refugee," justifies a hands-off approach to anyone reading his article, and perpetuates social hierarchies by marking those in New Orleans as inferior.



At the same time, it was not singularly the rhetorical style used by news article and broadcasts that worked to that further cement the ideas and subjectivities tied to the label of "refugee;" images were employed to do the same thing. In an online article published on the

Huffington Post days after the storm hit, Chris McGonigal curates a heart-wrenching collection of images taken in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. Titled "These are the Forgotten Images of Hurricane Katrina," McGonigal's photographs range from dead bodies floating in flooded streets, to buildings ravished by the winds of the storm.⁶⁹ One image in particular stands out. The description of the image in the article describes the scene as "Navy helicopter drops boxes of food and bottled water onto the roof of a public school for a man in New Orleans; flooded 9th Ward on September 5, 2005."⁷⁰

However, looking at the image, it seems much more dramatic and distant, almost as though it was taken in a war-ridden country far from American soil. Briefly describing it, the image is captured from a low-lying stance and looks upward at the scene. Pictured is a shirtless black man wearing tethered white shorts who stands below and facing away from a helicopter. The man's arms are covered in dust and dirt, he holds four full water bottles, and through the window of the helicopter we see a member of the Navy. The helicopter stands in contrast to the blue skies, and the landscape that surrounds the man looks white, dry, and destroyed; the few buildings that litter the horizon line seem to be broken and abandoned. It looks like a dried-out desert or war zone.

The image, as well as its description in the article, are important examples of the power that news media has in projecting specific messages to audiences. While the description merely provides the reader with the actions and location of the image, how the image is constructed provides an entirely separate narrative. Before I go into how the image perpetuates the ideas and labels used throughout the climate catastrophe, there are two points that I wish to make note of: one, that the image was captured on September 5th, six days after the storm hit, when people were just receiving help from the federal government; and two, the 9th Ward, where the picture was taken, is a low-income, predominantly black neighborhood.

69 Chris McGonigal, "These are the Forgotten Images of Hurricane Katrina," *Huffington Post*, August 27, 2015, https://huffingtonpost.com/entry/forgotten-images-from-hurricane-katrina_us_55d36f19e4b0ab468d9e90c4; Corey Sipkin, *Getty Images* https://huffingtonpost.com/entry/forgotten-images-from-hurricane-katrina_us_55d36f19e4b0ab468d9e90c4.

70 McGonigal, "These are the Forgotten Images of Hurricane Katrina."

The narrative that this particular image creates perpetuates the ideas tied to the label “refugee,” insofar that the image simply does not look American. The scene does not look as though it is taking place domestically, and while the description would provide the viewer with such context, images are visual objects and this image may be seen without attention to the descriptive details. This image connects back to my previous statement that the plight of those in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina was painted as an image of despair outside of America. It is extremely effective in our understanding that the media’s response to the lack of control in New Orleans was to mark the situation as “a scene out of another country.”⁷¹ This image looks as though it was captured in a war zone, and even positions the Navy as a savior figure. Consequently, the man in the image is projected as a person in need of help and is captured at angles that mark him as frail and malnourished—in need of food and water. This “forgotten image” is a perfect example of how media representation during Hurricane Katrina perpetuated the ideas and stereotypes created by the labels used as un-American.

The distance that such images created and relayed to its viewers was also perpetuated through language. This language, similar to the function of the label “refugee,” and similarly to how images were used to portray the natural disaster as occurring internationally, worked to separate those impacted by the storm from those who were not. Returning to Mike Pesca’s article, he explains that “if you looked at the armed men in fatigues on one side of metal barricades, and thousands of grieving people in tattered clothes on the other, you couldn’t help but think of Haiti or Kosovo.”⁷² Not only does this sentence exemplify the notion that the problem of “refugees” only exists outside of the United States, it also separates those impacted from those attempting to provide aid. Furthermore, Pesca deepens and contributes to the hierarchy he perpetuates through the adjectives he uses to describe these two “sides,” such as tattered clothing and armed men.

Ultimately, the media’s representation of those directly impacted by Hurricane Katrina as “refu-

71 Alessandra Stanley, “Cameras Captured a Disaster but Now Focus on Suffering,” *The New York Times*, September 2, 2005, 21.

72 Pesca, “Are Katrina’s Victims ‘Refugees’ or ‘Evacuees?’”

gees”—separate and avoidable—and the situation itself as fundamentally un-American, perpetuated the racist and classist hierarchies that exist within the United States. Arguably, while these hierarchies can be seen on a day-to-day basis, they were brought to the forefront during this natural disaster. Hurricane Katrina was a race and class problem. In the support and aid provided to the victims, specifically the lack of urgency from the federal government in providing support and aid, the city’s black communities were most impacted by the storm and were subsequently marked as disposable and unimportant. To the outside, these communities were not deserving of their immediate attention, as seen through the way the news media and the federal government reacted and responded to Hurricane Katrina. Wealthy white individuals did not face the same devastation as the poorer black people in New Orleans. Furthermore, “the vast majority of Katrina’s displaced [people who were] assigned the refugee label were African American and/or poor.”⁷³ Hurricane Katrina is a prime example of how CRT and ideological hierarchies exist and function within climate catastrophes—centering whiteness and relegating people of color as inferior.

Conclusion

Overall, my paper works to research, theorize, critique, and expand current conversations regarding racial and classist hierarchies that have existed within American society historically and bring them into the realm of natural disasters. In doing so, I have discredited the idea that natural disasters are unbiased—that they touch and impact everyone equally regardless of racial or socioeconomic status. I have shown the implications of being an individual of color and/or of lower socioeconomic status in America, particularly in the overlooked area of how natural disasters impact these communities to a significantly larger degree than their white or wealthy counterparts. To do so, I have analyzed how Critical Race Theory exists today, how it persisted through Hurricane Katrina, and how the federal government functions in such situations to perpetuate unequal and unjust conditions that benefit dominant white communities. My research and primary and secondary sources have highlighted specific issues and examples through which my argument that people of color and of lower socioeconomic status faced the brunt of risk, damage, chaos, and death before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina can be seen.

73 Petrucci and Head, 33.

The examples I have used have also showcased the progression of labels by news media, such as “refugee,” and the narratives they helped create. Furthermore, knowing that the victims of Hurricane Katrina were displaced domestically, as well as knowing that the legal definition of “refugee” requires an individual to cross an internationally recognized border, I have pointed out the contradiction created by media outlets in their coverage of Katrina. The victims of Hurricane Katrina were not “refugees;” they were evacuees. If a legal term was necessary to use to represent these individuals, news media should have used the term “internally displaced person.” I have also contested that the federal government’s delayed response to Hurricane Katrina, one of the costliest natural disasters in American history, mirrors the way American authorities have historically responded to climate catastrophes in New Orleans. This delayed response has marginalized and relegated the damage and impact of storms such as Katrina to individuals of color and lower income. The federal government’s delayed response was rationalized by the news media and social documentarian’s labeling of the victims as “refugees,” a rhetorical choice that othered the victims and situated them away from immediate relief. In all, I have shown that the labels used by the news media during and after Hurricane Katrina to represent the victims of the storm, as well as the delayed response by the federal government, perpetuate racist and classist structural and ideological hierarchies by designating the impact and risk to individuals of color and lower class to a significantly larger degree than their white or wealthy counterparts.

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