

BLACK DIASPORIC DISASTERS AND THE AFRICANIZATION OF
POVERTY IN WESTERN PRINT MEDIA: A CASE STUDY OF HURRICANE
KATRINA AND THE HAITIAN EARTHQUAKE IN THE *NEW YORK TIMES*

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

Graduate Program in Communication and Culture
York University
Toronto, Ontario

March 2014

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Abstract

Thousands of poor, mainly black Americans were plastered across the news in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005. Correspondingly, after the devastating Haitian earthquake in January 2010, images and readings of black impoverishment were rife. I argue during both disasters, news media depicted both populations as Africanized, discursively linking blackness and black African-ness with impoverishment. I conducted a critical discourse analysis of eighty *New York Times* articles, comparing both cases and found that black subjects were homogenously depicted as both threatening and helpless, as “others from within” in coverage of Hurricane Katrina and “others from without” in coverage of the Haitian earthquake; the former being black others who pose an immediate threat by proximity to white majority populations, and the latter as black others whose implied inferiority helps bolster a sense of superiority amongst whites. I conclude that depictions of these essentialized and denigrated black others are problematic as they may inform the mistreatment and management of black populations worldwide.

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Introduction

Lovely Avelus was found underneath rubble a week after a deadly 7.0 Richter scale earthquake rocked Haiti in January of 2010. As a remarkable symbol of hope and strength, the young girl was featured in news stories internationally. *Toronto Star* reporter, Catherine Porter met Lovely at a medical clinic where she was recovering a week after she was pulled out of the rubble. Porter subsequently wrote a column about Lovely, about Porter's role in financing the Avelus family after the quake, and the ethical issues she had to grapple with as a journalist involving herself so deeply in the life of her subject. The Ryerson Review of Journalism took up this ethical concern when they featured Porter's story and Lovely in the summer 2012 issue. Lovely made the cover page of the issue. The image, a close-up of the young girl's face, was lightly lit on the right side, illuminating the sullen expression of Lovely, whose chin was cupped in her small hands. Underneath the image were the words "Should you help this girl?" and beside the photo read "her name is Lovely. She barely survived the Haiti earthquake. But her problems didn't end there..." As one of three visual editors for the magazine's issue, I helped select the image because of its striking nature, interesting use of lighting, and its ability to draw a passerby's eyes to the publication. The print underneath the image however, was debated amongst the visual editors, artistic directors, and the issue's other editorial and marketing personnel. In the production room, someone asked of the cover image and text: "Does it look too World-Vision-y?" The room mostly agreed, perhaps hesitantly, that the conjunction of the text and image could have that effect.

But what was that question really asking? And what did it mean, given how it could possibly be read, that the decision was made to include both text and image regardless? The image read, according to the magazine's staff, like a solicitation for funds for a seemingly

impoverished child. We have all seen the advertisements; a black or brown child looking dismal surrounded by garbage, dirt, flies and decay, staring longingly into the camera. A white adult picks them up, dusts them off, and lets them know that, with the benevolence of the viewer at home, everything will be okay. This is what Lovely represented to us when we saw the mock up cover image; a young destitute girl who, with the help of the benevolent white journalist, was rescued from her life of squalor. I stressed that the message being sent by the cover was not quite right and not what we were going after. I suggested we change the wording underneath Lovely's face. Some agreed with me, while others begrudgingly did not. After all, we were in the late stages of production. We need not be hampered down by semantics. We played around with some other options but after some debate the original wording stuck. I was disappointed. Disappointed that I hadn't been convincing enough, but mostly that it didn't matter that we were depicting this young girl as just another helpless black child in a world chock full of them. I knew it wasn't a spiteful, calculated decision. It was one made out of convenience, out of the need to adhere to time restrictions, and most of all, out of familiarity. Those in the room had arguably become accustomed to seeing children from the "Third World" in this manner. But the decision to re-create that image spoke to the nature of news media production and media coverage of racialized people.

News media, like most mainstream media content, often rely on and thus reinforce existing stereotypes about racialized populations. Much scholarship has focused on media stereotyping and how the media, as a primary agent of socialization, teaches viewers about people they have never met and places they have been (Gray, 1995; Hall, 1997). The power imbalances inherent to social institutions in the Western world are replicated in news organizations, as producers of the news are largely white, male, and middle class. As such, news

that is produced in mainstream organizations is done so from a narrow viewpoint. In regards to racialized populations, news media often only report on these populations when something newsworthy occurs in racialized communities; this usually being a disaster or crime of some sort. The circular nature of stereotyping occurs when a population is only depicted in a certain, mainly negative manner. A familiarity with that depiction grows, which then spurs an inclination to depict a population in that established manner. In this way, stereotypes become naturalized and recur as tropes. Within news media production, such stereotypical tropes can dictate the way racialized others are framed. During Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake, I argue that reductive tropes of black otherness and black African-ness were present in the *New York Times*' coverage of the disasters.

In analyzing the *New York Times*' coverage of Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake I aim to illustrate the ways in which black subjects are essentialized in even the most respected mainstream press outlets and how such an essentialization relies on several tropes of black African-ness; these being savagery, violence, primitiveness, helplessness, poverty, and destitution. The black Diasporic bodies that inhabited the Gulf Coast, namely New Orleans, and Haiti were discursively linked to their African counterparts via the use of the aforementioned tropes. Moreover, this cross-Atlantic discursive connection was made due to the ways in which black subjects are reduced to their racial signifier and the behavioural, attitudinal, and most notably, socioeconomic associations blackness conjures up. Race scholar Michelle Wright (2004) argues that "Blackness only became a racial category with the forced removal of West Africans to the Western Hemisphere"¹ (p. 1). As such, the arbitrary category of "black" has been put upon those of African ancestry and this categorization has shaped the ways in which people

¹ Black Africans were also brought to Asian nations, most notably Pakistan, as chattel during the slave trade. See: *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean World*.

classified as black have been (mis)treated since the beginning of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The essentialized category of the black other was utilized to mark black others as exploitable and expendable in the West. Thus, problematic discourses emerge when contemporary constructions of blackness continue to reify the reductive notion that an all-encompassing definition of blackness exists, particularly one that denigrates Africans and African Diasporic peoples. I argue coverage of Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake in the *Times* did just that.

Indeed, coverage of both disasters in the *Times* constructed black subjects as racialized others in contrast to their Euro-American counterparts. Psychoanalytic and cultural theorist Frantz Fanon (2004) argues that blackness is constructed through the white gaze. Fanon maintains that racist expectations are put upon black subjects when “the white man injects the black with extremely dangerous foreign bodies” (p. 36). In coverage of both Diasporic disasters, I argue black Haitians and black² Americans were positioned as both dangerous and foreign in relation to white Americans who are then conversely constructed as benevolent and strong saviors of the black masses. In so doing, white saviour narratives—that is, the depiction of white people and authorities being the providers of peace and order in racialized communities—abound. As Fanon (2004) derisively asserts, amidst white saviour narratives, “sin is Negro as virtue is white” (p. 139). The ways in which black Americans and Haitians were portrayed in coverage of each respective disaster, alongside their white counterparts exemplified this assertion. In the proceeding chapters I will illustrate the reductive ways in which black subjectivity has been constructed and the historical and contemporary purposes such

² I use the term ‘black Americans’ as opposed to ‘African-Americans’ for two reasons. Firstly, I use the term to make a linguistic link between black Americans, black Haitians, and black Africans. Secondly, I use the term ‘black’ in order to delineate between ‘black’—as a socially and discursively constructed racial category—and ‘African,’ which implies geographic lineage and location, but does not necessarily mean black. Additionally, I use the term ‘Americans’ to denote those who reside within the United States specifically rather than those within both of the American continents at large.

constructions have been deployed for. Furthermore, I will examine how coverage of Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake discursively reinscribed these constructions to the detriment of the black populations described.

In chapter one, I outline the methodological and theoretical lens through which I analyzed the *New York Times*' coverage of both disasters. Theories of postcoloniality and theoretical undertakings from critical race scholars inform my analyses. More specifically, I interrogate the ways in which blackness is and has historically been constructed. I examine how this has been done so out of the need to stratify groups into definitive racial categories in order to outline social hierarchies and justify the inferior status of racialized populations in society. From a contemporary context, I examine how racialized populations are positioned as othered beings in Western white majority nations and within the Western consciousness. I contend this is done largely through discourses circulated in mediated depictions of racialized others. As such, I outline the selection and employment of my methodology, a critical discourse analysis of the *Times*' coverage of Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake. This mode of analysis allows me to extrapolate discursive themes present within the publication and tie them to larger structures of power in Western society.

In chapter two, I first provide the historical context in which black populations arrived in Haiti and the Gulf Coast. In so doing, I highlight the history of chattel slavery, emancipation, social marginalization, economic restriction, and social disinvestment black populations contended with and fought against in both regions. In examining this history, I elucidate how centuries of oppression, exploitation, and marginalization made these black populations physically and economically vulnerable to disasters of this magnitude. Furthermore, the largely impoverished state of Haiti and the Gulf Coast, felt most by the black inhabitants of both regions,

is linked to the social, political, and economic structures in the West. For instance, neoliberal policies that have allowed international interventions into Haiti are the same policies that ideologically absolve the state of its responsibility to provide its citizens with the social infrastructures necessary for them to prosper. Moreover, I highlight the role that mainstream news media plays and has played in perpetuating racist stereotypes of black populations. In so doing, I aim to elucidate how existing tropes of aberrant black others are currently produced and re-produced within Western media. These tropes, such as blacks as violent, lazy, helpless, or criminally inclined, work to create an image of black otherness that goes against and is positioned in opposition to white Western values. This positioning thereby implies that the marginalization that black populations face is largely self-inflicted rather than the product of centuries of social, political, economic, and psychic oppression.

In chapter three, I highlight the discursive themes extrapolated from the *New York Times*' coverage of Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake. I found eight subthemes under three main themes which were 'others as threatening,' 'others as victims,' and 'saviour narratives.' Under the theme entitled 'others as threatening,' I found that survivors of the disasters were constructed as chaotic, constructed as savage and violent, and an expectation of black retaliation was present. Under the theme entitled 'others as victims,' I found that survivors were constructed as helpless or blame-the-victim discourses were present within the coverage. Under the theme entitled 'saviour narratives' I extrapolated the subthemes of American exceptionalism, the positivity in militarized environments, and white saviours. I used these eight subthemes to illustrate how a larger overarching theme—in which survivors of the disasters were Africanized—was constituted. In so doing, I aimed to elucidate the discursive links made

between the black diaspora in Haiti and the Gulf Coast and black Africa, illustrating how black subjectivity is still essentialized in media and thus within the Western imagination.

Lastly, in Chapter four, I make connections between the content in the three preceding chapters, exploring what the implications are for reductive, alienating, and denigrating constructions of blackness. I conclude my thesis by positing that news coverage of the black diaspora that falls back on essentialist tropes, tropes that depersonalize and disparage black masses, may set precedence for the actual mistreatment and paternalistic management of black minority and majority populations, especially in disaster situations.

Theory and Methods

Theoretical Framework

Historically, the construction of blackness and black subjects has been an external process in which European colonizers required black bodies to be both physically and ideologically denigrated and dehumanized in order to justify chattel slavery. The racializing processes with which this happened, however, has varied over time, space, and place despite notions of essentialized black subjectivity. In arguing that under these disaster conditions, black subjects in the African diaspora are discursively reduced to the negative stereotypes of their African ancestry, without regard for varying Diasporic experiences, I aim to elucidate the ways in which blackness and black African-ness are conflated with one another and reductively imagined within the Western consciousness. While this essentialization renders black subjects interchangeable, critical race scholars have argued about the varying ways in which black racial formation has materialized. Race scholar Michelle Wright (2004) maintains that in white majority and settler societies, such as England and the United States, black others, as “others from within,” are positioned as those “whose unbearable proximity posits an immediate and inexcusable danger to resident whites” (p. 8). Conversely, black subjects in black majority nations are positioned as “others from without” in which the “other’s existence is consistently denied any role of importance, and yet its implied inferiority is the crux of Europeans arguments for their ostensibly self-evident superiority” (Wright, 2004, p. 8).

Wright’s distinctions regarding the feelings evoked in white majority populations depending on their proximity to black others will inform my analysis. I will utilize these distinctions in order to illustrate how coverage of black Americans during Hurricane Katrina were discursively constructed as threatening “others from within” whose savagery and inherent predilection for violence could be traced back to Africa. Likewise, I will examine coverage of

black Haitians in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, who were constructed as helpless “others from without,” thereby exemplifying the implied inferiority of blackness—characteristic of stereotypical black African-ness—juxtaposed by white generosity and implied superiority. Within a transnational context, Wright contends that the very concept of ‘black’ as a signifier of identity homogenizes those who are categorized as such. However, in order to counter dominant discourses about black subjects the identifier has been used to create a collective association, one that was necessary during decolonization movements in the African continent and civil rights struggles in North America in the mid twentieth century. Because civic rights were being afforded to black subjects at this time, race formation and discrimination adapted to such changes.

The contemporary ways in which racism is enacted has been the concern of recent critical race scholarship. I utilized such scholarship in my analysis. For instance, race scholar Paul Gilroy (1991) situates the modern deployment of racism in the nation-state, insofar as notions of nationhood require an understanding of who is included and who is excluded from the polity. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, racialized others in white majority nations may not be denied civic and legal rights explicitly but are considered to be different from the dominant group who mark their perceived difference as alien (Ahmed, 2000). Feminist, queer, and critical race theorist Sara Ahmed (2000) argues that the “other” is positioned as a stranger in colonized and colonizing nations in which the strange other is “produced as a figure precisely by being associated with a danger to the purified space of the community, the purified life of the good citizen, and the purified body of the child” (p. 37). As such, I will utilize both Gilroy and Ahmed’s theories of the postcolonial other within varying nation-states in order to illustrate how,

in coverage of each disaster, black Americans and Haitians were discursively constructed as strange and threatening others.

In addition to using theories of postcoloniality and racialized otherness, I utilized critical theories of whiteness—as the gaze through which otherness is delineated. Anti-colonial and psychoanalytic theorist Frantz Fanon (1952) maintains that blackness is defined by whiteness and through the white gaze. As such, Fanon’s work, and the study of whiteness, illustrates the ways in which racial formation is precipitated by a racializing process that defines blackness and racialized others in relation and opposition to white identity (Hall, 1997). Moreover, Wright (2004) argues that the construction of whiteness rests upon the differentiation and binary relation between white and black bodies. The author posits that, through a dialectical relation in which black bodies, namely “others from without,” are the antithesis to the European self, white identity is constructed as all that is not black (read: savage, unintelligent, pre-modern). Wright (2004) contends that “the belief in black inferiority is the result not of objective observation but instead the need for self-definition” (p. 27). In this way, utilizing theories of white identity construction is pertinent to understanding the myriad ways in which blackness is constructed from an historical and contemporary mediated context. As such, I examined dominant discourses about black and African subjects during both disasters within the *New York Times* utilizing theories of blackness and postcoloniality as well as through critical theories of whiteness. Moreover, I interrogated the way dominant discourses were relayed in the print medium from a critical media studies lens.

Mediated representations of racialized populations in Western nations by and large portray non-white groups in a negative and stereotypical manner (Gray, 1995; Hall, 1997). The small number of minority groups in positions of power to create positive and nuanced

representations of themselves means that stereotyping—a process that media scholar Stuart Hall (1997) argues “reduces, essentializes, naturalizes, and fixes difference” (p. 258)—is plentiful, particularly so where “gross inequalities of power” exist (Hall, 1997, p. 258). Thus, as news circulated about Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian Earthquake, stereotypical portrayals of blackness and the Third World did so as well. Victims of Hurricane Katrina were routinely referred to as “refugees” in seemingly Third World like conditions (Classes, 2009; Dyson, 2007) while, after the earthquake, Haitians were portrayed as barbaric, yet helpless, underdeveloped others (Dubois, 2012; Mason, 2011). As such, these “Third World” references situated the black body in a space outside its current inhabitation in order to articulate the racialized and spatial reference point and its socioeconomic associations. The prevalence of stereotypical portrayals of blacks as violent, drug addled, and welfare cheats (Gray, 1995) alongside depictions of Africans as primitive, poverty-stricken, helpless interchangeable others (Duodo, 2000) in Western media may have thereby informed media consumers about what constituted blackness and black African-ness during coverage of Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake. As such, I utilized critical media scholarship in order to interrogate the relation between media representation and identity construction.

Methodology

I conducted a critical discourse analysis of the *New York Times*' coverage of both Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake, comparing the two cases in order to extrapolate the ways in which the construction of knowledge of naturalized black impoverishment and the relations of power imperative to this normalization were articulated within the newspaper. The underlying messages encoded in the material were the focus of my analysis, rather than other discursive locations, such as visual images, for two reasons. Firstly, there is a wide breadth of

research analyzing visual images of both disasters. Secondly, print media provides additional information that images may not and thus is a site of additional discursive formations. I selected the *New York Times* as opposed to other publications because it is the highest circulating metropolitan newspaper in the United States and is widely available, online and in print, in North America, the continent within which both disasters were greatly publicized. Furthermore, linguist and political critic Noam Chomsky has argued that the *New York Times* specifically shapes news perception and historical consciousness within the Western world (Chomsky et al, 2007), and thereby may highly influence content in other publications.

I selected the *New York Times*' in particular because of its reputation as a leading news publication and its self-description as a news outlet that reports in a fair, balanced, and objective manner. The *New York Times* mission statement laments: "Companywide, our goal is to cover the news impartially and to treat readers, news sources, advertisers and all parts of our society fairly and openly, and to be seen as doing so. The reputation of our company rests upon that perception, and so do the professional reputations of its staff members." This statement of intended impartiality arguably aims to solidify trust in the publication from its viewership. While the publication intends to conduct news practices utilizing seemingly noble journalistic principles, it is the underlying messages encoded into the material which I examined in regards to coverage of black subjects affected by Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake. Furthermore, I aimed to illustrate the ways in which the essentialization of black populations is pervasive within Western media outlets even, if not especially, within a reputable news organization.

I examined eighty news articles and editorials in total during the two week period following each event to infer common themes invoked in the publication about the victims in the

immediate aftermath of the disasters. This enabled me to investigate the ways in which the publication produced and re-produced discourses about black subjects. I selected editorials and articles published in the two week period after both disasters because the majority of news coverage materialized in that time period. After this two week period, the quantity of news stories dropped significantly. I analyzed editorials in addition to news articles because editorials are meant to stimulate discussion about current issues and are a way for a particular publication to express its stance on subjects, that is, to express the discursive makeup of the news organization (Porter, 2004). These articles and editorials were retrieved from the LexisNexis online archival database, as well as via the *Times*' online article archive. I did not conduct any visual analyses, even though both print and online stories in the *New York Times* are often accompanied by photographic images. The conjuncture of the two media may or may not alter particular discursive themes extrapolated from the publication. Nevertheless, my research drew from and referred to studies that have analyzed news images of Hurricane Katrina and the earthquake in Haiti.

While there has been research conducted on the representation of race in coverage of both Hurricane Katrina and the earthquake in Haiti, very little work has been done regarding the correlation between these depictions and the naturalization of poverty in portrayals of the Third World in general and the African continent in particular. Critical race scholar Dylan Rodriguez (2007) and legal scholar Ruth Gordon (2009) touch upon this theme in relation to Hurricane Katrina but do not explore it in depth. As such, my research aims to fill the gap in literature about this topic.

Additionally, in conducting a critical discourse analysis, I also aimed to investigate larger structures of power that informed discursive constructions within the publication. Wodak and Meyer (2009) contend that “discourses are not only mere expressions of social practice, but also serve particular ends, namely the exercise of power” (p. 35). As such, in conducting a critical discourse analysis, I aimed to link the discursive stance of the organization with power structures, such as political entities and ideologies that benefit from and remain in place due to the maintenance of hegemonic discourses circulating in the mainstream press.

Historical and Contemporary Context of Hurricane Katrina and Haitian Earthquake

Hurricane Katrina

In order to interrogate the ways in which news coverage of Hurricane Katrina reproduced stereotypical tropes of blackness and discursively linked those tropes with black African-ness, I provide the historical context within which the disaster took place. Furthermore, the historical and contemporary role that racial discrimination in the Gulf Coast played in both the actual disaster and media coverage of it is outlined in order to contextualize the discursive environment the *New York Times*' coverage of the disaster was produced in. Thousands of poor, mainly black Americans were plastered across the news in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina alongside the wreckage that the disaster left. Reportage of death and destruction resulting from a lack of swift governmental response largely focused on the abhorrent conditions the dispossessed were left to live with in the New Orleans Morial Convention Centre and Louisiana Superdome. After the strong category three storm hit the Gulf Coast on August 25 2005, eventually killing 1400 plus people, news quickly spread about the broken levees in New Orleans, which resulted in areas below sea level being flooded in upwards of 10 feet of water (Nunn, 2009; Voorees et al, 2007). The 9th ward, occupied predominantly by black Americans, was one such area. Residents from these areas were by and large impoverished, thus without financial means to flee the city, and either sought refuge from the storm in the Superdome and Convention Center or waited out the storm in their homes. Images of hurricane victims trapped on rooftops after the storm, with make shift SOS signs, illustrated the fear and desperation victims of the disaster felt, and of the lack of emergency personnel present in the region.

Likewise, news reports of the conditions in the Superdome and Convention Centre focused on overcrowding, the lack of sanitation, and the growing number of dead bodies that had

not been retrieved by the state. Additionally, overblown reports of violence, rape, looting, and murder—later disproved—circulated in the press (Dyson, 2007). As such, images and readings of destitute African Americans in exceedingly deplorable conditions became *de rigour* in news coverage. Two things occurred in mediated representations of the disaster: firstly black Americans were shown in dire straits seeking help outwardly, and thus constructed as needy and weak; and secondly, they were shown to be savage and primitive regarding coverage of the alleged violence and looting. As such, racist discourses were deployed via news media which systematically served to vilify and denigrate the black body. The denigration of black bodies in the region specifically can be understood through the history of slavery in the Gulf Coast.

Slavery and New Orleans

During the trans-Atlantic slave trade, particularly in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, New Orleans had a large slave population as the state of Louisiana was a large plantation area (Lavelle & Feagin, 2006; Nunn, 2009). Africans were used as labourers predominantly for sugar production, agriculture, and to build infrastructure in and around the metropolis (Lavelle & Feagin, 2006). While the white inhabitants of the city benefitted from its growing economy, enslaved blacks were exploited for their labour without any recompense. Race historians Kristen Lavelle and Joe Feagin (2006) argue that “huge amounts of uncompensated black labour modernized New Orleans, ushering in a new era of city prominence” (p. 53). As such, generations of black Americans were disenfranchised as labour power was extracted from their bodies without financial compensation, with a few exceptions.

A select few blacks in New Orleans became freed slaves; either those fleeing from harsher conditions in northern and southern cities, or those who freed themselves through self-

purchase. These black Americans were predominantly light-skinned—often individuals conceived from the rape of an enslaved black woman by a white slave owner—and resultantly most slaves were dark-skinned blacks. This racialized separation created a rift within the black New Orleans community, a division Lavelle and Feagin (2006) maintain was an intentional one that derived from a “divide and conquer” rationality. In this way, white Americans were able to maintain and promote white supremacy in the region by selectively allowing some “closer-to-white” blacks to have a degree of social autonomy and financial freedom. However, at the time, white Americans and a hegemonic ideology of white supremacy was still prevalent in Louisiana as black subordination and white supremacy was publicly encouraged through mainstream media outlets—this was done through the support of segregated public spaces, the commonplace use of racial slurs, and the promotion of the white race as the master race, amongst other discursive tactics (Lavelle & Feagin, 2006). This history of overt racism in the New Orleans region, is often downplayed because of a parallel history of creolization and racial hybridity amongst the city’s residents (Lavelle & Feagin, 2006). Nevertheless, the social, political, and economic deprivation that blacks faced in New Orleans was pervasive and can be attributed to high rates of poverty in the region. This history of socioeconomic segregation was made evident by the large percentage of many black Americans living in poverty before Hurricane Katrina hit, and the excessive death that resulted from a lack of economic means to leave the city in its aftermath (Dyson, 2007).

“So black and so poor”: the racialization of poverty in New Orleans

The concentration of poverty in New Orleans, particularly so amongst the city’s black inhabitants, intensified the hurricane’s damage. When CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer reported on the deplorable conditions black New Orleanians were subjected to after Katrina hit, his proclamation

that the victims he was covering were “so black and so poor” highlighted—other than Blitzer’s ill-conceived choice of words—the racialized nature of poverty in the region. While Hurricane Katrina was framed as a “disaster,” that is, a spectacle of death and destruction, sociologists Thomas J. Durant, Jr. and Dawood Sultan (2007) argue that New Orleans was at the brink of a disaster well before the storm hit. The authors maintain that a history of racialized violence, both material and physical, inflicted upon black bodies in America, has culminated in the subordinate economic and precarious financial position urban black Americans live in. This is especially so in New Orleans, a city that is 67 per cent black (Durant and Sultan, 2007; Dyson, 2007).

New Orleans has one of the highest rates of poverty in America’s urban centres. Twenty three per cent of residents in the city lived below the poverty line before the storm, a factor often downplayed as some media personnel vilified blacks in the region who “chose” to stay; the real reason was that they simply could not afford to leave (Durant & Sultan, 2007; Dyson, 2007; Lavelle & Feagin, 2007). African American studies scholar Wahneema Lubiano (2006) reiterates this sentiment, stating that “the reality is that some of New Orleans’ residents were already dying a slow death, brought on by a concentration of poverty, inferior housing, dilapidated educational structures, violence, environmental decay, and systematic state neglect” (p. 23). Race scholar Michael Eric Dyson (2007) argues that the fact of poverty in the region was precipitated by the mass exodus of well-off white Americans to the suburbs in the second half of the 20th century. As suburbanization took hold across the nation, urban centres became largely inhabited by impoverished black citizens, which served to segregate black populations from more affluent whites, and the amenities that wealthier regions had access to (Dyson, 2007; Fair, 2009; Lubiano 2007; Nunn, 2009). Additionally, the tourist economy in New Orleans was conducive to keeping impoverished citizens in that state as the main modes of employment were low-paying, wage,

service-sector jobs that at times proved to be precarious (Dyson, 2007). Furthermore, the failing education system—caused by a lack of investment in public education as wealthier whites sent their children to private schools and thus voted against taxes for schools (Lavelle and Feagin, 2007)—enabled a 40 per cent rate of illiteracy amongst citizens in the region, thereby minimizing the chances of upwards mobility for that population (Dyson, 2007). Dyson (2007) maintains that “concentrated poverty is the product of decades of public policies and political measures that isolate black households in neighbourhoods plagued by severe segregation and economic hardship” (Dyson, 2007, p. 7). This ghettoization of black poverty exacerbated the damage the storm did.

The unnatural disaster

Two precipitating factors rendered the disaster that followed Hurricane Katrina unnatural. While the storm itself was heavy-hitting, the environmental racism—that is, the ways in which a history of racial discrimination placed black Americans in geographically vulnerable areas of the city—that preceded the storm and lack of governmental response in the aftermath dramatically heightened the number of lives lost. Firstly, the areas in which many black New Orleanians lived in, such as the 9th ward, were approximately ten feet below sea level (Nunn, 2009). The reason why the impoverished mainly lived there was because wealthy white Americans in the region occupied the higher ground areas and were thus less vulnerable to the intensive flooding that occurred after the storm (Lubiano, 2007). The levees that broke amidst the high winds were old and well due for repair. While the hurricane ended up being branded as a strong category three storm, meteorologists were initially expecting the storm to be either a category four or five (Lubiano, 2007). The literature on what a storm of that proportion would do to New Orleans, and

the mainly black populated areas like the 9th ward, was expansive, and thus authorities were well aware of the extent of damage a storm of that magnitude could cause, such as breaking the levees and dumping upwards of 10 feet of sea water into the city (Lubiano, 2007). Despite these well known facts, the state failed to fix these infrastructural problems because of, as Lubiano contends, the lack of political clout held by and general devaluation of the surrounding communities. As a result, thousands perished. Lubiano (2007) argues that “the politics of death are articulated in the life we deny the most vulnerable of our people and the life that is increasingly going to be denied to more and more of us” (p. 34). Not only was it the structural racism that placed poor black Americans in a defenceless position, but the lack of response by the federal government, and namely the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), in the storm’s aftermath.

It took five days for FEMA to send emergency personnel to New Orleans. During these five days, victims of the storm were either stranded on their rooftops—without food, water or shelter—or crammed inside the Superdome or Convention Centre with thousands of other residents, also without food, water, or proper sanitation. Camera crews that managed to find their way to New Orleans reported on these conditions, showing the young, the elderly, and persons with disabilities literally dying and being left to fend for themselves. Local non-profit agencies, surrounding municipalities, and communities provided what they could at the time but lacked the resources to provide large-scale assistance.

The government’s negligence, legal scholar Kenneth Nunn (2009) contends, is akin to murder under the nation’s criminal laws. The author maintains that: “by failing to treat the literal abandonment of blacks by their government as criminal behaviour, the state sends the message that the African American community is not important, and that blacks are not full citizens” (p.

200). This lack of value for black life, this “biopolitics of disposability” (Giroux, 2008, p. 592), rendered the black body inherently expendable. Images and readings of this disposability were disseminated through the mainstream media that framed poor black Americans in a similar vain.

Race, media, and Katrina

Hurricane Katrina was covered extensively by print and television news outlets throughout the United States. In order to contextualize the discursive environment within which the *New York Times*' coverage was produced, I outline the ways in which race was portrayed in varying press sources and scholarship analyzing such depictions. Moreover, I outline stereotypical depictions of black Americans in order to make evident the ways in which black folks within the United States are already imagined with the aim of linking these depictions to those of black Africans and other members of the African diaspora. Mediated depictions of stereotypical blackness, that is, the portrayal of African descendants as helpless and dependent while conversely threatening and criminal, flourished in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. While journalists were being congratulated for entering hard to access regions that “put federal and state emergency agencies to shame” (Classen, 2009, p. 2), journalistic coverage of the event, conducted mainly by white reporters, reproduced tropes of black incivility and incompetence (Shah, 2009). Media scholars Shannon Kahle, Nan Yu, and Erin Whiteside (2007) maintain that “media do not just supply information to the public; rather they can influence the public’s understanding of an issue.” As such, depictions of black Americans as inherently dependent on social assistance, but also criminally inclined may have worked to construct African Americans in a derogatory light within the public imagination.

The images of black New Orleanians as needy, helpless, and inept for not leaving the region before the storm were rife. Kahle et al (2007) contend that “although the coverage was in many ways sympathetic, the depiction of passive African Americans receiving handouts reinforces the stereotype that African Americans lack self-reliance” (p. 79). The authors, who conducted content analyses of images circulated in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, found that while white Americans were portrayed as helpers and rescuers, black Americans were portrayed predominantly as “helpless victims” (p. 86). Additionally, the authors concluded that a “blame-the-victim” discourse about blacks not leaving New Orleans despite evacuation warnings—and thus a lack of analysis about the structural conditions that prevented many of the impoverished from doing so—was ever present. Similarly, Sociologist Woody Doane (2007) argues that black Americans were shown to have a “welfare mentality” (p. 113), particularly so when black single mothers—portrayed as welfare queens—were foregrounded. These depictions were accompanied by portrayals of blacks as savage and criminally inclined. An abundance of images and news stories about black criminality materialized in the aftermath of the storm. For instance, media coverage often focused on alleged lootings of stores in the days following the hurricane—while white storm survivors were depicted as “finding food” (Doane, 2007; Dyson, 2007; Merrill 2006). Kahle et al (2007) maintain that mainstream media have a tendency to over represent deviant behaviour during coverage of natural disasters. Media scholar Steve Classen (2009) contends that “powerful racial mythologies connecting notions of crime and indolence with blackness” (p. 3) were prevalent in journalistic accounts of the disaster. Reports of rampant rapes and killings in the Louisiana Superdome and New Orleans Convention Centre were widespread (Doane, 2007). However, accounts of such behaviour were overblown in news coverage. For instance, there were reports

that six homicides took place in the Superdome were widely disseminated, however, when it was found that there was but one potential homicide, news corrections were scant (Doane, 2007; Dyson, 2007). As such, blackness, poverty, and crime were discursively linked, as coverage of the makeshift shelters sensationalized social anarchy that was not actually taking place. Media scholar Morris Merrill (2006) succinctly describes the nature of this reportage when the author states: “the outlines of our assumptions became clear: looters must be black. Desperate people act like animals. The poor deserve their fate” (Merrill, 2006, p. 45). In this way, media coverage constructed black subjects as innately criminal and savage. Furthermore, Dyson (2007) argues that “the media framed black survivors as lawless thugs while ignoring the social conditions that made their lives hell” (p. 169). Indeed, the structural barriers many impoverished black Americans faced were largely ignored.

While coverage of black Americans magnified a sense of natural unruliness and a culture of poverty within the community, it did not analyze and discuss the history of slavery, Jim Crow segregation and black disenfranchisement that has placed many poor black Americans in the socioeconomic bracket that they inhabit, and thus the difficulty in attempting to leave New Orleans before the storm hit. Classen (2009) argues that news anchors were quick to speak of “resolutions rather than framing social problems as outcomes of the chronic, unjust practices endemic to larger socio-political structures” (p. 5). Likewise, communications scholars Eran Ben-Porath and Lee Shaker (2010) intimated that not only did coverage attribute the hardships many blacks faced to their own ineptitude and thus disregarded structural disadvantages faced by poor black Americans, but that this portrayal may have had an effect on audience perception as well. The authors argue that narrow images of the storm’s victims as indolent may steer the audience’s attentions away from a “broader structural context and toward the question of

individual actions” (p. 470). When black Americans were not portrayed as helpless and inept, they were constructed as a violent threat in coverage of the storm’s aftermath.

Coverage of the storm reproduced stereotypes about black criminality, savagery, and incompetence. In so doing, such coverage also worked to accentuate ideologies about white racial superiority (Doane, 2007; Moon & Hurst, 2007; Voorhees et al, 2007). The nature of the mainstream media was conducive to this. Social psychologists Courte Voorhees, John Vick, and Douglas Perkins (2007) maintain that the mainstream media construct an image of the nation as one in which white Americans hold most of the power and thus must come to the rescue of comparatively inferior racialized minorities. A way in which this occurs in news media is by sourcing information from white individuals, who relay their opinions about racialized minorities; opinions and portrayals that are largely negative, which then become thought of as factual. Media scholar Hemant Shah (2009) outlines the fallaciousness of such a process and how similar racial logics work in the nation when the author states: “racial minorities in America were not oppressed because they were inferior; they were defined as inferior so that they might be oppressed” (p. 13). Media reportage of Hurricane Katrina discursively defined poor black Americans as inferior and thus deserving of their socio-economic status. Communications scholars Dreama Moon and Anthony Hurst (2007) conducted a discourse analysis of the thinly veiled white supremacist website *American Renaissance* in order to elucidate the ways in which the construction of black New Orleanians after the storm as inferior was taking place within the online realm. Three prominent themes the authors found in the online publication were the notion of civilized whites versus uncivilized blacks, that there are inextricable (perhaps biological) differences between whites and blacks, and that blacks were shown to be the “white

man's burden" (Moon & Hurst, 2007, p. 134). A reader response to Hurricane Katrina posted on the website reiterated these notions:

The citizens of this country have been made to believe that blacks and whites are no different and the only thing keeping blacks down is white racism. Well now it's plain to see for all the world that Africans that reside here are just as savage and barbaric as their kinfolk in Africa (p. 136)

The authors justify their choice in examining this seemingly extreme publication as they argue that such discourses, while less overtly racist, are mirrored within the mainstream press—discourses that I aim to extrapolate from the *New York Times*' coverage of the disaster. Legal scholar Bryan Fair (2009) posits that coverage of Hurricane Katrina was in fact about “the social construction of racial identities, which privileges a white majority as the superior race and deems all other racial groups inferior” (p. 37). Moreover, race scholar Dylan Rodriguez (2007) maintains that the spectacle made out of the biological and social death of black Americans brought to light an already present racial caste system in the United States in which social, physical, and psychological violence is inflicted upon racialized minorities while “white bodies are generally alienated from and systematically unfamiliar with forms of collective, unexpected bodily violence and premature death” (p. 137). In this way, white supremacist ideologies were reinforced by black suffering made hyper-visible by news coverage of the storm.

Haitian Earthquake

Black suffering was mediated by news outlets in the aftermath of the Haitian earthquake. Similar to news coverage that followed Hurricane Katrina, coverage of the Haitian earthquake was reductive and relied on stereotypical tropes of blackness. In order to understand the

construction of black Haitians in a stereotypical manner, I provide the historical and contemporary context within which Haiti, as a black republic, has been imagined. After the 7.0 Richter scale Haitian earthquake on January 12, 2010, which killed more than 300,000 people, images and readings of Africanized impoverishment were rife (Dubois, 2012). Haitians, a black majority population already imagined as impoverished and despondent, were represented as “both passive and desperate, as well as violent and uncivil” (Mason, 2010, p.96). Evidenced in the numerous relief campaigns that followed, Haiti was depicted as an unfortunate country with a poverty-ridden and primitive population whose plight, like many African nations, could only be fixed by foreign aid (McAlister, 2012). The inhabitants of the island nation were constructed, as they historically have been, as naturally impoverished helpless others; much like their homogenously imagined African counterparts. However, a mix of historical, political, social, and economic reasons allowed the earthquake to be as devastating as it was. These reasons were oft overshadowed by sensationalist and reductive media coverage of the event.

In Haiti, numerous natural disasters, such as mud slides, tropical storms, and earthquakes have occurred within the last decade. The island nation, the third largest in the Caribbean, was once an agricultural haven but decades of resource extraction and soil erosion has left the land vulnerable to catastrophe (Brown, 2010; Dubois, 2012); disastrous mudslides in 2004 were a testament to this. The country, already estimated as the poorest in the Americas, was hit with tropical storms in 2008, leaving 900,000 Haitians in need of humanitarian aid. In the aftermath of the storms, political unrest ensued around an already corrupt government and about the lack of resources, uneven distribution of wealth, and an increase in food prices (Brown, 2010). When the 7.0 Richter scale quake rocked the country, the previous disasters that had devastated the country exacerbated the damage (Mason, 2011). It was not only the environmental background of the

country, but the lack of solid infrastructure that led to the intense destruction of houses, hospitals, and electricity lines leaving Haiti and the estimated 9,000,000 Haitians—as of 2009—in dire physical, social, political, and economic straits (Brown, 2010). Reductive news coverage of the disaster’s victims worked to obscure this historical context.

History of Haiti

Haiti was the first colonized, enslaved republic to gain independence in the Western Hemisphere and was the first independent black post-colonial nation in the world. During the 1791 uprisings, enslaved blacks fought back against French colonizers as they took hold of the nation. However, as a result, in 1825 the newly founded nation was forced to pay a large indemnity to France, its former colonizer, in order for the formal recognition of the state and to pay for the loss of human property for French slave owners. As such, the beginning of a long road of international indebtedness was ushered in. Indeed, independence meant “the beginning of a neo-colonial relationship with the outside world” (Dash, 2011, p. 64).

Following suit with former colonial rulers, Haitian elites, largely lighter skinned blacks, enacted restrictive political and economic measures that “marginalized the majority of slaves and continues to exploit their labour when possible to exclude them from political and economic control” (Casimir and DuBois, 2011, p. 128). Such stratification rendered the majority of Haitians vulnerable to precarious socioeconomic straits. Race scholar Jean Casimir and cultural studies scholar Laurent DuBois (2011) contend the trend of black labour exploitation in post-slavery nations is a hemispheric phenomenon when they state:

In the U.S., Brazil, and the Caribbean, the abolition of slavery did not bring full equality and dignity to former slaves and their descendants, who continued for generations to face

extreme forms of political, social, and economic exclusion as well as structural inequalities that shape these societies to this day (Casmir and DuBois, 2011, p. 128)

In this way, the racialization of black bodies as inherently enslavable has been carried forth in a contemporary context via cheap black labour pools in the Americas and the Caribbean.

Sociologist Alex Dupuy (2010) maintains that the U.S., France and Canada have aided in turning Haiti into “a supplier of the cheapest labour in the Western hemisphere...and one of the largest importers of U.S. food in the Caribbean Basin” (p. 2). For instance, policies set in place by the Clinton administration in the 1990’s made it so Haitians would have to import the majority of their rice from Arkansas farmers, despite the ability for the crop to grow locally. As such, the country not only lost a source of internal revenue, citizens were forced to pay import prices for the agricultural good. This is just one of the ways international political opportunism retains Haiti in an impoverished state. The myriad ways this happen is often cloaked by a notion that the country and its inhabitants are hopelessly poor, a socioeconomic state inherent to the people.

The naturalization of Haitian impoverishment

Blackness and poverty are often synonymous signifiers of racialized otherness. Haiti, and its population in particular, is repeatedly labelled as “the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere” (Balaji, 2011; Farmer and Muckerjee, 2011; Wagner, 2011). Such a label works to naturalize an economic state, one often at the hands of international intervention. In painting Haiti as such, discourses about the *inevitable* plight of its people are circulated and maintained. Critical anthropologist Laura Wagner (2011) maintains that “Haitians to do not deserve this [poverty and destitution] and they are not accustomed to it just because people outside the country are used to seeing them that way” (p. 22). The reinforcement of such racialized

stereotypes works to reductively define a segment of the population. Moreover, to narrowly construct a nation as impoverished is to disregard the plethora of historical and contemporary contributions citizens have made to the nation and the international community. Michel Le Bris (2011) highlights the detriment of the narrow construction of Haitians when the author states: “[I am] tired and angry, hearing over and over the superlative adjective, ‘poorest’ applied to Haiti, as though there is nothing rich about the country, its history, its culture, and its people” (p. 39). As such, when the quake hit, viewers particularly in the West were inundated with images of helplessness and rampant impoverishment, and, given the sizable international donations the country received, eliciting pity for these black others.

Race scholar Murali Balaji (2011) argues that the ways in which pity is felt is within a racialized affective dimension. The author maintains that “race is central to how pity is enacted, appearing both invisible and hyper-visible at the same time in mediated discourse...race is so pervasive in cultivating pity that it becomes lost in the rhetoric surrounding pity, yet it is instrumental in creating the other” (Balaji, 2011, p. 51). In this way, race acts as a homogenizing signifier that elicits pity for the black other in black Diasporic disasters. The pitying of black bodies also works to create the image of the vulnerable yet violent black victim who is an interchangeable other. Balaji (2011) contends that “the Kenyan, Nigerian, Haitian, Jamaican, Afro-Brazilian, and African-American become consumable others through tropes such as conflict, struggle, poverty, violence, and dysfunctionality” (p. 53). As such, the ways in which black subjects are often reduced to just that identifier, disregards the cultural and historical specificities of many black populations worldwide, which is in effect the logic of racism, that is, to make one aspect of a group representative of the whole. Images that circulated after the

Haitian earthquake reiterated already present notions of impoverishment and destitution as the natural black and the natural African condition.

In naturalizing abject poverty within black majority populations, white Western audiences are able to situate themselves in the role of the saviour. After the Haitian earthquake audiences were arguably able to rescue the black victims via either monetary donations or through adoption, the latter proving to be a rather contentious practice. The plethora of news images of black bodies in distress amidst destruction “highlighted the construction of black people as somehow hopelessly dependent upon the charity of whites” (Balaji, 2011, p. 51). While the destruction caused by the earthquake was severe, and monetary donations were needed, the historical context of the indebted nation was often overshadowed by sensational images of black death and conversely the opportunity for white saviours. One of the ways white saviour narratives materialized was through the mass adoption of Haitian babies. With a death toll higher than 300,000 people according to Haitian officials, large numbers of orphans were indeed left behind. However, the speed at which agencies, both recognized and not, were taking Haitian babies and children was alarming (Bellgarde-Smith, 2011). Moreover, the coverage widely supporting the predominantly white parents adopting black babies was also indicative of white saviour narratives. Africana studies scholar J Michael Dash (2011) argues that “the mercy missions to adopt Haitian children that were lavishly covered in the U.S. media may have been humanitarian in intent but they also served to reinforce the old image of a country in need of saviours” (p. 67). Knowledge of such helplessness was produced and re-produced by media outlets whose coverage of the disaster invariably presented racialized stereotypes of black others within reports.

Media, Race, and Haiti

News coverage of the Haitian earthquake, like many racialized disasters, was reductive, employing tropes of innate victimhood and conversely savage violence. This was done so most prominently by news reports of looting. Literary scholar Yanick Lahens (2011) contends that “the acts of the few inevitable looters systematically relayed by the international media were greatly outweighed by such a clamour for life and dignity” (p. 10). While looting is often reported in cases of racialized natural disasters, and contested for not being reported as foraging for basic necessities, reports of such looting in the aftermath of the Haitian earthquake were often overblown and in some cases wholly inaccurate, as reports from the ground largely illustrated how Haitians, who knew better than to rely solely on government and international aid, worked together in rescue efforts (Bell, 2011; DuBois, 2011; Farmer and Muckerjee, 2011; Lahens, 2011). Cultural studies scholar Laurent DuBois (2011) maintains that “television reporters kept asking when the looting was going to begin, but reporters in Haiti instead described most communities as rapidly mobilizing to deliver mutual aid” (p. 12). Such reports reproduce the image of the savage black other, a construction used to justify the subjugation of black populations. Critical anthropologist Laura Wagner (2011) illustrates this when she states:

The news that emerged in the first few days after the earthquake salivated over ‘looters’ and ‘criminals’ set loose on a post-apocalyptic wasteland. This is the same story that has always been told about Haiti, for more than two hundred years, since the slaves had the temerity to not want to be slaves anymore (p.18)

As such, reportage of death and destruction amongst Haitians, who were largely portrayed as violent and savage were rife. When Haitians were not portrayed as violent, they were portrayed as helpless victims.

Destitute Haitians in the aftermath of the earthquake became a standard image in news reports. Balaji (2011) argues that such reports elicited feelings of racialized pity in viewers, one that colluded images of helplessness with victimhood inherent to the black condition. The author maintains that “by presenting raw and emotionally intense images to global audiences, media industries are able to perpetuate a cycle of racialized pity that privileges those who pity and pathologizes those who are pitied” (Balaji, 2011, p. 58). In this way, the pitied black Haitians were reported as those whose culture and practices—such as the Voodoo faith (Bellgarde-Smith, 2011)—keep Haitians in their plight. For instance, when a Haitian mother was interviewed about the whereabouts of her deceased child, the misreporting that followed supported such a discourse of primitive helplessness. Literary scholar Marlene Rigaud Apollon (2011) states: “I was frustrated when a young woman who was asked what happened to the corpse of her baby answered ‘Yo jeté Li’ [they threw it away], and the reporter, no doubt in good faith, translated her words as ‘I threw it away’” (p. 12). Reporting errors such as those altered the reality of what was happening on the ground, an alteration that fits in with well-established myths about black subjectivity. Le Bris (2011) argues that “the Haiti that journalists describe is a fantasy, a mirror of their fears, or their prejudices” (p. 30). In this way, media coverage of the earthquake and its after effects discursively constructed the nation in reductive and stereotypical ways.

Mainstream media, as a primary discursive apparatus, shapes the way images, namely of others, are created, distributed, and maintained. News coverage of the quake constructed Haitians most prominently as outsiders, the antithesis, to the presumed (white) Western viewer. As such dichotomous notions of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ were perpetuated. Le Bris (2011) maintains that this dichotomy bolsters the belief that foreign aid and international intervention are required in

disaster situations and allows for the reification of a belief in the benevolence of Westerners. The author states:

And these are not Haitians that I see in the Hollywood disaster movie presented by the TV channels. It is instead the spectacle that we present to ourselves of the aid we bring to a mass of ignorant characters, incapable of organizing themselves, governed by sudden impulses, panic, disorder, and looting (Le Bris, 2011, p. 30)

Likewise, the abundance of aid telethons worked not only to construct Haitians as helpless others but to create a sense of national pride within Western nations at the expense of Haitian subject formation. American studies scholar Shana Redmond (2013) maintains that aid telethons and anthems are a space that expands “the terrain of black depravation” in which “first world sympathy” can be deployed. Similarly, Religions scholar Elizabeth McAlister (2011) argues that aid telethons oversimplify devastations caused by natural disasters because they focus on the benevolent role of potential donators. While telethons served to obscure nuanced reasons for the breadth of the damage caused—allowing Western audiences to remain compassionate givers—media coverage of the disaster, including telethons, relied on existing stereotypes of black otherness to relay a message of destitution. The discursive power of the Western media enabled these stereotypical constructions to occur. African studies scholar Patrick Bellegarde-Smith (2011) argues that such constructions are created and maintained within an unequitable media system that propagates racialized otherness. As such, the reductive imagery disseminated in the aftermath of the quake exemplifies the power the media has in creating essentialized understandings of black subjects to their detriment. The discursive constructions of black Haitians as weak and helpless yet savage and primitive illustrate both the prevalence of long-

standing anti-black stereotyping and are indicative of what Lahens (2011) argues as the West's "difficulty in humanizing the black" (p. 10).

In both Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake, black populations were subject to media stereotyping and scrutiny regarding the socioeconomic bracket of the African diaspora in those regions. The role that a history of marginalization in both New Orleans and Haiti played in the magnitude of damage both disasters caused was obscured in most mainstream press outlets. Instead, sensationalist and reductive tropes of blackness appeared. In outlining the historical and contemporary contexts of both regions, I aim to highlight why such reductive depictions of black Haitians and black Americans were both misguided and problematic. Furthermore, the lack of this context in media reports, I contend, allowed for essentialized tropes of black African-ness to be linked with the African diaspora in coverage of both disasters.

Findings

Through examining articles and editorials about the Haitian earthquake and Hurricane Katrina, nine themes of Africanized otherness materialized in the coverage. Moreover, tropes of black others were present within the coverage that worked to elicit images and reductive notions of black African-ness. Similarities in coverage of the two events were analyzed borrowing from Michelle Wright's (2004) delineation between "others from within"—others within white majority societies who are positioned as immediately threatening—and "others from without"—others in racialized majority nations who are constructed as inferior in order for those of European ancestry to assert their superiority. Nine themes invoked in *New York Times*' coverage of the two disasters reinscribed tropes of black otherness and were as follows: Blacks as chaotic, blacks as savage/violent, a fear of black retaliation, blacks as helpless, blame-the-victim discourses, American exceptionalism (American's as supposed saviours), positivity in militarized environments (restoring order), and white saviours. Lastly, the ninth theme extrapolated from the reportage was blacks as foreign, Africanized others. I describe this theme apart from the other eight in order to examine how the initial eight themes play into and reinforce notions of Africanized otherness. Existing scholarship regarding the construction of blackness within news media highlight some of the themes I extrapolated from the *Times*' news coverage of both disasters. By illustrating how established tropes of black otherness in fact imply and are conflated with the denigrated construction of black African-ness, I aim to build on existing literature of constructions of essentialized black subjectivity.

Others as Threatening

Theme 1: Chaos

During coverage of Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake, the black inhabitants of both regions were portrayed as disorderly and chaotic. While both disasters gravely affected the areas within which they took place, the coverage of the events in the *New York Times* reinscribed tropes of black otherness that often portray blacks and black Africans as disorderly and thereby justifiably governed by paternalistic political interventions (Camara, 2008; Classen, 2009). Discursive depictions of both disasters highlighted the unmanaged behaviour of black victims whilst simultaneously naturalizing police or military presence, rather than primarily aid relief, in both the Gulf Coast and Haiti. During coverage of Hurricane Katrina, numerous accounts of the state of New Orleans rested upon “restoring order” in the region and to the Superdome and Convention Center that held the majority of mainly black residents after the storm. New Orleans was described as “a city beset by chaos and crime” while law enforcement were said to “create a sense of civility in a city with no running water, no electricity, a dwindling supply of food and a spreading sense of chaos” (Applebome et al, ‘A Delicate Balance’). Furthermore, reporters at the *Times* outlined the chaotic nature of New Orleans in the following passages:

“Disorder prevailed, as thousands of survivors with glazed looks and nothing more than garbage bags of possessions waited in interminable lines for a chance to get out” (Dao and Kleinfeld, ‘More Troops and Aid’)

“Scores of amphibious vehicles and Humvees carrying thousands of newly dispatched armed National Guardsmen pushed through New Orleans in a daylong parade, hoping to

replenish the dire needs of the stranded and to try to restore order to a city that has devolved into wantonness” (Dao and Kleinfield, ‘More Troops and Aid’)

A sense of chaos was also recounted given how reports of ‘looting’ were rife in coverage of Hurricane Katrina, a term hotly contested in the aftermath of the storm. The term ‘looting’ is argued to be used to describe black New Orleanians in a criminalized fashion when such actions may in actuality be foraging for necessities given the dire situation. For instance, when a Greyhound bus station was turned into a makeshift jail for arrested looters, those held may have been apprehended unfairly. James McTairie reported that he was held in the makeshift jail for taking towels from a store (Berenson, ‘With Jails flooded’). Reportage of alleged looting added to an overall discourse about the chaotic nature of the Gulf Coast. Moreover, coverage of looting in conjunction with reports of impending police and military presence justified the latter. The following quotes exemplify such reports:

“In New Orleans, thousands of National Guard and active duty troops as well as federal marshals finally appeared to be in control of streets where looters and hooligans had run wild for days last week, unchecked by overwhelmed police officers who were focused on saving lives, not property, in the chaotic city” (McFadden, ‘New Orleans Begins a Search’)

“The governor’s sent out the police and the National Guard after reports of looting, and officials in some parts of Louisiana said they would impose curfew” (Treaster and Zernike, ‘Hurricane Slams into Gulf Coast’)

“Hundreds of newly arrived National Guard troops patrolled the lawless streets of New Orleans yesterday beginning the task of wresting control from thugs and looters and

restoring order in a city that had all but surrendered to death and disorder after Hurricane Katrina” (McFadden, ‘Bush Pledges’)

“About one-third of these 21,000 Guard members now in place or preparing to deploy to the four state region are military police to help combat looting and help restore order” (Stevenson, ‘Administration Steps Up’)

Implicated in the discursive construction of New Orleans as a chaotic region filled with disorderly, unmanageable people was the rendering of the city as a nearly anarchic place.

Reports stated the following:

“As New Orleans descended into near anarchy, the White House considered sending active-duty troops to impose order” (Applebome et al, ‘A Delicate Balance)

“That things have gone so badly so quickly after the storm in New Orleans has produced, beyond sympathy, feelings in Europe of disappointment, distress, and even fear that a major city in the world’s superpower could have fallen into something that looks, from this side of the Atlantic, like anarchy” (Bernstein, ‘The View from Abroad’)

The discursive trend of reporting on Katrina and the regions affected by the storm as chaotic were rife within the *Times*. In the aftermath of the Haitian earthquake, black inhabitants of the region were framed in the same chaotic way.

In coverage of the Haitian earthquake, the *Times* reportage of the disaster created an image of the region and its black inhabitants as chaotic, while reports of looting, or the impending threat of looting, were rife as well. Such reports reinforced stereotypes of black others, particularly impoverished black others, as disorderly and in need of regulation. While the dire condition in the aftermath of the earthquake was evident by first hand reports from people on the island nation, the camaraderie of those able to help, namely in Port-au-Prince, one of the

hardest hit regions, was obfuscated by news reports that often highlighted the few tensions that arose. For example, in the following passages, coverage of the storm centered on the perceived anarchic state of the country:

“Patience was wearing thin and reports of looting increased as another day went by with no power and limited fresh water. ‘For the moment, this is anarchy,’ said Adolph Reynold, a top aide to the mayor in Port-Au-Prince.” (Lacey, ‘Patience Wears Thin’)

“Medical workers from Doctors Without Borders which had 800 people in Haiti before the quake said they were mobbed everywhere they went by people who had suffered severe traumas and crushed limbs, and by others begging for help in rescuing trapped relatives” (Cooper and Robbins, ‘United States Mobilizes’)

“They sought to leave an anarchic city marked by acute shortages of basic goods and efforts hampered by bottlenecks and security fears” (Lacey, ‘Patience Wears Thin’)

“The struggle to survive intensified Thursday, in dramas that played out around this city that has already suffered more than most from centuries of poverty, violence, and natural disaster” (Lacey, ‘Hopes Fade’)

Furthermore, the chaotic description of Haiti was further propagated by reports of impending looting and violence in the region. For example, reports stated:

“Hunger drove many to swarm places where food was being given out. Reports of isolated violence and looting intensified as night approached” (Thompson and Cave, ‘Officials Strain’)

“Senior United Nations officials said it might boil over at any moment as the difficulties of living without water, food, and shelter mount” (Romero and Lacey, ‘By Air, Sea and Land’)

During coverage of both Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake, reports in the *Times* framed the Gulf Coast and Haiti, respectively, as anarchic places filled with chaotic, unmanageable people. This discursive tendency was done so alongside the construction of black Haitians and Americans as savage and violent masses.

Theme 2: Savagery and Violence

Coverage of Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake illustrated existing tropes of black savagery and violence. Within the public imagination, such tropes work to justify the subordination of black populations. For example, during coverage of Hurricane Katrina, Doane (2007) posits, for white Americans being shown images of poor blacks as outside of traditional American society, and as looters, rapists and murderers, only reinforced existing stereotypes. This reinforcement only serves to further ‘other’ black and racialized bodies—Shah (2009) concedes that “the outsider groups posing a risk to established communities are often singled out as irrational, dangerous, and a threat to community order” (p. 4)—whilst simultaneously reinforcing white supremacist notions. In this way, white identity is constructed in opposition to the irrational, violent, barbaric, black other. Reportage of the Hurricane in the *New York Times* repeated tropes of the violent black other. ‘Looters’ were described as menacing thieves while “armed thugs seiz[ed] control” of the Superdome (Treaster and Kleinfield, ‘New Orleans is Inundated’) and Convention Center, both of which were cited, by unsubstantiated reports, as hotbeds for violence, rape, and murder. For example, the following quotes illustrate the focus on alleged violence:

“Captain Winn said armed groups of 15 to 25 men terrorized the others, stealing cash and jewelry. He said policemen patrolling the center told him that a number of women

had been dragged off by groups of men and gang-raped—and that murders were occurring” (Lipton et al, ‘Breakdowns Marked Path’)

“In Bay St. Louis Mississippi, the police shut down a high school that had been illegally turned into a squalid, lawless shelter where hundreds of people were fighting and using floors as toilets” (Dewan and Goodnough, ‘Rotting Food’)

Coverage of violent black others permeated news reports in the *Times*. The threat of these others-from-within was evident in reports of confrontations between state authorities and “armed thugs.” Such a fearful discourse was illustrated by the publication reporting that, after the storm, bus drivers were afraid to pick up passengers because of reports of looting and violence. Likewise, police officers were reported to have walked out on the job “citing the peril of fighting armed and menacing refugees” (McFadden, ‘Bush Pledges’). The following quotes highlight a few examples of this fearful discourse:

“Looting broke out as opportunistic thieves cleaned out abandoned stores for a second night. ‘These are not individuals looting,’ Colonel Ebbert said. ‘These are large groups of armed individuals.’” (Treaster and Kleinfield, ‘New Orleans is Inundated’)

“[Police officers were] plundering into the darkness guided by the muzzle flashed of thugs’ handguns” (Lipton et al, ‘Breakdowns Marked Path’)

Savagery of the storm victims in coverage of Hurricane Katrina was often expressed by the wanton nature of alleged looting. Since the protection of private property remains a cornerstone of American values, the site of individuals taking said property was reported as an assault not only on civic order, but a symbol of impulsive and unwarranted greed. For instance, the *Times* reports:

“The desperate and the opportunistic took advantage of an overwhelmed police force and helped themselves to anything that could be carried, wheeled, or floated away, including food, water, shoes, television set, sporting goods, and firearms.” (Barringer and Longman, ‘Owners Take Up Arms’)

“As they came and went, the looters nodded companionably to one another” (Barringer and Longman, ‘Owners Take Up Arms’)

Likewise, in coverage of the Haitian earthquake, tropes of violent black others were plentiful. Haitians, as “others from without,” were constructed as savage beings whose primitive instincts, unlike their Euro-American counterparts, were compelled to engage in spurts of violence amidst such a disaster. Balaji (2011) maintains that such tropes of primitive violence enacted by Haitian subjects in the mainstream media are “symbolically linked with the dysfunctionality of a homogenous Africa” (p. 54). Such a link provides the basis for homogenizing and denigrating all black bodies. For example, Haitians were depicted as inclined to loot and shoot amidst the disaster in the following instances:

“Looting of houses and shops increased Friday and anger boiled over in unpredictable ways; residents near the city’s overfilled main cemetery stoned a group of ambulance workers seeking to drop off more bodies.” (Lacey, ‘Patience Wears Thin’)

“The threat of mass looting seems to increase by the day. And the police have been outmatched by criminal gangs in money and guns.” (Thompson and Sontag, ‘Haiti Takes Tiny Steps’)

Likewise, in coverage of the earthquake in the *Times*,’ the threat of violence from black Haitians was implied. Reports highlighted the mob-like, and often primitive, nature of the violence. For instance:

“Many business owners have not opened their doors for fear of mobs ransacking their operations and stealing their merchandise. Those fears were staked by pockets of looting in downtown commercial areas in recent days.” (Romero and Lacey, ‘By Air, Sea, and Land’)

“Along the capital’s main commercial strip Saturday afternoon, dozens of armed men—some wielding machetes, others with sharpened pieces of wood—dodged from storefront to storefront, battering down doors and hauling away whatever they could carry” (Romero and Lacey, ‘Looting Flares’)

Additionally, reports of vigilante violence were ever present within coverage of the quake. Again, Haitians were depicted as primitively violent and savage, taking retributive matters in to their own hands. The following quotes illustrate this theme.

“When news that the earthquake had granted the prisoners early parole reached Cite Soleil, a committee was set up, then vigilante security teams. Prisoners spotted re-entering the area were chased and run out of town. Those who were caught came to a definitive end” (McKay, ‘Update of the Crisis’)

“Both impulses—the riotous theft and the vigilante response were borne of desperation, the lack of food and water as well as the absence of law and order.” (Romero and Lacey, ‘Looting Flares’)

In the *Times*’ coverage of both Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake, the majority black populations affected by the disasters were constructed as savage and violent, both stereotypical characteristics of aberrant black otherness and I argue black African-ness. These characteristics were implied in the discursive trend of framing black storm and quake victims as those to retaliate state authorities with violence.

Theme 3: Fear or Expectation of Black Retaliation

Black Americans and Haitians were portrayed as a violent threat in the *Times*' coverage of Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake. However, this was done in two separate ways. As I argue, African Americans were constructed as "other from within," that is, as an internal threat to Euro-Americans. In this way, a fear of retaliation was elucidated through the depiction of the Gulf Coast, and New Orleans in particular, as requiring state officials to police the black bodies in that region as to prevent potential violence enacted upon Euro-American authorities for failing to respond to the hurricane in a timely and efficient manner. Conversely, in coverage of the Haitian earthquake, black Haitians were constructed as "others from without," thereby not imposing an immediate threat to Euro-Americans, but being constructed as an inferior species. This materialized in reports outlining an expectation of violence, as black others are considered to engage in, but then reporting that the expected violence "surprisingly" did not occur. For example, coverage of Hurricane Katrina presented black Americans as a threat to state order and authorities in the following quotes.

"But the president did not interact much with storm victims, and at one site, a Salvation Army truck in Mississippi, those he did see had first been screened by Secret Service agents with metal detectors." (Bumiller, 'Promises By Bush')

"Mr. Bush did not go into the heart of the city's devastation, where thousands of largely poor, black refugees have raged at the government's response to one of the worst natural disasters in American history." (Bumiller, 'Promises By Bush')

"The White House cited security concerns and worries about causing more chaos as the reasons for keeping Mr. Bush away from the streets and the New Orleans Superdome,

where refugees have lived in squalor and lawlessness for days.” (Bumiller, ‘Promises By Bush’)

Coverage of the Haitian earthquake on the other hand portrayed black Haitians as a group accustomed to engaging in violence. Evident in the following quotes was the surprise with which the expected violence did not occur, or did so minimally.

“On Sunday morning, a United Nations truck appeared in the park near the presidential palace, where hundreds of families have been squatting since the earthquake. They handed out bags of water to a crowd mostly appreciative, with only a little shoving.” (Cave and Sontag, ‘Supermarket Rescue’)

“Port-au-Prince, volatile in normal times, remained relatively calm, but the United Nations reported that one of its food warehouses in the capital had been looted.” (Lacey, ‘Patience Wears Thin’)

“Some people were bracing for the worst. Harold Marzouka, a Haitian-American businessman who was hustling his family onto a private jet to Miami, said he could feel the tension rising and feared that hunger and desperation might prompt an explosion of violence.” (Lacey, ‘Patience Wears Thin’)

“Given the conditions, it was all the more remarkable that a spirit of cooperation and fortitude prevailed.” (Romero and Lacey, ‘Looting Flares’)

“Mr. Delatour said he found hope in the fact that there had been relatively few reports of post-earthquake looting and violence.” (Lacey, ‘Haiti’s Government’)

Black Haitians and black Americans were constructed as threatening. The *Times*’ coverage of both disasters framed the two Diasporic populations as a real or potential threat to state authorities and themselves. However, when both populations were not framed as threatening,

they were constructed as helpless masses dependent on the benevolence and strength of white saviours and state personnel.

Others as Victims

Theme 4: Helplessness

Reportage of Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian Earthquake depicted the black bodies involved in both disasters as helpless when they were not portrayed as threatening. In so doing, black Americans and Haitians were constructed as populations that could not take care of themselves and thus were in need of saving from their Euro-American counterparts. Moreover, such a depiction of black helplessness may work to reify notions of black inferiority, white supremacy, and the resulting socio-cultural and socio-political implications of such an idea (i.e. promoting a reduction in social services, less international aid, and disinvestment in black majority population areas). Depictions of black helplessness were evident in coverage of Hurricane Katrina, exemplified in the following passages that portrayed black Americans as in need of rescuing:

“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 and rising water threatened generator” (Treaster and Kleinfield, ‘New Orleans is Inundated’)

“Hundreds were still huddled on rooftops or isolated on patches of ground, where they awaited rescue for two days without food or water. An armada of small boats was out, rescuing many from flooded areas in the city’s poorest sections” (McFadden and Blumenthal, ‘Bush Sees’)

“The narrative of feckless victims being plucked to safety wore thin over the week and anchors began posturing to no good effect. Mr. Hannity seemed riveted by the fact that rape was part of the story in the darkened corners of the Convention Center and Superdome” (Carr, ‘The Pendulum’)

Likewise, coverage of the hurricane’s victims highlighted the deplorable conditions in which the black Americans were forced to live in the aftermath of the storm, due to their financial inability to evacuate New Orleans, but also because of a lack of swift governmental response to the storm. In so doing, black New Orleanians were shown as helpless others who were at the mercy of authorities. For instance, *Times* coverage stated the following:

“On the streets of this submerged town, the anxiety and depravation that had built up over four days gave way on Thursday to misery, despair, and anger as the refugees of Hurricane Katrina waited yet another day for their deliverance” (Dao, Treaster, and Barringer, ‘New Orleans is Awaiting Deliverance’)

“Death was only a part of the devastation along the Gulf Coast. There was also hunger, the thirst, and the homelessness” (Bewan, ‘Face to Face’)

“‘Many of these households are low-income and they’re going to rely more heavily on government aid and charity,’ said Mark Zandi, the chief economist at Economy.com, a research company.” (Leonhardt and Uchitelle, ‘Willing Workers’)

“All morning, cable news networks showed scene after scene of victims, most of them black, stranded without adequate food, water, or shelter, helpless and enraged” (Stanley, ‘Cameras Captured’)

In reportage of the Haitian earthquake, the *Times* depicted Haitians as a helpless population amidst the catastrophic result of the quake. While the damage to the island nation was

significant, the portrayal of Haitians as destitute and waiting for foreign help was prevalent in reports despite the fact that Haitian citizens began recovery efforts by themselves, as their faith in both national and international government aid faltered. The country, described as “everybody’s cherished tragedy” (Danner, ‘To Heal Haiti’), was repeatedly portrayed as plagued by poverty, hopelessly devastated by the storm, and a wasteland without hope for recovery. The proceeding quotes illustrate the ways in which Haiti was constructed as a place of hapless destitution.

“Sometimes the pity that is attached to the land—and we see this increasingly in the news coverage this past week—attains a tone almost sacred, as if Haiti has taken its place as a kind of sacrificial victim among nations, nailed in its bloody suffering to the cross of unending destitution” (Danner, ‘To Heal Haiti’)

“So, is Haiti hopeless? Is Bill O’Reilly right? He said: ‘Once again, we will do more than anyone else in the planet, and one year from today Haiti will be just as bad as it is right now.’” (Kristof, ‘Some Frank Talk’) [answered in negative]

“In Haiti, the apocalypse wears the trappings of the norm. It’s a place where heartbreak never seems to end.” (Herbert, ‘Resolve Among the Ruins’)

“Enslavement, murderous colonial oppression, invasions by powerful foreign armies, grotesque homegrown tyrants, natural disasters—all you have to do is wait a while in Haiti for the next catastrophe to strike” (Herbert, ‘Resolve Among the Ruins’)

“This is a country that, even before the earthquake created so much devastation, could barely cope with the healthy” (Rivera, ‘After Amputations’)

Furthermore, reportage of Haiti in the aftermath of the quake portrayed the country as a nation of desperation; one irrevocably damaged by the quake, which only magnified the destitute nature of the country. The following quotes illustrate this trend:

“[Previous storms] left a destitute population in even more desperate conditions”

(Romero and Lacey, ‘Fierce Quake’)

“‘In 30 seconds, this country was set back 100 years,’ Bill Hemmer, an anchor on FOX News channel said” (Stelter, ‘Next News’)

“Until Jan 12th, Haiti was a ‘fragile state’ desperate for help to develop a working economy and effective institutions. Now it is much worse—a charnel house with tens of thousands of corpses in a capital city wasteland” (Traub, ‘Imagining a Stronger Haiti’)

“Reporters and anchors struggled to convey the enormity of the devastation in Haiti on Thursday, as the world’s news media directed their collective attention to the crippled country” (Stelter and Perez-Rena, ‘The Media Struggle’)

Additionally, helplessness in the island nation was alluded to by the naturalization of Haitian poverty within coverage of the earthquake. While the country is often reported as the ‘poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere,’ the reasons why that is the case are often obfuscated by the sensationalist nature of press coverage that renders the nation “jaw-droppingly poor.” Such renderings are evident in the following passages:

“And the poor who define this nation squatted in the streets, some hurt and bloody, many more without food and water, close to piles of covered corpses and rubble” (Romero, ‘Haiti Lies’)

“Long before its ground started heaving Haiti was already a byword for a broken place. Its leaders were considered kleptocrats; its people were jaw-droppingly poor.” (Lacey, ‘Cultural Riches’)

“[Earthquake] a tragedy made more cruel by Haiti’s desperate poverty” (Cooper and Robbins, ‘United States Mobilizes’)

Survivors of Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake were constructed as helpless masses in the *Times*’ coverage of both events. In so doing, these majority black populations were rendered hapless subjects upon which recusing efforts were enacted. Conversely, when survivors of the disasters weren’t portrayed as feeble subjects, they were blamed for their victim status in the publication.

Theme 5: Blame-the-victim

Blame-the-victim discourses were present in coverage of both Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake. Such discourses implicate the victims of the respective disasters in their own suffering. In so doing, responsibility is absolved from bodies, namely government authorities, who failed citizens by their self-serving actions and inaction before and after both disasters. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, black victims were scolded in the press for not leaving the Gulf Coast despite evacuation orders by state authorities. The lack of financial means that hindered many poor inhabitants from doing so was obscured by such blame-the-victim discourses. For example, the proceeding quotes exemplify the ways in which victims of the storm were blamed for their own travail.

“[Warning of a break in the levees was] enough for many of the city’s 485,000 residents to heed the mayor’s call to leave” (Treater and Goodnough, ‘Powerful Storm’)

“Some out of town guests took taxis as far as Baton Rouge, 75 miles away, to find rental car agencies that were open” (Treaster and Goodnough, ‘Powerful Storm’)

“Authorities said from the start that the Superdome would not be a full-service shelter and urged people to use it only as a last resort if they could not evacuate the city” (Treaster, ‘Life-or-Death’)

Likewise, during coverage of the Haitian earthquake, the *Times* implied that Haitians were responsible for the precarious position that most inhabitants of the island nation faced before and after the quake. Reports of money mismanagement by authorities and of the lack of fortitude and intellect of the Haitian people were expressed in the publication. Such discourses were made evident through the use of rhetorical questions, reader feedback, and traditional reporting. Money mismanagement as a blame-the-victim theme is highlighted in the following passages:

“Given Haiti’s long history of mismanagement of funds, international donors were hesitant to write a blank check” (Lacey and Thompson, ‘Agreement on Effort’)

“Over the past few decades, the world has spent trillions of dollars to generate growth in the developing world. The countries that have not received aid, like China, have seen tremendous growth and tremendous poverty reductions. The countries that have received aid, like Haiti, have not.” (Brooks, ‘The Underlying Tragedy’)

Reader feedback: “Giving money to Haiti and other third-world countries is like throwing money in the toilet.” (Kristof, ‘Some Frank Talk’)

Reader feedback: “I won’t send money because I know what will happen [corruption]” (Kristof, ‘Some Frank Talk’)

Furthermore, Haitians were implied as lacking the work ethic and intelligence necessary to maintain a functional and prospering society. The following quotes illustrate how such discourses were deployed.

Reader feedback: “The low I.Q of the 9 million people there [are to blame for its poverty]” (Kristof, ‘Some Frank Talk’)

“Why is Haiti so poor? Is it because Haitians are dimwitted or incapable of getting their act together” (Kristof, ‘Some Frank Talk’)

“[Haiti] should replace parts of the local culture with a highly demanding, highly intensive culture of achievement—involving everything from new child-rearing practices to stricter schools to better job performance” (Brooks, ‘The Underlying Tragedy’)

“Haiti’s many man-made woes—its dire poverty, political infighting and proclivity for insurrection—have been exacerbated by natural disasters” (Romero and Lacey, ‘Fierce Quake’)

During the *Times*’ coverage of both Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake, victims of the disaster were discursively blamed for being in the unfortunate position that they were. Such a discourse worked to absolve other bodies, such as relief agencies and state authorities, from their often unmet responsibilities to both populations. However, it was these organizations that were revered in the publication for their supposed saviour roles in both disasters.

Saviours

Theme 6: American³ Exceptionalism

³ I use the term ‘American’ to describe something or someone belonging to the United States of America, rather than either or both continents in the Americas.

Within coverage of both Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake, a discursive trend of American exceptionalism was present. Such a discourse however was enacted in variant ways between coverage of both disasters. During Hurricane Katrina, coverage in the *New York Times* highlighted the out of character nature of the largest superpower in the world being unable or unwilling to quickly come to the aid of its citizens. This was also reiterated by black victims of the storm who expressed that their citizenship in the U.S. ought to protect them from such a calamity. Gordon (2009) posits that though black Americans were described in this manner, a notion of American exceptionalism—that such atrocities could not and should not happen to black citizens in the “greatest country in the world”—was present in storm victim’s responses to being referred to as refugees. Conversely, in coverage of the Haitian earthquake, the presence of a strong, if not intimidating, American presence in the region was an example of how the world’s superpower can and does flex their economic and political muscle.

In the *Times*’ coverage of Hurricane Katrina, a sense of shame was eluded to regarding the “Third-World like” condition that the Gulf Coast was in after the storm. Implicated in this sense of shame was the assumption that deplorable living conditions should not be found in such a “great” nation. The following quotes illustrate this discursive trend:

“If it’s shameful that we have bloated corpses on New Orleans streets, it’s even more disgraceful that the infant mortality rate in America’s capital is twice as high as in China’s capital” (Kristof, ‘The Larger Shame’)

“This is a national disgrace. FEMA has been here three days, yet there is no command and control. We can send massive amounts of aid to tsunami victims, but we can’t bailout the city of New Orleans [said by Terry Ebert, head of Homeland Security in New Orleans]” (Bumiller, ‘Democrats and Others’)

“[People] have been shocked by scores of bodies floating in flood waters and the elderly left for dead in their wheelchairs in the world’s most powerful nation” (Bumiller, ‘Promises by Bush’)

Additionally, reportage highlighted how the disaster, as a national failure, reduced the United States to the status of developing nations—some reporters intimated the larger problem of poverty and social inequality in the country allowed for such a comparison to be made. For example, reporters stated:

“‘It really makes us look like Bangladesh or Baghdad,’ said David Herbert Donald” (Purdum, ‘Across U.S.’)

“Indeed, according to the United Nations program, an African American baby in Washington has less of a chance of surviving its first year than a baby born in urban parts of the state of Kerala in India” (Kristof, ‘The Larger Shame’)

“Americans are accustomed to welcoming, or at least receiving, refugees from other countries, not creating our own” (Soloman, ‘A Refugee Among Refugees’)

“Mr. Clinton could not suppress a smile as he reported that the ambassador from Sri Lanka had offered to coordinate the tsunami countries to raise money for the Katrina victims” (Stanley, ‘Cameras Captured’)

In coverage of Haiti, the *Times* highlighted the powerful nature of the United States, particularly within disaster relief efforts. American exceptionalism as a discursive theme was illustrated through the reinforcement of the U.S. as not only the world’s economic superpower but as a benevolent state as well. Reporters stated the following:

“On a political level, Brazil’s maturity—in sharing leadership—will be tested to the limit. In particular, after years of being the unrivaled leaders of the military forces securing the

streets of Haiti, Brazilian commanders now have to coordinate with U.S. military forces, whose numbers, equipment, and resources are likely to dwarf those of all other nations combined” (McKay, ‘Update on the Crisis’)

“With reports of looting and scuffles over water and food, President Obama promised \$100 million in aid, as the first wave of a projected 5,000 American troops began arriving to provide security and the infrastructure for the expected flood of aid from around the world”(Lacey, ‘Hopes Fade’)

“In countries like the United States or China, with vast resources to handle and count the dead, the numbers are likely to be more accurate than in a poor nation like Haiti” (MacFarquhar, ‘Haiti’s Poverty Thwarts’)

“The United States is known for throwing its considerable weight around in international aid efforts” (Rivera, ‘Obstacles to Recovery’)

In coverage of both Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake, a discourse surrounding the exceptionalism of the United States, as a place in which a disaster the magnitude of Hurricane Katrina should never happen and a nation ready to rescue Haiti, was ever present. This discursive trend was also evident in the ways in which the *Times*’ revered the militarization of both the Gulf Coast and Haiti in the aftermath of the each disaster.

Theme 7: Militarized Environment

State authorities were positioned as saviours in coverage of both Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake. More specifically, American military presence in both the Gulf Coast and in Haiti was expressed as necessary for order to be maintained and beneficial to the inhabitants of both regions, despite reports to the contrary—that military presence scared New

Orleanians in the Superdome and Convention Center (Dyson, 2007) and hindered the facilitation of aid and distribution of supplies in Haiti after the quake (DuBois, 2012; Farmer and Muckerjee, 2011). However, the emphasis on social disorder within both affected regions was juxtaposed by a strong military presence able to control the chaotic, criminal, and hapless masses. During coverage of Hurricane Katrina, military personnel and local state authorities were shown to bring order to the seemingly frenzied Gulf Coast. For example, reporters stated:

“The guardsmen were posted at major intersections, and army vehicles patrolled the streets, seeking to quell the looting and unrestrained crime that has shocked the nation. Some 300 members of the Arkansas National Guard, just back from Iraq, were among those deployed from foreign assignments specifically to bring order” (Dao and Kleinfield, ‘More Troops and Aid’)

“It took four days of National Guard troops to arrive to restore order as looting and lawlessness spiraled out of control”(Applebome et al, ‘A Delicate Balance’)

“Because the New Orleans police were preoccupied with search and rescue missions, sheriff’s deputies and state police from around Louisiana began to patrol the city, some holding rifles as they rolled through streets in an armed vehicle” (Barringer and Longman, ‘Owners Take Up Arms’)

Furthermore, coverage of the storm in the *Times* made evident the force with which military personnel asserted their authority over the victims of Katrina. The proceeding passages illustrate this trend.

“On street where gun battles, fist fights, hold ups, car jackings and marauding mobs of looters had held sway through the week, the mere sight of troops in camouflage battle gear and with assault rifles gave a sense of relief to many of the thousands of stranded

survivors who had endured days of appalling terror and suffering” (McFadden, ‘Bush Pledges’)

“‘Some of these kids think it’s a game,’ he said. ‘They somehow got their hands on a weapon. They think they are playing Pac-Man or something and shooting at people. Those kinds of hot spots will continue, but I can tell you they will learn very quickly the 82nd Airborne does not like to be shot at. This is not a game” (McFadden, ‘Bush Pledges’)

“‘I have one message for these hoodlums,’ said Gov. Kathleen Babineaux Blanco of Louisiana. ‘These troops know how to shoot and kill, and they are more than willing to do so if necessary.’ In the radio interview, Mayor Nagin blamed much of the widespread crime on crazed drug addicts cut off from their fixes.” (Dao and Kleinfeld, ‘More Troops and Aid’)

In elucidating the necessity for state officials to be in the region, coverage of the storm and the state personnel there subsequently implied the criminal nature of black bodies as they evidently required such control. The following quotes illustrate the construction of storm victims as a threat to safety and order, which was then quelled by state authorities.

“East Baton Rouge Parish officials agreed to send 20 buses with special weapons and tactics officers to help evacuate New Orleanians, but only if a state trooper was also placed on each bus.” (Barringer and Longman, ‘Owners Take Up Arms’)

“President Bush said he had ordered 7,000 additional troops to the city and the Gulf Coast states to crack down on lawlessness and to evacuate thousands of refugees” (McFadden, ‘Bush Pledges’)

“Partly because of the shortage of troops, violence raged inside the New Orleans Convention Center which interviews show was even worse than previously described” (Lipton et al, ‘Breakdowns Marked Path’)

“On Wednesday night, Mayor Nagin ordered 1,500 police officers, most of the city’s force, to turn from search and rescue to stop the looting.” (McFadden and Blumenthal, ‘Bush Sees’)

“After days of looting and reports of murders and rapes, the New Orleans police and military troops asserted control” (Bumiller and Haberman, ‘Bush Makes Return Visit’)

In the *Times*’ coverage of the Haitian earthquake, state authorities were shown in varying ways. Haitian authorities were constructed as corrupt and enabling chaos to continue in the region. For instance, a report stated: “Earlier today, a reader drew our attention to this video report from the CBC [link] which showed Haitian police officers firing guns and using violence to try to stop looting in Port Au Prince on Tuesday” (McKay, ‘Update on the Crisis’). American authorities on the other hand were shown to retain order in the island nation, prevent Haitians from trying to illegally enter the U.S., and showed the military power of the United States. The following quotes illustrate such trends:

“Those [police officers] who are left have filled the open shifts and organized meetings with residents to discuss strategies for fending off looters.” (Thompson and Sontag, ‘Haiti Takes Tiny Steps’)

“He [Lt. Commander Christopher O’Neil] said anyone caught leaving the island and heading toward Florida would be returned to Haiti” (Romero and Lacey, ‘By Air, Sea and Land’)

“The World Food Program finally was able to land flights of food, medicine and water Saturday, after failing on Thursday and Friday, an official with the agency said. Those flights had been diverted so that the United States could land troops and equipment, and lift Americans and other foreigners to safety” (Thompson and Cave, ‘Officials Strain’)

Haiti and New Orleans were constructed as regions that benefitted from militarization in the aftermath of both disasters. The *Times*’ coverage reified this notion. Likewise, military and other state personnel deployed to the regions, alongside benevolent white Americans, were constructed as (white) saviours of the majority black masses.

Theme 8: White Saviours

White saviour narratives were ever present within the *Times*’ coverage of both Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, survivors of the disaster were constructed as helpless and in need of aid from the mainly white law enforcement agents that arrived four to five days after the storm. During this coverage, authorities who helped citizens of the Gulf Coast leave the affected areas were shown as rescuers while the mainly black bodies that were helped were described as depersonalized victims who were “plucked,” “herded,” “scooped,” and “saved” from a set of conditions exacerbated exponentially by the slow relief efforts. The following selections illustrate the contrast between depictions of the savers and the saved.

“The authorities estimated that thousands of residents had been plucked off rooftops, just feet from the rising waters” (Treaster and Kleinfield, ‘New Orleans is Inundated’)

“During the day additional survivors were deposited at the Superdome by rescuers”
(Treaster and Kleinfield, ‘New Orleans is Inundated’)

“In a city too bruised to know what to feel many of the famished survivors applauded the arrival of the relief trucks, though others, enraged at how long their wait had been, showered them with profanities” (Dao and Kleinfield, ‘More Troops and Aid’)

“Convoys of trucks carrying food, water, and other relief supplies rolled into the city and were greeted by cheers and sobs of relief by some exhausted, traumatized refugees.”
(McFadden, ‘Bush Pledges’)

Likewise, in the *Times*’ coverage of the Haitian earthquake, white saviour narratives were rife. These narratives played out in various forms: as white nations rescuing black victims from the disaster, as western writers declaring what needs to change about Haitian culture in order for it to prosper, and as developed nations bestowing politico-economic strategies upon the island nation that ought to save the Haitian people. The following are examples of how survivors of the actual disaster were victimized whilst being saved by white Americans.

“One week ago, the two little girls, now the most celebrated new residents of this tiny town, had lives confined to the concrete walls of a Haitian orphanage, beside a ravine clogged with the bodies of earthquake victims” (Savnly, ‘Girls Rescue from Haiti’)

“Dievnette arrived covered in dried diarrhea. Bettanna’s clothing had to be burned. But they spent the weekend here in rural Nebraska cuddling on a plush sofa, feet warmed by a fire, outfitted like princesses, being hugged and kissed as they ate and drank, laughed and played with a toy poodle. They looked thoroughly contented—perhaps for the first time in their entire lives” (Savnly, ‘Girls Rescue from Haiti’)

“After three days of chaos and congestion at the airport in Port au Prince, Haiti’s government ceded control of it to American technicians, to speed the flow of relief supplies and personnel” (Lacey, ‘Patience Wears Thin’)

White saviour narratives present within the *Times*’ coverage of Haiti was also evident within various hypotheses on how Haitians should govern Haiti. These economic and political suggestions ranged from theoretical leadership styles to the implementation of sweatshop labour. The following illustrate such impositions:

“It’s time to promote locally led paternalism...programs that really work includes intrusive paternalism.” (Brooks, ‘The Underlying Tragedy’)

“Haiti needs and deserves a modern Marshall Plan that rebuilds public institutions and creates jobs outside of the worn-down agricultural sector” (McKay, ‘Update on the Crisis’)

“That idea (sweatshops!) may sounds horrific to Americans. But it’s a strategy that has worked for other countries such as Bangladesh, and Haitians in the slums would tell you that their most fervent wish is for jobs.” (Kristof, ‘Some Frank Talk’)

“What can the international community do to help Haiti create a future different from the generations of misery it has known?” (Traub, ‘Imagining a Stronger Haiti’)

“The feeling that Haiti, relatively calm and newly buoyed by substantial trade preferences granted its apparel and textile industry by the United States Congress, was poised to turn a corner.” (Rivera, ‘Obstacles to Recovery’)

In addition, articles in the *Times* critiqued Haitian culture—perhaps something innate to Haitian people—blaming it for the state that Haitians lived in before and after the quake. The implied

superiority of white Western culture, that ought to be taught to seemingly primitive black Haitians, was elucidated in the following quotes:

“Haiti, like most of the world’s poorest nations, suffers from a complex web of progress-resistant cultural influence. There is the influence of the voodoo religion, which spreads the message that life is capricious and planning futile.” (Brooks, ‘The Underlying Tragedy’)

“Promotion of contraception could not only help Haiti, but other poverty stricken countries as well although in the case of Haiti, religion makes that an uphill battle” (Letter to the Editor, ‘Did Haiti’s Poverty’)

“Were all supposed to politely respect each other’s cultures. But some cultures are more progress-resistant than others, and horrible tragedy was just exacerbated by one of them” (Brooks, ‘The Underlying Tragedy’)

“It’s time to find self-confident local leaders who will create no excuses countercultures in places like Haiti, surrounding people—maybe just in a neighbourhood or a school—with middle-class assumptions, an achievement ethos and tough, measurable demands” (Brooks, ‘The Underlying Tragedy’)

In coverage of Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake, the *Times*’ constructed the majority white state personnel in both affected regions, as well as benevolent white Americans, as saviours of the black populations described. In so doing, the victims of the disasters were discursively constructed solely as the subjects upon which rescue efforts were carried out. I argue this discursive theme, alongside the other seven aforementioned themes, worked in cohesion to Africanize victims of both disasters.

Theme 9: Africanization of victims

The Africanization of victims, that is, the discursive connection made between the black bodies in the Gulf Coast and in Haiti with their black African counterparts, was made evident by the depiction of the people and places as primitive, savage, and hopelessly destitute; an amalgamation of the aforementioned tropes. Psychoanalytic and cultural theorist Frantz Fanon maintains that “Black Africa is looked upon as a wild, savage, uncivilized, and lifeless region” (p. 108). This contention was made evident during coverage of both Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the *New York Times* discursively constructed black Americans as savage, uncivilized, and of a foreign nature, illustrated best by the repeated usage of the term ‘refugees’ to describe American citizens. Classen (2009) maintains that this designation ultimately implied that black American identities were “fundamentally foreign” (p. 3). Furthermore, not only did this association highlight the foreignness of black subjectivity but, according to civil rights leaders Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, “implied that the victims were less than full citizens” (Sommers et al, 2006, p. 41) and thereby less than human. Gordon (2009) contends that the term “refugee” and other Third World references were only used when referring to black victims of the storm, intimating that both words are associated with those who are “distraught, hapless, and very black” (p. 241).

Firstly, these discursive constructions of black Americans were highlighted in the ways in which survivors of the storm were othered via the description of the people and state of the Superdome and Convention Center as worn-down, weary, disgusting, and in comparison to the African continent. For instance, the Superdome and Convention Center, where tens of thousands of mostly black Americans were stationed after the storm, was described in the following manner:

“[The Superdome is] the site of unimaginably squalid conditions.” And “conditions described as unfit for animals.” (Dao and Kleinfeld, ‘More Troops and Aid’)

“They had renamed the place, rife with overflowing toilets and reports of murder and rape, the Sewerdome.” (Dao and Kleinfeld, ‘More Troops and Aid’)

“[Claudette Paul, a hurricane survivor said] Disease, germs... We need help. We don’t live like this in America” (Applebome et al, ‘A Delicate Balance’)

“The bulk of the city’s refugees were in or around the Superdome... Condition there had become desperate, with food, water, and other supplies running out, with toilets overflowing and the air fowl.” (McFadden and Blumenthal, ‘Bush Sees’)

Secondly, black Americans were described as a weary mass whose presence in the aftermath of the storm was defined by naturalized impoverishment, dirt, and disease indicative of the ways in which a homogenous Africa is often depicted. The proceeding quotes illustrate such a discursive trend.

“Refugees with no place to go were deposited on the island of dry land... During the long, hot afternoon and into the humid night, the crowd swelled to 2,000 hungry, flood-weary people” who were “plucked from roofs and attics” (Applebome et al, ‘A Delicate Balance’)

“Barefoot women cradling naked screaming babies limped from the National Guard rescue truck, everything they owned on their backs.” (Applebome et al, ‘A Delicate Balance’)

“The unannounced arrival of Mr. Compass, in a crisp navy-blue uniform, was a sudden and even surreal turn at this dark outpost of suffering, filled to bursting with the people

who had flocked here days earlier to escape the floods of Hurricane Katrina, only to become a trapped horde of the hungry, the filthy, and here and there, the dead.” (Treaster, ‘First Steps to Alleviate’)

“The refugees from Louisiana, many dirty and hungry, wandered about aimlessly.”
(Treaster, ‘Despair and Lawlessness’)

Thirdly, the Gulf Coast, namely New Orleans, was likened to Third World nations in the *Times*’ coverage of the storm. The presence of black bodies in squalor made comparisons of this nature rife within the publication. The following passages illustrate this trend:

“At times, the scenes on television were so woeful they looked as if they could have been filmed in a former Soviet republic or Haiti. And that’s how television correspondents put it. ‘This is not Iraq. This is not Somalia,’ said Martin Savidge of NBC. ‘This is home.’” (Stanley, ‘Camera Captured’)

“It is hard to measure this [why European response was tepid, not fully sympathetic], but judging from the commentary and the blogs, the collective European response to the victims of the tsunami or famine in Niger, to the killings in Darfur or the deaths that took place in poor, troubled nations, not in the most powerful and richest country on earth”
(Bernstein, ‘The View From Abroad’)

“Ms. Waters said she had travelled throughout Africa and never seen anything quite like that scene. ‘This looks like an underdeveloped country,’ she said. ‘No time did I think that in America we could see this kind of homelessness, this kind of displacement.’”
(Broder, ‘Amid Criticism’)

“The images of starving, exhausted, flood-bedraggled people fleeing New Orleans and southern Mississippi over the last two weeks have scandalized many Americans long

accustomed to seeing such scenes only in faraway storm-tossed or war-ravaged places like Kosovo, Sudan, or Banda Aceh” (Dao, ‘No Fixed Address’)

“Officials warned of an impossible future in a destroyed city without food, water, power, or other necessities, only the specter of cholera, typhoid or mosquitoes carrying malaria of the West Nile virus.” (McFadden, ‘New Orleans Begins’)

Fourthly, black Americans were routinely referred to as refugees in the *Times*’ coverage of Hurricane Katrina, a designation that ultimately othered the black bodies that were the face of the storm. Dyson (2007) posits that in being referred to as refugees “black folk felt that they had already, for so long, been treated as foreigners in their own land,” (p. 176) and that such a designation only added insult to injury. Reporters at the publication used the term numerous, exemplified in the following:

“Wedged near the front of the wall of hungry, unbathed refugees, James Edwards was trying to tell the soldiers about his bad heart.” (Dao, Treaster, and Barringer, ‘New Orleans is Awaiting’)

“Refugees scooped from roofs or straggling in from sunken streets were dropped at one staging point, only to be herded up and moved to another, then another” (Dao, Treaster, and Barringer, ‘New Orleans is Awaiting’)

“At the increasingly unsanitary Convention Center, crowds swelled to about 25,000 and desperate refugees clamoured for food, water, and attention while dead bodies, slumped in wheelchairs or wrapped in sheets lay in their midst” (Treaster, ‘Despair and Lawlessness’)

Lastly, the impoverishment of black Americans was highlighted in the *Times* coverage. This emphasis made a discursive correlation between the state of the Gulf Coast in the aftermath of

the storm and recurring images disseminated about the African continent. For example, the proceeding passages illustrate this.

“The [Houston] Astrodome looked at times like a squatters camp in a war-torn country.”

(Treater, ‘Despair and Lawlessness’)

“In New Orleans many refugees scrounged for diapers, water, and basic survival.”

(Treater, ‘Despair and Lawlessness’)

“Heaps of rotting garbage in bulging white plastic bags baked under the Louisiana sun on the main entry plaza, choking new arrivals as they made their way into the stadium after being plucked off rooftops and balconies.” (Treater, ‘At Stadium’)

“...daylong images on television shoed refugees desperate for food and water in the richest nation on earth” (Bumiller, ‘Democrats and Others’)

“Pitiful groups of refugees wading through contaminated water, clutching plastic garbage bags.” (Stanley, ‘Camera Captured’)

The ways in which black Americans were Africanized in the *Times*’ coverage of Hurricane Katrina was replicated in the ways in which black Haitians were constructed in the publication.

During coverage of the Haitian earthquake, the island nation was discursively likened to the African continent namely through the naturalization of impoverishment in the nation and the destitution with which Haiti is often known for. Such a designation is similar to that of a homogenously imagined black Africa. Sociologist and civil rights activist W. E. B DuBois articulates the racialized way in which Haiti is imagined within the Western consciousness and why it is problematic. DuBois states: “There is the need of getting rid of that fatalistic attitude towards Haiti which says that nothing can come of this entrancingly beautiful island rich in

material resources and culture because its people are predominantly of Negro descent” (Camara, 2008, p. 63). The imagined hopelessness and helplessness of Haiti connoted by DuBois is reiterated in coverage of the Haitian earthquake. Furthermore, such rhetoric of hopelessness is apparent in the ways in which the African continent is imagined. In constructing Haiti as inevitably impoverished and a place of death and destruction, the nation is discursively aligned with the African continent. Camara (2008) maintains that the media portrays Africa as “the home of violence, conflict, and genocide.” (p. 21). The *Times*’ coverage of the Haitian earthquake used tropes of African otherness—impoverishment, endless death, and destitution—to describe the island nation. The following passages illustrate these tropes.

“A fierce earthquake struck Haiti late Tuesday afternoon, causing a crowded hospital to collapse, levelling countless shantytown dwellings and bringing even more suffering to a nation that was already the poorest and most disaster prone” (Romero and Lacey, ‘Fierce Quake’)

“The history of Haiti’s vulnerability to natural disasters—to floods and famine and disease...” (Kidder, ‘Country Without a Net’)

“Graphic photos of dead bodies on the front pages of newspapers offended some subscribers, who made their disapproval known to the *Times* public editor and *The Washington Post*’s ombudsmen. In columns on Sunday, both men said the newspapers were right to display the unsettling photos” (Stelter, ‘Next News from Haiti’)

“[Exodus going] out, away from the destruction, the water shortages, the rancid stench of death.” (Cave, ‘Exodus from Ruined Haiti’)

Furthermore, poverty, often perceived as innate to the African continent, was emphasized in coverage of Haiti. While the *Times*’ coverage of Hurricane Katrina focused on the newly “Third-

World Like” conditions of the Gulf Coast, reports on Haiti described poverty as a condition inherent to the island nation. The following quotes illustrate this discursive trend.

“Far more than most other impoverished countries—particularly those in Africa—Haiti could plausibly turn itself around” (Kristof, ‘Some Frank Talk’)

“She did not have much before the earthquake, living in a leaking one bedroom house” (Sontag and Thompson, ‘On Street Tracing’)

“Although protesting is a national custom, so is surviving on little. That national ethos, the Haitians ability to scrounge to find enough to fight their hunger pangs, is being tested in full by the current crisis” (Romero and Lacey, ‘Haiti’s Government’)

The *New York Times*’ coverage of both Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake relied on tropes of black otherness and black African-ness. In so doing, the multiple ways in which black subjects are reduced to stereotypical traits was made evident. Black subjects were on the one hand constructed as helpless masses and on the other hand as savage and violent, and by doing so “their humanity and the value of their lives was rendered invisible” (Garfield, 2007, p. 58).

Moreover, the hypervisibility of black disaster victims portrayed in an Africanized light made a discursive connection between the black bodies of the African diaspora. However, such a connection was forged by the denigration of black Americans and Haitians within the publication.

Conclusion

Hurricane Katrina was one of the most destructive storms in American history. The strong category three hurricane wreaked havoc on the Gulf Coast in general, but especially so on poor, mainly black New Orleanians that were unable to evacuate the city during the storm. A history of slavery and racial discrimination only exacerbated the calamity caused. Black Africans were brought to the metropolis as enslaved chattel whose labour modernized the city and made white New Orleanians well-off. This labour exploitation, after slavery ended, resulted in the physical and economic segregation of white and black Americans in the region. As such, poor blacks in the area inhabited the most vulnerable, below sea level, areas of the city. Resultantly, when Katrina hit, it was predominantly black residents' homes that were submerged in ten plus feet of sea water. The negligence of the state to up keep the broken levees that released the sea water put black New Orleanians further in harms path. In this way, race was a determining factor for who was most affected by the storm.

Though many blamed the victims of the disaster for not leaving in time, the history of racial marginalization became evident when the impoverished inhabitants of the city were forced to seek refuge in the Louisiana Superdome and New Orleans Convention Centre as a poor alternative to evacuating. Again state officials failed these citizens by being ill-prepared for a foreseeable catastrophe and for lagging in response to the storm. This act (or lack thereof) was captured by camera crews who made their way to the affected areas faster than any governmental relief agency. However, the ways in which the mainstream media portrayed black Americans—as helpless and dependent, but also savage and criminal—only heightened prevailing ideologies about black incompetence and white supremacy. The *New York Times*' coverage of the storm illustrates the ways in which mainstream news media constructed the black victims of the

disaster as helpless and victimized while simultaneously savage and criminally inclined. Through tropes of Africanized otherness, the *Times*' coverage made evident the ways in which black others in the case of Hurricane Katrina were "others from within," that is, black Diasporic bodies who pose an immediate threat to Euro-Americans. This was elucidated mainly through the portrayal of black Americans as chaotic thereby requiring state control to manage them. Likewise, the publication constructed black Haitians in a similar manner after the 2010 earthquake.

The 7.0 Richter scale earthquake was one of the worst disasters Haiti has faced. The lack of solid infrastructure as well as years of agricultural erosion and previous natural disasters made the effects the quake catastrophic. Mediated depictions of Haitians however, as poor and helpless, constructed the inhabitants of the island nation as hapless beings whose own ineptitude and corruption placed them in dire straits, rather than years of oppressive colonial rule, foreign intervention, and indebtedness. The nation, the first black republic to win independence in the world, was indebted to France, its formal colonizer, as a form of payment from lost "property"—the slaves that no longer were. Contemporarily, the nation's economy has suffered at the hands of neighbouring superpowers who have managed to make Haiti a large importer of food goods once native to the nation. As such, the country, known as the poorest in the Western Hemisphere, has become impoverished due to international intervention and self-interested ruling elites. However, Haitians are often depicted as a hapless primitive mass whose impoverishment is innate to their being. In the aftermath of the quake, such reductive depictions were ever present.

The Haitian earthquake was widely reported in Western media. The extent of damage the island nation endured was significant. Reports of the disaster highlighted the state of the nation before and after the disaster, mainly focusing on the impoverishment of the Haitian people. In so

doing, coverage of the quake and the victims created an image of helplessness in the nation, one that also worked to inflate the saviour-like status of Western nations. While foreign intervention into the region is partly to blame for the state of the island nation, international aid in the form of monetary donations and paternalistic intervention was shown to be paramount to the country's recovery effort. Moreover, the *New York Times*' coverage of the disaster utilized tropes of interchangeable foreign black helplessness and savagery. Haitians were depicted as a primitive black others whose predilection for catastrophe made them vulnerable to all things destructive, be it poverty, storms, or corruption. These "others from without" were positioned as inferior beings in comparison to their white Euro-American counterparts who were portrayed as saviours of the Haitian people in the aftermath of the quake.

In the *Times*' coverage of both Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake, tropes of Africanized otherness were present. As both "others from within" and "others from without," black Americans and black Haitians, respectively, were aligned with their African counterparts as reductive tropes of primitive savagery and impoverished helplessness were rife in reportage. Images of a homogenous "Africa" portray black Africans as hopeless others whose lives are marked by violence, death, and disease. Moreover, tropes of black African-ness—as primitive, savage, and poverty-stricken—constructs them as requiring the aid of rational and giving Westerners to survive. Such tropes were employed in portrayals of Haiti and the Gulf Coast in news media in general and the *Times* in particular. The initial ideological apparatus, as Marxist scholar Babacar Camara (2008) argues, frames Africa as backwards. When the media do not "denigrate the continent, they simply omit it from any informations or studies" (p. 22). Much like this selective depiction of the continent, black Haitians and black Americans were reported on with such fervour only when disaster struck. In so doing, black subjects were rendered an

inferior and threatening other whose plight is justified by their lack of morality, ingenuity, and self-control. This discursive operation was present at the beginning of the trans-Atlantic slave trade when resources were extracted from the African continent and black chattel slaves were treated as inhuman and depersonalized in order to substantiate the treatment they received. It was through the homogenization of black bodies that their seemingly interchangeable labour power was exploited all through the Americas, the Caribbean, Europe, and on the African continent itself. It was also through a reductive notion of the black other that all black bodies became inherently expendable.

The high death toll of Hurricane Katrina and the Haitian earthquake arguably exemplifies how the expendability of black bodies has been carried forth in a contemporary context. While overt forms of racism that reduce Africans to chattel have ceased, state neglect and disinvestment in black Americans exacerbated the death toll in the Gulf Coast. Likewise, oppressive international policies that weakened the Haitian economy while promoting corrupt leadership within, contributed to the fragile state Haiti was in before the quake struck, that then exponentially increased the death toll in the aftermath. Discursive constructions of the black inhabitants of both regions as lacking in intellect and moral fibre paint the African diaspora as a hapless, homogenous mass who deserve their marginalized status. In “Africanizing” the black diaspora, the status of those populations are further denigrated given the fatalistic notions the West has of the continent. In problematizing down-trodden depictions of Africans, exemplified through the Africanization of the black populations in Haiti and the Gulf Coast, I aimed to highlight the ways in which black bodies have historically and contemporarily been discursively constructed as primitive, helpless and threatening, and thereby expendable others. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1997) maintains that discourse “influences how ideas are put into practice

and used to regulate the conduct of others” (p. 44). In this way, the discursive construction of black Americans and black Haitians as an Africanized, that is, homogenous and denigrated other may inform the social, political, and economic management of black bodies, rendering black populations vulnerable to the machinations of white supremacist and imperialist control.

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