

### Synthesis Essay

Hurricane Katrina was an unforgettable storm that shook the nation and took down everyone and everything in its path. Being one of the most detrimental storms in history, Katrina not only caused physical damage to the city of New Orleans, but emotional damage to those who were affected by it. Although there is no way to measure the amount of pain caused by this deadly storm, we know it is vast and long lasting. However, many believe it is not the storm alone that caused so much grief for the people of New Orleans, but the way that certain members of the community were treated after the storm. These people, being black, making the response to Katrina, in many peoples minds a race issue. After carefully observing Spike Lee's documentary, along with several articles on Katrina, it has become obvious to me that there are various reasons leading to the belief that blacks were treated unfairly during the relief efforts for Katrina. Although it cannot be proven that race was a factor in deciding who received the most aid after the storm, I have observed many reasons as to why people would consider there to be racial tensions during and following Katrina.

Immediately following Katrina, people all over the nation started to question the intentions of the storm's recovery efforts. It all began with the media, where it became frequently suggested through images, videos, and personal stories that the black victims were receiving much less help than the white victims. However, As Nils Gilman points out in his article, *What Katrina Teaches about the Meaning of Racism*, Kanye West was the one who sparked a flame that sent the media into a racial frenzy. West inserted himself into the controversy by making his famous claim, "George Bush doesn't care about black people". Clearly this was a controversial statement, causing it to receive a lot of time in the media. This very bold and unexpected remark came as a huge surprise to the American public and served as an eye opening moment to those watching the chaos of Katrina unravel on television. Although many may have blown off this moment as a well-known celebrity making a stupid comment for publicity, there was reason behind his claim; it sparked a conversation that almost framed the racial tensions of hurricane Katrina. Kanye's statement did not serve as a way to bash President Bush, but as a way to inform the public that the black community of New Orleans was not receiving proper aid. In an NBC news report, Patricia Thompson, a New Orleans Evacuee, stated, "Yes it was an issue of race. Because of one thing: when the city had pretty much been evacuated, the people that were left there mostly was black" (Sanders). It is the people like Patricia Thompson that caused West to bring up the topic of race, people who were there to experience the discrimination themselves. While his claim initially shocked the country, it led to people examine what happened during the storm, and caused people to re-evaluate the situation.

Kanye West's statement was not just a random outburst, it was based on a multitude of different factors that caused people to question race and class relationships in the United States. Clearly, West made his infamous claim for a reason, many of these reasons can be seen in Spike Lee's film, "When the Levees broke". This film takes us through the journey of the unfortunate victims of Hurricane Katrina. These

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survivors each give a detailed account of the storm and what it was like to be in the center of it all. From the day leading up to the storm to the hard months afterwards, these people experienced everything from the loss of loved ones to the loss of beloved family homes. After watching the film, it became clear to me that the levees were the first thing to initiate a conversation about race. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans experienced two other large and controversial storms including, the 1927 storm and hurricane Betsy in 1965. In 1927, it is believed that the levees were dynamited in order to prevent the higher-class neighborhoods from being flooded. Therefore people believe that the same thing happened during Katrina, as one local says, "I think there are too many similarities between 1927 flood and Katrina" (Lee). Due to the fact that the storms were so similar in so many ways, some believe that it is no coincidence. Lower class communities are obviously going to be less trusting of the government, if they have experienced discrimination against themselves in the past. If the levees were dynamited once, who is to say they wouldn't do it again? Along with the 1927 storm, members of the New Orleans community were very suspicious of Hurricane Betsy. Many of those who were there for Katrina also experienced Betsy. One resident of the lower 9<sup>th</sup> ward who experienced both storms, recalls Betsy when he says, "They dynamited the lower 9<sup>th</sup> ward in order to save some of the more expensive property in the lake front area" (Lee). People believed that it was dynamited for racial reasons before, causing them to continue to believe it happened for racial reasons again.

The levee controversy became one of the biggest factors of the race discussion following Katrina because the victims were so strongly opinionated on it. The day the storm hit, many people claimed to have heard a loud explosion. Although it cannot be proven, it was believed by many that this was the sound of the levees being dynamited. As Audrey Mason, resident of the 9<sup>th</sup> ward claims, "I didn't only hear the explosion, I felt the explosions, it should be somebody else besides me" (Lee). Audrey's claim shows us how much the people of New Orleans truly believed the levees were dynamited. It also shows us that she believes that she felt the explosion because she is black. When she says, "it should be somebody else besides me", she is referring to some of the white people who were not as badly affected as she was. Considering that the black communities were affected the worst in the case of all 3 storms, people like Audrey are fed up and starting to recognize a reoccurring pattern of blacks being left behind. Along with Audrey, Diane Cole French tells a similar story: "I was on my front porch, I have witnesses that they bombed the walls of the levee" (Sanders). The fact that so many members of the community believe that the levees were dynamited is a huge reason that people believe there was racial discrimination involved with Katrina. In fact there was so much buzz about the levees that one official said, "It is not a far jump to believe the urban myth that it got dynamited" (Lee). This quote confirms that French and Mason's claims about the dynamite are not too far fetched. Even if there was no dynamite at all, dynamiting the levees has become a symbol for mistreating the lower class neighborhoods and just the thought of it happening contributes to the race issue.

Along with the levee controversy, the racial stereotypes that come along with crime became a huge part of the issue. As I witnessed in Spike Lee's documentary, at the time of Katrina people had to kick into survival mode, as a result of this looting became very popular. While it began as a way for people to retrieve necessities such as food and water, it quickly escalated to the theft of materialistic goods such as televisions. This caused an outbreak of violence, which made people realize that it was seriously time to get out of New Orleans. Therefore, members of the community tried to cross over the bridge and leave the city. However people were not allowed to cross the bridge which many found to be un-American and most of all racist. As one witness says, "They were calling the people who were trying to cross in thugs, in today's language we know that when people are referred to as thugs and looters, that they were clearly talking about the African American citizens of New Orleans" (Lee). In others words what she was trying to say is that black people were not being allowed over the bridge because the white areas thought that the crime in New Orleans stemmed from them. This is just one more reason that people found Katrina to be racist. Along with this, the film describes an incident where a picture of black members of the community were in a boat with food and water and were labeled as "looters" while an almost identical picture of white people was labeled as "victims". If the media is sending messages like this, making it seem as though black people are responsible for all crime, than why wouldn't people see it as racism? If people truly believe these bad stereotypes about black people, than it is not ridiculous for people to believe that the black community would receive less help than the white community. In fact the differences between white and black views of racism were also a huge cause for the Katrina racial controversy.

The different views on what it means to be racist is what caused some people to believe that hurricane Katrina was racist while others did not. Rep. Cynthia McKinney stated, "Racism is something we don't like to talk about, but we have to acknowledge it and the world saw the effects of American-style racism in the drama as it was outplayed by the Katrina survivors" (Sanders). Yes, it is true that racism is a subject that many of us try to avoid, this is why Hurricane Katrina was so controversial, many people brought up the topic of racism. However, not all people have similar thinking to McKinney. In fact Nils Gilman states, "Two thirds of blacks believe that racism continues to be a problem in this country, while two thirds of whites believe that its is not". If some people believe that racism is prevalent while others do not, than obviously there will be controversy around the subject. Along with Gilman, NBC News's Kerry sanders reported, "6 out of every 10 black New Orleans residents said if most of Katrina's victims were white, relief would have arrived sooner". This statistic is disturbing because it shows that a large population of the survivors thought

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they would have been better off if they were white. If people who were there to witness the whole event first hand believe the recovery efforts were racist, than why wouldn't everyone else think the same thing? This I believe, is one of the greatest reasons that people remember hurricane Katrina as a racially controversial storm.

For those who ask if the response to Katrina was race related, I urge them to look at what the survivors have to say about it. If it weren't for Kanye West's bold comment about President Bush and the survivors first hand accounts of the events that took place during Katrina, Would we think it was racist? I think not, the issue of race would have been swept under the rug as it usually is in today's society. While Kanye West sparked the conversation about racism, Katrina survivors verified his concerns through explaining their personal experiences during the storm. Whether it is the levees, the previous storms leading up to Katrina, the misconceptions about looting, or the different perceptions on racism, there are many reasons as to why people saw hurricane Katrina as racist.

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