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**Higher Ground**

# Do You Know What It Means...
## Mapping Emotion in the Aftermath of Katrina

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*This article explores the interconnection of race, politics and emotion in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Not only did Americans of different races perceive vastly different realities about the events in New Orleans, but black and white Americans felt different about what happened. The affective responses of African Americans were more pronounced than those of their white counterparts. These emotions are rooted in America's racial history and it resonance in contemporary US society. Using data from several national surveys conducted in the weeks following September 11, 2001, and the weeks following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, this article maps the differences in emotional responses among black and white Americans to both disasters. The survey data is used to suggest that Americans' political and racial beliefs were significantly related to their psychological experiences in the weeks following Katrina.*

Keywords: emotion, Hurricane Katrina, politics, racial differences, September 11

Do you know what it means to miss New Orleans
   And miss it each night and day
I know I'm not wrong...this feelings gettin' stronger
The longer, I stay away

—Louis Armstrong

George Bush doesn't care about black people.

—Kanye West

On the one year anniversary of the Katrina disaster, a documentary film about the events premiered on HBO. "When The Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts" was produced by award-winning, African-American filmmaker Spike Lee. Lee used the enduring images of human suffering in New Orleans and the compelling narratives of hurricane victims to give new meaning and poignancy to the tragedy. Although the film is political in its thesis and conclusions; it is fundamentally an emotional tale about the heart of the experience of Katrina for the people of New Orleans. HBO promoted the film as an "intimate, heart-rending portrait of New Orleans in the wake of the destruction that tells the heartbreaking personal stories of those who endured this harrowing ordeal and survived to tell the tale of misery, despair and triumph" (HBO 2006). In his discussion of the film and its importance, Lee makes a claim to the centrality of the emotional effects of the storm on its victims. Lee reports: "Post-Katrina, the obituary column in the Times-Picayune is 30 per cent more. Suicides are up.... People are just buggin'. And there are no facilities to deal with the mental-health issue down there. This stuff is going to have reverberations for many years to come. When you have children who've seen their parents drown in front of them or parents who have seen their children drown in front of them, I mean how do you deal with that?"

Building on this compelling articulation of the emotional effects of the storm, this article explores the interconnection of race, politics, and emotion in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. When the levees of New Orleans failed it was not a colorblind disaster. The storm caused greater loss and displacement for Black New Orleans residents.[1] The storm also provoked significantly different reactions from Black and white Americans who viewed the unfolding disaster through the media.[2] Not only did Americans of different races perceive vastly different realities about the events in New Orleans, but Black and white Americans *felt* different about what happened. The affective responses of African Americans were more pronounced than those of their white counterparts. These emotions are rooted in America's racial history and the resonance of that history in contemporary U.S. society. In the aftermath of Katrina, emotional devastation is a political response. Using data from several national surveys conducted in the weeks following September 11, 2001, and the weeks following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, I map the differences in emotional responses among Black and white Americans to both disasters. I then analyze this survey data to suggest that Americans' political and racial beliefs were significantly related to their psychological experiences in the weeks following Katrina. Finally, I argue that the emotional map of Katrina responses demonstrates the centrality of race over class in shaping how Black Americans understood and experienced the disaster.

## Evaluating American Feelings about Disaster

Katrina wrought enormous devastation on those who lost property, sustained injury and suffered displacement as a direct result of the flooding in New Orleans (Kessler et al. 2006). While compelling and important, it is hardly surprising that victims of a catastrophic natural disaster experienced profound emotional reactions. Symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are common among disaster survivors.[3] Far more remarkable are the occasions when those who are not directly victimized by a disaster experience negative emotional consequences simply as a result of their vicarious exposure to the vulnerability and suffering of others. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, generated precisely this sort of collateral emotional damage for Americans who were not directly victimized by the events.[4]

Several national studies demonstrate that in the days and weeks following September 11, Americans experienced elevated stress and signs of probable post-traumatic stress disorder.[5] In the two months following the attack, 17% of respondents in a national sample reported
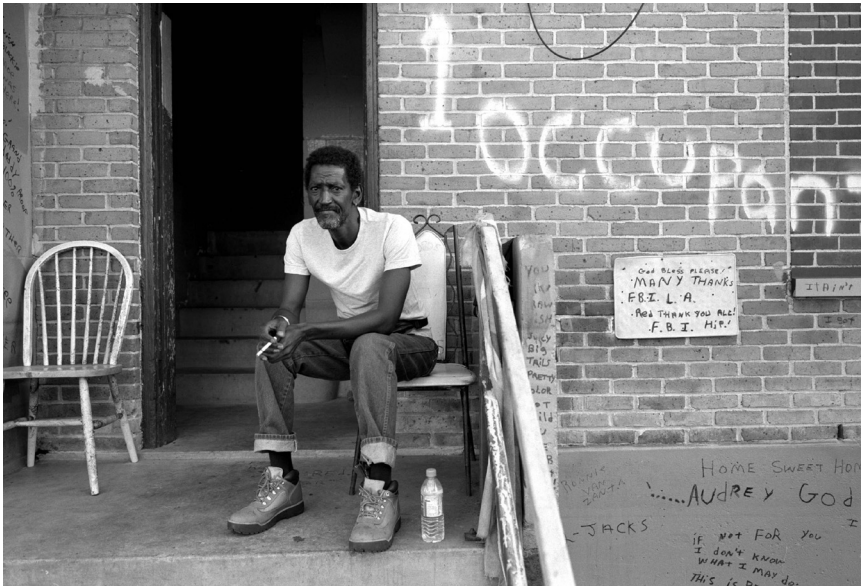
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post-traumatic stress symptoms (Silver et al. 2002). Although New York City was most directly affected by the attacks, Americans throughout the country shared in the anxiety and stress that the tragedy evoked. While there was a shared sense of distress, residents of New York experienced more negative emotions; follow-up studies revealed that New Yorkers were still experience emotional suffering while much of the country had begun to return to more normal psychological functioning six months following the attacks.[6] Proximity to the disaster left New Yorkers more shaken at the outset and more distressed in the long term than initially empathetic fellow-citizens who could more easily return to normal emotional states.

The National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago conducted the National Tragedy Study between September 13 and September 27, 2001. NORC interviewed 2,126 Americans and with an oversample of residents in New York City and Washington, DC.[7] The National Tragedy Study replicated a series of questions used to gauge the emotional state of Americans in the days following the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963. The Kennedy Assassination Survey Symptom Checklist

**Table 1**
**Mean Scores on Kennedy Assassination Survey Symptom Checklist**

| National | Mean | SE | New York | Mean | SE |
|----------|------|-----|----------|------|-----|
| White | | | White | | |
| $n = 641$ | 4.29 | .16 | $n = 166$ | 5.67 | .30 |
| Black | | | Black | | |
| $n = 95$ | 3.85 | .41 | $n = 81$ | 4.59 | .44 |

Source: The National Tragedy Study (2001).

Table adapted from Tom Smith, Kenneth Rasinski, Marianna Toce "America Rebounds: A National Study of Public Response to the September 11th Terrorist Attacks." Report of the National Opinion Research Center.

(KASSC) measures fifteen physical and emotional reactions to traumatic shock.[8] Table 1 reports the average score on the KASSC for Black and white respondents in both the national and New York samples. New York residents (both Black and white) have elevated KASSC scores compared with their counterparts in the general population. New Yorkers were more upset by the events of September 11, but many people throughout the country shared a sense of vulnerability and sadness after vicariously experiencing the attacks on Manhattan.

Importantly, when the KASSC score is modeled as a function of race, gender, age, education, income, and employment and estimated with an ordinary least squares regression, the results demonstrate that in the days immediately following September 11, there was no statistically significant difference in KASSC scores among Blacks and whites in either the national or the New York samples.[9] In the case of September 11, proximity to the disaster was much more important than race in predicting initial emotional responses. Understandably, New Yorkers felt the tragedy most sharply, but all of America, Black and white, mourned along with city. NORC researchers concluded, "Nationally, the attack engendered anger, confusion and both defensive and altruistic behaviors. There is no indication that African Americans and Caucasians differed in their initial appraisal and behavioral coping. The overwhelming nature of the attacks appears to have cut across ethnic groups in response" (Rasinski et al. 2002, 21).

While September 11 provoked similar initial responses from Blacks and whites; the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina revealed a wide emotional chasm between the races. Results from the Pew Foundation survey[10] conducted immediately following Katrina asked respondents, "Have you yourself felt angry because of what's happened in areas affected by the hurricane?" Although a significant proportion of whites responded to the disaster with anger (46%), anger was much more prevalent among African Americans. Seventy percent of Black respondents reported that the events surrounding Katrina made them angry. Similarly, African-American respondents to the Pew survey were much more likely (71%) than white respondents (55%) to report they "felt depressed because of what's happened in areas affected by the hurricane." These results suggest that Spike Lee's documentary film accurately captured a sense that Black America experienced the aftermath of Katrina with intense emotion.

The University of Chicago Center for the Study of Race, Politics and Culture Racial Attitudes and Katrina Disaster Study[11] further explores the emotions that Americans experienced in response to Katrina. The Katrina Disaster Study, conducted approximately one month after the initial levee breaches in New Orleans, asked respondents "In the past five weeks since the Hurricane Katrina disaster how often have you felt: so sad that nothing could cheer you up; nervous; restless or fidgety; hopeless; that everything was an effort; worthless; that difficulties were piling up so high you could not overcome them; and that you are unable to control the important things in your life." For each emotion, respondents could report that they felt this way very often, fairly often, not too often, hardly ever or never. Figure 1 reports the percent of Blacks and whites who felt these emotions "very often" in the weeks after the hurricane.

There are clear and consistent differences between African American and white respondents. Approximately double the proportion of African Americans report the highest level of suffering from each of the negative emotions they were asked about in the survey. They are twice as likely to report being sad, nervous, restless and hopeless. They are also twice as likely to feel overwhelmed, worthless and as though everything takes more effort. Just over a month after Katrina, more than one in ten African Americans report feeling very often that they are unable to control the important things in their lives.

The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina provoked different patterns of emotional responses than the tragedy of September 11, 2001. There was little difference in how

**Reports of Emotional States by Race**
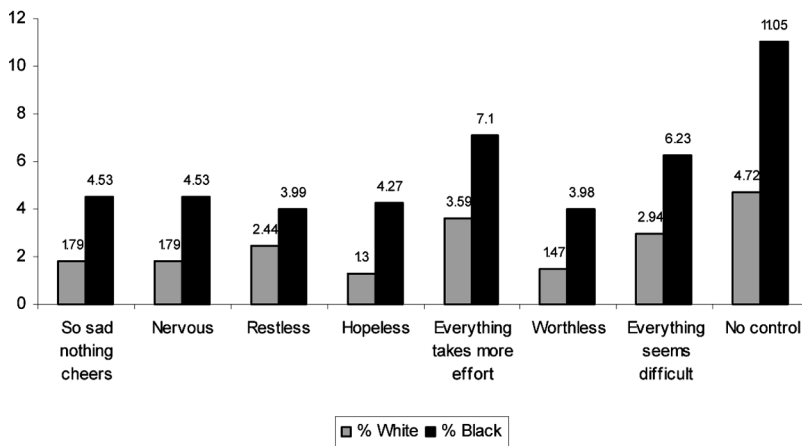


*Figure 1.* Percent who report feeling negative emotions "very often" in the weeks immediately following Hurricane Katrina. Source: University of Chicago Center for the Study of Race, Politics and Culture Racial Attitudes and Katrina Disaster Study.

Black and white Americans felt about the horror of the terrorist attacks. Predictably, New Yorkers, felt worse in the days, weeks and months following September 11, but these differences were true for New Yorkers of both races. The country mourned together in a sense of shared vulnerability. Although the aftermath of Katrina provoked strong emotional responses from all Americans, the impact of the storm seems to have been more deeply felt among African Americans. Black respondents were also more debilitated by their negative emotions. When asked if these emotions had interfered with life activities, 67% of whites reported that they had felt no impairment of life activities. Only 58% of Blacks believed they suffered no impairment. A full 42% of the Black Americans reported that their negative emotions had interfered with their life activities.

Similar to the ways citizens of New York felt more distress following September 11, Black Americans had more negative emotions after Katrina. While the response of New York residents is likely explained by their greater proximity to Ground Zero and perception of greater vulnerability to repeat attacks, these explanations cannot account for the heightened emotional distress of African Americans in the weeks following Katrina. Most African Americans have little reason to fear being struck by a hurricane with the potential to destroy their homes, neighborhoods and city. So why were Black people more distressed than whites?

It could be that Black people are generally more sad and anxious. There is some evidence from prior research suggesting that African Americans report chronically elevated levels of emotional distress compared to whites.[12] This evidence, however, is decidedly mixed (George and Lynch 2003). In some studies Black Americans report fewer symptoms of sadness. In other studies, the racial disparity in negative emotions can be explained by controlling for class (Cockerman 1990; Kessler and Neighbors 1987). Because of conflicting findings across multiple studies, the evidence is neither clear nor compelling that Black people express chronically higher levels of negative emotions. Analysis of data from the University of Chicago Katrina Disaster Study shows that when income, education, gender, and age are accounted for in a simple regression model, race still has a strong and significant correlation with reported mental distress. This suggests that the emotional disparity between Blacks and whites following Katrina cannot be accounted for solely on the basis of enduring markers of social differences between the races.

Even if Black respondents are not chronically more negative in their emotional reports, it is possible that the post-Katrina racial disparity is the result of African Americans regularly responding to national crises with more negative emotions than their white counterparts. Data on racial responses to September 11 show that this explanation is incorrect. In Table 1 there are no statistically significant differences between Black and white respondents in the days immediately following 9–11. To the extent that there are differences in average emotional responses between Blacks and whites immediately following September 11, those differences indicate that whites, not Blacks were more distressed. The Katrina gap is not present in the case of national tragedy four years earlier, so it cannot be explained away as the mere extension of an ingrained racial pattern of response to disaster.

The analysis below explores a third hypothesis, suggesting that the reason for the racial disparity in emotional response to Katrina lies not with the essential psychology of Black nor white Americans but rather with historical and contemporary racial beliefs that shape the political and emotional lives of many Black Americans, but of far fewer white Americans. September 11 was widely understood as an American tragedy that was national in scope, but Hurricane Katrina was perceived as a more narrow racialized disaster. It is therefore the politics of race that helps explain why whites and Blacks feel so differently about these two events.

## The Politics of Racial Emotion

> Their government had forsaken them; they weren't citizens but castoffs, evacuees turned effortlessly, in language and life, into refugees.

> —Michael Eric Dyson (2006), *Come Hell or High Water*

When newly emancipated Black men entered the American polity at the end of the Civil War it was with optimism about the possibility of becoming full partners in the American democratic experiment (Litwack 1979). Despite having suffered generations of forced labor, formerly enslaved persons allowed themselves to embrace the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. Having fought to preserve the Union, Black men took on the franchise and ran for elected office. Black women and men opened businesses, founded schools, and formed organizations and associations to support their new status as wage earners, taxpayers, and citizens (Cooper, Holt, and Scott 2000). Then in 1877 the Hayes-Tilden Compromise crushed the emerging dream of Black citizenship. The country's political parties balanced their own power on the backs of Black people, negotiating away the responsibility of the United States to protect its citizens. The federal government withdrew troops from the former Confederacy and initiated one hundred years of creative brutality as the South instituted Jim Crow, lynch mob rule and disenfranchisement (Litwack 1979).

Still, with each major military conflict of the 19th and 20th centuries, Black men marched into battle believing that their service as citizens might translate into protection by the American state. Black people earned a fraction of all other workers, but they faithfully paid taxes despite having been shut out of the public schools and accommodations that these taxes financed (Cooper, Holt, and Scott 2000). As taxpayers and soldiers, Black men and women expected the full rights and protections of other Americans, but the country remained steadfast in its refusal to grant them even the basic rights of access to public education, public facilities, government aid, voting rights or social equality.

Racial inequality has persisted into the 21st century. African Americans continue to earn a fraction of their white counterparts, suffer from worse physical health, enjoy fewer educational opportunities, are less well represented in politics and popular culture, and

labor under persistent racial stereotypes (Nguyen 2003). Despite significant and continuing racial inequality, one might argue that the last half century has been the most hopeful time for Black citizenship in American history. Having fought and died in the streets of the urban South, African Americans rolled back voting restrictions, asserted the right to fair and equal treatment under the law, and made real gains in education, access, and visibility. The months immediately preceding the Katrina disaster in 2005 witnessed several important milestones in the history of African-American citizenship. The United States Senate issued an official and public apology for never passing anti-lynching legislation (Thomas-Lester 2005). The government exhumed the body of Emmett Till to bring closure to the murder that helped launch the civil rights movement (Sheehan 2005). Prosecutors in the state of Mississippi reopened and successfully litigated the case of the murders of three civil rights workers: Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner (Brunner 2005). These were positive steps in the history of Black America, but when the levees broke in New Orleans, the destruction of the city was accompanied by a disillusion of emerging optimism about the contemporary state of Black citizenship.

It is possible that this history of disappointed expectations influenced the emotional reactions of Black people during Katrina. I initially began to hypothesize this connection when I traveled to New Orleans in November 2005 just seven weeks after the levee breach. While in New Orleans I conducted dozens of interviews with survivors of the storm. I also attended several community meetings led by Mayor Ray Nagin and his Bring Back New Orleans Commission. The emotional devastation of those who had lived through the storm was palpable. Everyone I spoke with had been displaced following the city's mandatory evacuation; the majority had sustained unimaginable loss of personal property; many had survived the nightmarish conditions of the Superdome or Convention Center; some were still searching for missing family members and friends; and a few had confirmed that family members had died during the storm. As direct survivors of the storm they manifested classic symptoms of post-traumatic shock disorder.[13] While I was not surprised to find that these survivors were enduring painful and raw emotions, but I was stunned by the nearly universal agreement among African-American survivors that their suffering was related to their status as second class citizens.

An example of how Katrina's Black survivors in New Orleans talked about their own experience emerged in the November 14, 2005, meeting of Mayor Nagin's Bring Back New Orleans Commission. The meeting was held in a large ballroom at the Sheraton hotel in downtown New Orleans, which had become a kind of headquarters for municipal action. Mayor Nagin presided over the meeting and the official panel included representatives from several federal agencies, local utility companies, elected officials and community leaders. After an update on the state of the city and the pace of recovery, members of the audience were allowed to come to a central microphone and address the panel.

The first four persons who spoke were white residents from the Garden District area with a variety of concerns about power outages, mold, and general health concerns. The fifth person to speak was an African-American man who owned his own trucking business. As a local contractor, he expressed outrage at the "storm followers" who were making "$18 per hour while I can only manage to get $15 per hour." In an impassioned plea to the mayor he shouted, "Listen. I got four hundred Black men ready to work and we are being talked to like dogs. This is our city and we are being treated like second-class citizens." In response to his statement, the audience broke into unrestrained applause. When the next African-American man spoke, he pleaded for a moment "to pause and recognize the loss of thousands of people. The nation paused on 9–11, but not now. No one cares about our losses. I am a homeowner who is homeless. I am a taxpayer and a voter. I placed my trust in the elected officials to do what is right but instead we got nothing. We are not refugees, we are Americans."

Subsequently, a Black woman, who had stood while holding her sleeping toddler in her arms during the first seven speakers, continued the theme of government accountability to its citizens. She said:

> I was one of the people left behind. I was stuck on a roof in New Orleans East. I am a taxpayer and a registered voter. I am happy but I am not rich. I have been shifted to five hotels all around the country. I am tired. I have never asked Louisiana for anything. I just want a place call my own. I didn't need help before this. I was doing for myself and for my children. Mr. Mayor, all I want is a home for my children for Christmas.

After this woman, a Black man who lost his home in the 9th ward and was displaced first to Denver and then to Dallas confronted the mayor saying:

> What is really going on? You are asking us to come back to work. I served this city for 35 years and we are watching foreigners get paid to rebuild it while we are sitting on the curb. There is something going on Mr. Mayor. I understand about the dollar bill situation, but I want to come back and function for my people, for New Orleans. It is wrong for us to be turned down. I was willing to stay an extra year to help my city. This is my home, these are my roots. We are not in Texas. We are here.

It is not surprising that individuals who suffered catastrophic losses would articulate impassioned emotional pleas. It is more provocative when so many of these requests are framed with an anxiety about citizenship. Not only did the people of New Orleans whom I spoke with express sadness and grief about their loss, they also provided explanations for that loss which were rooted in racialized understandings of themselves as disposable members of the American populace. They asserted their positions as homeowners, taxpayers, citizens and government workers as they constructed an argument about their city and country's betrayal of them. These interviews proved to be a rich source for understanding the depth of the emotional trauma and the importance of political explanations for survivors. However, what remains remarkable about the aftermath of Katrina is that Black Americans who were not directly impacted by the disaster also experienced significant elevations of negative emotions.

Survey data make clear that Americans not only felt bad as they witnessed Katrina; the vicarious experience of the disaster had immediate and dramatic political consequences. The Pew study reported that 67% of Americans believed that President Bush could have done more in his handling of the relief effort and nearly 60% rated the response of the federal government as only fair or poor.[14] The Katrina disaster also caused many Americans to reconsider the nation's security, with 42% reporting that the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina made them feel less confident that the government can handle a major terror attack (Pew 2005). In the aftermath of the hurricane, job approval ratings for President Bush plummeted[15] and one year later still had not rebounded to their pre-Katrina levels. Many observers point to the Katrina disaster as both a national tragedy and a political turning point, linking an emotionally difficult experience with a politically relevant change in public opinion (Weisman and Abramowitz 2006).

The nation's emotional reactions to the Katrina disaster are important because they demonstrate the link between how Americans *think* about social and political realities and how they *feel* about national events. To test the hypothesis that Americans' affective responses to Katrina were primarily rooted in a particular understanding of America's racial history, the analysis below estimates a model of emotional distress among Black and white Americans in the weeks following Katrina as a function of personal, political, and racial variables. This estimation is performed using data from the University of

Chicago Center for the Study of Race, Politics and Culture Racial Attitudes and Katrina Disaster Study.

Researchers normally do not think of an individual's mental or emotional state as resulting primarily from world political events. Decades of epidemiological work have convincingly demonstrated that we can make predictions about the likelihood that an individual will feel depressed, angry, or fragile based on a number of personal characteristics and proximate life circumstances. Even in the days and weeks following Katrina we should expect that most emotional variability between individuals is directly related to durable and personal patterns that have been explicated in previous research. We should expect that poorer and less educated Americans should generally feel more psychological distress than their more affluent counterparts (Aneshensel and Sucoff 1996; Cutter et al., 2003). We should expect women to express more sadness than men (Kessler 2003) and for the very young and very old to express more sadness than those who are middle-aged (George and Lynch 2003; McLeod and Shanahan 1993). In light of these expectations, the equations estimated below control for education, income, sex, and age.[16]

Acknowledging that a significant proportion of the variation in individual emotional responses can be accounted for by these variables, the goal of this analysis is to determine whether there is an independent relationship between negative emotions and political variables after accounting for the demographic variables. To explore this question, the model below uses three categories of variables. The *partisan variables* used in the equation include partisan self-identification[17] and agreement with the statement that President George W. Bush represents the concerns of people like you. The second set of questions taps respondents' *attitudes toward America*. Respondents were asked to rank their level of agreement with the statement "I am proud to be an American" and with the statement, "America is the land of opportunity. If a person works hard in America he or she can accomplish almost anything." The survey respondents were also asked to assess which statement is truer: "America's economic system is fair to everyone" or "America's economic system is unfair to poor people."

The model tests the hypothesis that Americans' emotional responses to Hurricane Katrina were intimately linked to their beliefs about race and America's racial history. Several measures of racial attitudes are used to capture this idea. Blacks were asked if they believed that what happens to Black people will affect their lives and whites were asked if they believe what happens to whites will affect their lives. These racially-linked fate attitudes are included in the model below. Respondents also indicated if they believed that Blacks in America have achieved racial equality, will soon achieve racial equality, will not achieve equality in your lifetime or will never achieve racial equality. Responses to this question serve as a measure of racial pessimism.

Finally, respondents were asked a series of questions about their support for federal reparations for African Americans as compensation for a number of historic injustices. Blacks and whites were asked: (1) Do you think the federal government should or should not pay money to African Americans whose ancestors were slaves as compensation for that slavery?; (2) Do you think the federal government should or should not pay money to African Americans as compensation for the system of anti-Black violence and legal segregation know as "Jim Crow"?, and (3) Do you think that reparations should or should not be paid to survivors and their descendants of large, violent, 20th-century anti-Black riots such as those that occurred in Tulsa, Oklahoma and Rosewood, Florida? Responses to these three items are combined in a single scale indicating overall support for reparations to Black Americans.

The dependent variable is a scale derived from a factor of eight emotional response variables that asked respondents, "In the past five weeks since the Hurricane Katrina disaster how often have you felt: so sad that nothing could cheer you up; nervous; restless or

fidgety; hopeless; that everything was an effort; worthless; that difficulties were piling up so high you could not overcome them; and that you are unable to control the important things in your life.'' The scale is computed as a factor and is constrained to a unit scale where 1 represents the highest presentation of symptoms on all indicators and 0 represents having none of these negative emotions.

Table 2 presents the estimated coefficients and standard errors from an ordinary least squares regression modeling the emotional distress scale from the University of Chicago Katrina Disaster Study as a function of these partisan variables, demographic variables, and national and racial attitudes. The model is estimated separately for white and Black respondents to account for possible differences in the emotional processes operating for each group.

**Table 2**
**Model of Emotional Distress among Black and White Americans in the Immediate Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina**

| | Whites | | Blacks | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | $n = 602$ | | $n = 345$ | |
| | $r^2 = .16$ | | $r^2 = .10$ | |
| | Coefficient | SE | Coefficient | SE |
| **Partisan variables** | | | | |
| Bush represents people like me | $-.05$ | .04 | .06 | .06 |
| Democrat | .03 | .02 | .01 | .02 |
| Republican | $-.03$ | .02 | .02 | .06 |
| **Attitudes toward United States** | | | | |
| Proud to be American | .06 | .05 | .05 | .06 |
| America is unfair to the poor | $-.01$ | .02 | .01 | .02 |
| America is the land of opportunity | $-.15^*$ | .04 | $-.10^*$ | .05 |
| **Racial attitudes** | | | | |
| Racial linked fate | $.04^*$ | .01 | $.05^*$ | .02 |
| Blacks will not achieve equality | $-.01$ | .01 | $-.03$ | .02 |
| Reparations Support (3 item scale) | $.04^*$ | .02 | $.03^*$ | .01 |
| **Demographic variables** | | | | |
| Education | .03 | .04 | $-.03$ | .06 |
| Income | $-.14^*$ | .04 | $-.07$ | .05 |
| Female | $.04^*$ | .01 | $.04^*$ | .02 |
| Age$^2$ | $-.002^*$ | .0004 | $-.001^*$ | .0006 |
| Constant | $.62^*$ | .05 | $.48^*$ | .07 |

Source: University of Chicago Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture Racial Attitudes and Katrina Disaster Study.

Coefficients estimated with ordinary least squares regression. The dependent variable is constrained to a unit scale. Coefficients can be read as the percent change in total emotional distress. For example, those whites who support all three forms of reparations are 4 percentage points more distressed in the weeks following Katrina than those whites who do not support any form of reparations, all else being equal.

*Indicates significance at $p < .05$.

As expected, the model accounts for relatively little of the variation in emotional distress among Blacks or whites. As predicted, most people feel bad or good based on personal and proximate causes. There is a substantial and statistically significant effect that gender and age bear on both whites and Blacks. Men and middle-aged people experienced fewer symptoms of emotional distress in the weeks following Katrina. Somewhat surprisingly, education is not a statistically significant covariant for either group. Income is significant only for whites. Poorer whites are far more emotionally distressed in the weeks following Katrina than are their wealthier counterparts. For African Americans however, income makes no difference. Poorer and richer Blacks were equally likely to feel sad and overwhelmed.

While demographic variables account for some of the variation in the emotional distress measure, statistically significant relationships between emotions and racial and political variables are present. Negative affective reports were not related to partisan attitudes for either Blacks or whites. The emotions of Republicans and Democrats are indistinguishable from the emotions of those with no partisan preference. Also, believing that President Bush is representative of people like you provides no emotional harm or protection from bad feelings post-Katrina. Similarly, patriotism is unrelated to the emotional impact of the disaster. NORC researchers concluded that in the weeks following September 11, patriotism helped provide an emotional buffer against despair for many Americans (Rasinski et al. 2002). In the case of Katrina, patriotism has no discernable impact on emotional reports of whites or Blacks.

While these basic political beliefs had little influence on how Americans felt, racialized political variables were important. For both white and Black respondents, there were three key factors associated with their emotional responses after Katrina. First, those who believed that America is a land of opportunity where individuals can accomplish anything were significantly less distressed following the hurricane. This belief in America's limitless potential served as a buffer for some who witnessed the events in New Orleans. Perhaps they reasoned that although terrible things were happening, America would provide opportunities for these citizens to be restored and re-established. Among both Blacks and whites, those who were optimistic about the nation's opportunities felt relatively better than those who were more pessimistic.

While American idealism mitigated negative emotions, belief in racially-linked fate and recognition of America's historic racial injustices were related to more negative emotions after the hurricane. African Americans and whites who believe that their fate is linked to the fate of their race felt more distressed than those with less sense of linked fate. For African Americans, this finding seems straightforward. Just as New Yorkers felt more vulnerable than the rest of the country in the days following September 11, so too did Black people, who perceived their life opportunities linked to that of other Black people, feel more vulnerable in the aftermath of Katrina. Although probably not estimating that they were more likely to be affected by a natural disaster, Blacks' perception of a linked fate likely heightened the sense that they were more vulnerable to the inadequate government response to human suffering.

More surprising, whites who sensed their fate linked to that of other whites also felt more distressed following Katrina. We might expect that they would feel less distress because most whites escaped the worst horrors of the New Orleans disaster. However, white respondents who have a sense of linked fate may be more racially empathetic because they are more aware of the operation of race in individual life outcomes. If this hypothesis is accurate, then these white respondents are people who recognize race in America and express that recognition through a belief that the outcomes of their racial group influences their experiences. Forman and Lewis assert that when Americans expressed shock about the racialized poverty exposed by Katrina they were articulating

a willful ignorance of race that characterizes contemporary racial understandings in America. Contemporary racism in the form of racial apathy is not the explicit desire to inflict racial harm, but instead a willful expression of ignorance about racial inequality and its effects (Forman and Lewis 2006). It is not possible to fully test this hypothesis with the available data in this study, but simple bivariate correlations show that a sense of white linked fate is positively correlated with the belief that Blacks will never achieve racial equality (.11); positively correlated with the belief that America is unfair to poor people (.08); and negatively correlated with the belief that America is the land of opportunity (.04). White linked fate covaries with negative emotions in the aftermath of Katrina for those white people who recognize and acknowledge the continuing importance of race and inequality in American society.

Finally, those Blacks and whites who support federal reparations for slavery, Jim Crow and 20th-century race riots felt, statistically, significantly worse in the weeks following Katrina. Respondents were not asked to predict the likelihood that federal reparations would be forthcoming. We should not assume that the clear majority of Black respondents who believe the federal government *should* provide reparations are optimistic that the federal government *will* provide reparations. Instead support for federal remuneration is more accurately understood as recognition of the lingering effect of racial injustice and the government's failure to acknowledge or make amends for that injustice. Both Black and white Americans reported feeling greater levels of sadness and distress in the weeks following Katrina if they also believed that the federal government stilled owed Black Americans for centuries of previous injustices.

## Conclusion

> To the real question, how does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word. And yet, being a problem is a strange experience,—peculiar even for one who has never been anything else, save perhaps in babyhood and in Europe.
>
> —W.E.B. DuBois (1903) *The Souls of Black Folk*

Three tentative conclusions suggest themselves in light of this analysis. The first raises profound questions concerning race and class. Vulnerability to the storm's ravages fell disproportionately on those who lived at the intersection of poverty and Blackness. Wealthier Black people in New Orleans fared better in the aftermath of the storm than poorer Blacks. While the disaster's direct effects had a class component, the emotional responses to the storm for Black observers were structured by racial considerations not class concerns. Income and education did not distinguish the emotional experience of Katrina for Black people. Further, as Table 2 shows, questions concerning America's fairness toward poor people bore no direct correlation with negative emotions. Although some researchers and observers have worked to point attention toward issues of class and away from discussions of race in the aftermath of Katrina, it seems that race and not class is at the heart of the Black affective experience of the disaster.

In his foundational text, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African American Politics* (1994), political scientist Michael Dawson convincingly demonstrates that African Americans often use racial group interests as a proxy for determining their own interests. This Black linked fate results in many African Americans expressing public opinions and supporting public policies that are not apparently in their class interests. Black linked fate emerges both from historical, race-based experiences of discrimination and contemporary realities that make class interests more complicated for African Americans. The Black middle class

**Table 3**
**Percent of White and Black Respondents who Agree with Indicators in Model**

|  | %White | %Black |
|---|---|---|
| **Partisan variables** | | |
| Bush represents people like me (yes, a lot) | 22.6 | 3.4 |
| Democrat | 29.1 | 57.9 |
| Republican | 30.1 | 3.4 |
| Independent or No Preference | 38.6 | 37.8 |
| **Attitudes toward United States** | | |
| Proud to be American (strongly agree) | 77.1 | 57.9 |
| America is unfair to the poor | 41.7 | 71.3 |
| America is the land of opportunity (strongly agree) | 54.9 | 30.8 |
| **Racial attitudes** | | |
| Racial linked fate | 57.2 | 79.2 |
| Blacks will not achieve equality | 27.4 | 67.2 |
| **Reparations support** | | |
| Reparations for slavery | 2.6 | 51.7 |
| Reparations for Jim Crow | 3.4 | 59.2 |
| Reparations for 20th-century race riots | 4.9 | 63.7 |
| **Demographics** | | |
| Female | 50 | 58 |
| Income (mean on a 0–1 scale) | .56 | .45 |

Source: University of Chicago Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture Racial Attitudes and Katrina Disaster Study.

is likely to be residentially segregated (Darden 1995), economically vulnerable (Blau and Graham 1990), and linked through familial and social ties to the Black poor (Massey 1990). Black observers may have seen the Black poor suffering in New Orleans, but they also saw themselves. The white middle class was more insulated from these negative emotions. Thus, while socioeconomic status was correlated with white emotional patterns in the weeks following Katrina, class was unimportant for understanding Black American feelings.

The second conclusion we can draw from this research is that the disparity between Blacks and whites is not because white people are essentially unable to empathize with Blacks. The disparity grows out of differing meanings given to the events. If white people see the world the way that Black people do, then they feel the way that Black people do. The disparity emerges because only a tiny fraction of whites share African American's perceptual experiences. The responses in Table 3 underline the point that Black and white Americans exist and operate in vastly different political realities. Blacks and whites score significantly differently on every political and racial variable importantly correlated with emotional distress. White people are much more optimistic about the opportunity for individual advancement in the American system. A clear majority (55%) strongly agree that America is the land of opportunity while fewer than one third (31%) of Black Americans join them in this optimistic assessment. While a clear majority of whites express a sense of linked fate with other whites (57%), this is dwarfed by the near unanimity among Blacks that their race helps determine life chances. Finally, while a substantial majority of Black Americans believe that the federal government should provide compensation to Black Americans for historical injustices, only a tiny fraction of whites agree.

The small proportion of white Americans who perceive America's racial landscape in ways similar to the majority of Black Americans also felt significant distress and sadness following

Katrina. The enormous racial disparity is not attributable to the fact that whites are essentially incapable of racial empathy. Instead, the disparity exists because so few whites see the world through the lens that most Black Americans use for understanding their world.

The final tentative conclusion to be drawn from this research is that America's racial history affects America's emotional present. September 11 proved to be a rallying point of American identity. Americans largely shared a sense of vulnerability and loss in the days, weeks and months following 9–11. However, the national camaraderie after September 11 did not last. Americans responses to the tragedy became increasingly complicated by race, region, and partisanship as the domestic and international responses to the attack emerged. The Hurricane Katrina aftermath did not provoke such uniform affective emotional response. Black people found themselves relatively more isolated in their grief and fury. At the core of this differing response are the racial and political meanings that Black people assigned to the Katrina disaster. Good citizens of conscience and kindness responded with generosity and concern for those who had been displaced and devastated. White doctors, nurses, preachers, lawyers, and everyday working people were moved to great acts of heroism, generosity, and benevolence. But still, as a nation there was a significant gap in the emotional experiences of the disaster. While most whites believed that the abandonment of New Orleans was the result of bureaucracy, inefficiency, lack of preparedness or technical capacity, most Blacks believed that race was the real issue.

The levee failure in New Orleans that trapped thousands of Americans and destroyed one of America's most distinctive cities was one of the few televised American tragedies. Until the events in New Orleans, only the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963 and the destruction of the World Trade Centers in 2001 allowed Americans to share in the trauma of their fellow citizens in real time. Unlike either of these earlier events, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina was an unfolding drama that lasted for days. Rather than a single, terrible moment replayed by the media, the horror of New Orleans increased daily, produced new images of agony and death, and generated increasingly awful narratives of suffering. Americans witnessed hours of grisly footage. The nation was able to watch in real-time as the faces of their fellow citizens were contorted in fear, pain, and hunger; unable to feed their children or comfort their parents or find their partners.

While the terrible consequences of Katrina were readily apparent to most, African Americans suffered unique horrors as they watched the aftermath of the storm. Hurricane Katrina was not colorblind in its effects and Americans were not colorblind in their interpretations of the disaster. There is a vast racial disparity between how Black and white Americans understood the lessons of the storm.

Empirical social science can open up the human experience of politics by prompting considerations about what it means to feel bad within the context of American politics. To be a citizen in a democracy is to be not only the ruled, but the rulers. To be a citizen in a democratic republic is to have a voice in which you can name your experiences and pursue your good through public means. On September 11, the nation momentarily felt like vulnerable, attacked, but united citizens. This sense of vulnerability was less shared in the case of Katrina. Not only were the victims of the hurricane abandoned in their drowning city, but Black Americans were abandoned in their grief as they once again confronted by the fact of their second-class citizenship.

## Notes

1. (Cutter 2005; Gabe et al. 2005; Sherman and Shapiro 2005; Frymer et al. 2006).
2. (Bobo 2006; Sweeney 2006; Huddy and Feldman 2006).
3. (Harvey and Bryant 1998; Kessler et al. 1995; North et al. 1999; Davidson et al. 1991; Green 1991; Breslau 1995).

4. (Schuster et al. 2001; Chan 2006).

5. (Schuster et al. 2001; Schlenger et al. 2002).

6. (Silver et al. 2002).

7. The National Tragedy Study was conducted between September 13 and September 27, 2001, by the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago. It was a telephone interview of adults (18+) living in households with telephones in the United States. The total sample size of 2,126 comprised a national sample of 1,013 households and additional samples in the New York City, Washington, D.C., and Chicagoland areas. The overall response rate was 52 percent.

8. The Kennedy Assassination Study was conducted between November 26 and December 3, 1963, by the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chciago. The Kennedy Assassination Study Symptoms are derived from responses to the following: I am going to read a list of things some people have said happened to them since they heard about the attack on the World Trade Center. Please tell me whether or not they happened to you: Didn't feel like eating. Smoked more than usual. Had headaches. Had an upset stomach. Cried. Had trouble sleeping. Felt nervous and tense. Felt like getting drunk. Felt more tired than usual. Felt dizzy at times. Lost my temper more than usual. Hands sweat and felt damp and clammy. Had rapid heartbeats. Felt sort of dazed and numb. Kept forgetting things.

9. Rasinski et al. (2002).

10. Results for the survey are based on telephone interviews conducted under the direction of Princeton Survey Research Associates International among a nationwide sample of 1,000 adults, 18 years of age or older, including an oversample of African Americans, during the period September 6–7, 2005. The oversample of African Americans is designed to allow a sufficient number of interviews for reporting results of this demographic group. The national sample of telephone households was supplemented with an additional 103 interviews with African Americans whose households had been recently contacted for past Pew Research Center national surveys. Demographic weighting was used to ensure that the survey results reflect the correct racial and ethnic composition of national adults, based on U.S. Census information.

11. The Center for the Study of Race, Politics and Culture at the University of Chicago supported a national survey of Americans to gauge political and racial attitudes in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Principal investigators are Michael Dawson, Melissa Harris-Lacewell, and Cathy Cohen. The data were collected by Knowledge Networks between October 28, 2005 and November 17, 2005. Knowledge Networks employs a Random Digit Dialing (RDD) telephone methodology to develop a representative sample of households for participation in its panel. Once a Knowledge Networks household is selected, members are contacted first by an express delivery mailing and then by telephone for enrollment in the *Knowledge Networks*[TM] panel. The panel structure enables clients to conduct surveys of low-incidence populations, such as African Americans, more efficiently and inexpensively than would otherwise be possible. Every participating Knowledge Networks household receives free hardware, free Internet access, free e-mail accounts, and ongoing technical support. Participants receive a short multimedia survey about once a week. Surveys are delivered by e-mail on the same standardized hardware, through the television set. The data include responses from 1252 Americans. The racial composition of the respondents is as follows: White: 703, Black: 487, Hispanic: 52, Other: 10. Interviews were conducted in person by Melissa Harris-Lacewell in various locations in New Orleans November 11–18, 2005. Interviews include than 28 personal discussions with local residents and hours of transcripts from three community meetings about rebuilding efforts.

12. Amato (1991), Breslau et al. (1998).

13. The name Post Traumatic Stress Disorder first appeared in 1980 in DSM-III, the *American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* Third Edition. The diagnosis was updated in 1994 in the latest edition DSM-IV. The diagnostic criteria for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are defined in DSM-IV as follows:

> The person experiences a traumatic event in which both of the following were present: the person experienced or witnessed or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others; and the person's response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror. The traumatic event is persistently re-experienced in any of the following ways:1. recurrent and intrusive distressing recollections of the event, including images, thoughts or perceptions; recurrent distressing dreams of the event;. acting or feeling as if the traumatic event were recurring (eg reliving the experience, illusions, hallucinations, and dissociative flashback episodes, including those on wakening or when intoxicated); intense psychological distress at exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event; physiological reactivity on exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event. Persistent

avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma and numbing of general responsiveness (not present before the trauma). Persistent symptoms of increased arousal (not present before the trauma) as indicated by at least two of the following: difficulty falling or staying asleep; irritability or outbursts of anger; difficulty concentrating; hypervigilance; exaggerated startle response.

14. News sources mattered for the conclusions that Americans drew about the efficiency of Presidential response. Seventy three percent of CNN watchers reported that the president could have done more, but only 50% of Fox News viewers agreed. Forty-six percent of those whose primary source of Katrina coverage was Fox news believed that the President had done all he could.

15. The Pew survey reports a 50% approval rating for President Bush in January 2005 and a 40% approval rating immediately following Katrina.

16. Education is coded as years of education. Income is measured as self reported household income, and coded on a unit scale where 0 represents the lowest income category and 1 represents the highest income category. Sex is coded as a dichotomous variable with female = 1. Age is coded as reported age at time of survey. The variable used in the equation is $age^2$ to account for the hypothesized parabolic relationship between age and mental health.

17. Democrat and Republican self identification are included in the model. They should be read against, the excluded category of those who say that there are independent or have no preference.

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