

THE BLAME GAME

*Racialized Responses to Hurricane Katrina*¹

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Abstract

Response to Hurricane Katrina and public commentary by high-profile individuals has made race a focus in the media and brought racial inequality to the attention of people in the United States. Analyzing responses to an article in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, I find that, even after this very public event that brought race to the forefront in the U.S., people relied on the ideologies of meritocracy and color blindness to rationalize inequality. Findings of how the myth of meritocracy is utilized, along with how people argue against it, can be used to keep race at the forefront of the nation's attention while furthering discussions of inequality. The academic community is challenged to keep the voices of alternative ideologies in the spotlight and to use the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina to create change.

Keywords: Race, Inequality, Racism, Color-blind, Meritocracy, Responsibility

INTRODUCTION

Race has been thrown into the headlines in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and the media has been forced to discuss racial inequality (Violanti 2005). Public response to the hurricane reveals reliance on the myth of meritocracy and color-blind ideology, where individuals are blamed for their circumstances, while structural inequalities are not taken into account (Bonilla-Silva 2003). Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, and through media coverage it was evident that those who were *not* able to leave were disproportionately poor, elderly, and Black. Pictures of Black people waving flags as they waited days on their roof without food and water, and those of Whites “finding” food while Black people were “looting,” highlighted racial disparities in this country (Ralli 2005).

President George W. Bush's mother, former First Lady Barbara Bush, toured the Astrodome in Houston where many residents of New Orleans were taken when the city was evacuated. On the tour she was quoted as saying: “And so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them” (*New York Times* 2005). Comments such as this one from high-profile

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individuals neglect structural inequalities in the U.S. and have sparked discussion in the media regarding why certain people remained in the city while others were able to get out before the hurricane hit. These conversations have highlighted and questioned the role of race in relation to Katrina, with great variation in opinion between racial groups. A poll conducted by the Pew Research Center found that “two-thirds of African-Americans said the government’s response to the crisis would have been faster if most of the victims had been white, while 77 percent of whites disagreed” (*New York Times* 2005).

Using ideologies of meritocracy and color-blind ideology, I analyze responses to the circumstances surrounding Hurricane Katrina. I find that when a public event highlights racial inequality after a very public disaster, people continue to rely on these dominant ideologies. I would have expected individual responses to show not only compassion, but also increased racial recognition because the hurricane itself and surrounding media coverage brought race to the forefront of discussion in the United States.

MERITOCRACY AND COLOR-BLIND RACIAL IDEOLOGY

This country operates on the idea that everyone has an equal chance and an equal opportunity to succeed in life—the idea that the game of life is played on a level playing field. This cultural argument points to lack of values and hard work as leading to poverty, rather than structural arguments that focus on unequal opportunities and access to resources. The myth of meritocracy is evident in the public response to government involvement and the role of race in the response to Hurricane Katrina, for inequality is thus rationalized. According to this outlook, success in life is earned and is the result of an individual’s hard work, without taking into consideration opportunities and structural inequality. This notion of meritocracy combined with a color-blind racial ideology, where people do not “see” race (Frankenberg 1993; Gallagher 1997; Bonilla-Silva 2001), leads people to believe that they have earned their position and success whether in the workplace, through owning a home, or in their overall position in society. This ideology is problematic because it allows those who are privileged, particularly Whites, to neglect not only how they received their privilege, but also to ignore altogether their advantages. Structural inequality operates whether privilege and oppression are recognized or not. History, government assistance, and policy changes uphold the racial hierarchy that privileges Whites and affects the opportunities that different groups have in U.S. today (Omi and Winant, 1994).

The myth of meritocracy is closely connected with racism in this country. Contemporary racism is typically not the overt racism of pre-civil rights, but is hidden covertly in coded behavior and language (Perry 2001). Racial inequality is rationalized by stating that success is due to individual effort and merit, and those who do not succeed do not try hard enough or do not have the correct values. Racial ideology is “the racially based framework used by actors to explain and justify (dominant race) or challenge (subordinate race or races) the racial status quo” (Bonilla-Silva 2001, p. 63). While the framework of the dominant group (i.e., Whites) becomes the framework of everyone, this does not mean that subordinate groups (e.g., Black people) do not hold oppositional views.

Bonilla-Silva (2003) finds that Black and White people use several of the same ideological frameworks regarding race, but various aspects of color-blind ideology are not as essential to Black respondents as they are to White people. For example,

Black people may also believe that individual characteristics determine inequality and that inequality is natural. Bonilla-Silva finds that while Black people may use some of the same frameworks as Whites, they do not minimize racism by stating that everyone has the same opportunity, and they do not think that inequality results from a difference in what people ultimately want in life, as Whites do (Bonilla-Silva 2003).

Being outside the dominant group, yet having to live in and understand it, allows people of color to see racism and inequality (Du Bois 1903[1999]). People of color are on the margins and are able to view structural systems and inequality from both the inside out and from the outside in (hooks 1984). For instance, men fail to see the world in the same way as women do, Whites fail to see the world in the same way as do people of color, and White women fail to see the world in the same way as do women of color—with variations in any racial/ethnic group and gender (Condor 1986; King 1989; Collins 2000). To survive in White-dominated society, people of color must be aware of the way of the oppressors, who define the positions within society (Collins 2000). If Black people are more aware of systems of oppression, then they are more likely to see racial inequality than Whites. This helps to explain why most Black people believed that the response to the hurricane would have been faster if those left behind had been White, while most Whites did not (*New York Times* 2005).

In this paper, I use the theories of meritocracy and color-blind ideology to examine public response to an overt statement about racial inequality and government involvement in the relief efforts after Hurricane Katrina. I investigate how people discuss race when racial inequality is explicitly addressed in the media. I find two main themes: (1) the use of cultural arguments that blame individuals, and (2) the use of structural arguments that point to systemic inequities. I find that while responses that support race-conscious ideologies and point out systemic inequality are present, the myth of meritocracy and color-blind racism remain prevalent. After discussing the events of Hurricane Katrina and my findings, I challenge academics to use this moment to create change towards racial equality.

IN THE WAKE OF DISASTER

Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Shores on August 29, 2005, and led to widespread devastation. As a result of the storm, the levees that had been protecting New Orleans broke, leading to mass flooding, particularly in areas where lower-income Black people lived. Those who did not have the means or were not able to evacuate were transported to the New Orleans Superdome and the Convention Center. They remained there for several days without provisions, electricity, working toilets, or water, until they were taken to the Astrodome in Houston, Texas, and various shelters across the country. Pictures and video brought the devastation of the Gulf Coast directly into our homes, making it hard to ignore discussions of inequality.

The media drew our attention to the response of the government at all levels, but particularly that of President George W. Bush (Allen 2005). As flooding was overtaking New Orleans, much of the Gulf Coast was destroyed, and evacuees were *not* being taken care of, President Bush was attending meetings on Medicare and immigration in Arizona (Allen 2005). Bush did not visit the Gulf Coast for several days and viewed the worst-hit areas of New Orleans from a helicopter (Loven 2005a). Government officials, including Bush, stressed that the focus needed to be on relief efforts and not trying to place blame. On September 12, 2005, President Bush was reported to have

replied testily to a reporter who asked whether he felt let down by federal officials in responding to the disaster. "Look, there will be plenty of time to play the blame game," he said. "That's what you're trying to do. You're trying to say somebody is at fault. And, look, I want to know. I want to know exactly what went on and how it went on, and we'll continually assess inside my administration" (Loven 2005b).

While the government wanted to avoid blame, pictures of the devastation made it clear that poor people and Black people were disproportionately affected by this disaster because of their location in larger systems of inequality.

People of color in the United States continue to have unequal access to resources compared to White people in terms of education (Kozol 1991; Darden 1997; Cawley et al., 1999), the persistence of residential segregation (Conley 1999), job segregation and lower wages (Aldridge 1999; Bound and Dresser, 1999; Tomaskovic-Devey 1993), and disproportionate distributions of wealth (Oliver and Shapiro, 1997). The history of privilege for White people and oppression of people of color has led to these unequal opportunities and continued structural inequality that exist regardless of personal beliefs or drive to succeed. Despite documented inequalities, the dominant discourse and ideology in the United States is one of individualism and meritocracy, where inequality is said to be due to personal values and lack of desire to achieve (Frankenberg 1993; Gallagher 1997; Bonilla-Silva 2001). There is little recognition or acknowledgement of either social systems or history.

When asked about the role of race in response to the hurricane, President Bush replied that "the storm didn't discriminate and neither will the recovery effort" (Loven 2005b). Disasters such as floods, heat waves, and hurricanes are labeled as "natural" without taking into consideration the social conditions that lead to unequal impact (Klinenberg 2002; Peacock et al., 1997). The notion that disasters strike everyone with the same force perpetuates the idea that stratification by socioeconomic status and race does not have an effect on damage experienced from such disasters (Peacock et al., 1997). The level of damage to homes, immediate physical injury, type of temporary housing, ability to receive compensation through insurance, government assistance, and long-term effects on health and life chances vary by socioeconomic status, affecting those from lower socioeconomic status groups the most, which in the United States is closely tied to race (Bates et al., 1982; Drabek and Key, 1983; Kreps 1984; Peacock et al., 1997). Studies of disasters consistently show that families who have stable and sufficient incomes, adequate housing, and good insurance prior to a disaster are more likely to fully recover, and to do so more quickly (Edwards 1998). Thus, systemic inequality affects resulting impact and recovery from disaster—the location of people within the social system becomes accentuated in the wake of disaster.

While damage and results from disasters are horrendous, they also provide an opportunity to sociologically examine inequality and suggest change for the future. Research on disasters tends to focus on preparation, the effect of the disaster on those directly affected by it (i.e., physical and psychological, in the short- and the long-term), response, and consequences for organizations and the community hit by disaster (Erikson 1976; Kreps 1984; Edwards 1998). Even though this paper is situated within the scholarly literature on inequality and racism, it also aspires to contribute to the literature on disasters, by changing the focus to that of *public opinion* concerning the response of the government and the role of race in a recent natural disaster. One would expect to find people joining forces and supporting one another when disaster strikes. However, in spite of the devastation and the documentation of

stratification within the United States, many continue to rationalize disaster outcomes by appeal to the myth of meritocracy and color-blind racial ideology.

CONTROVERSIAL COMMENTARY

The statement made by performance artist Kanye West at a live fundraiser aired on NBC on September 2, 2005, spurred conversation and controversy. As West and actor Mike Myers presented information on the disaster, West departed from the prepared script to initiate the following exchange:

West: I hate the way they portray us in the media. You see a black family, it says, “They’re looting.” You see a white family, it says, “They’re looking for food.” And, you know, it’s been five days [waiting for federal help] because most of the people are black. And even for me to complain about it, I would be a hypocrite because I’ve tried to turn away from the TV because it’s too hard to watch. I’ve even been shopping before even giving a donation, so now I’m calling my business manager right now to see what is the biggest amount I can give, and just to imagine if I was down there, and those are my people down there. So anybody out there that wants to do anything that we can help—with the way America is set up to help the poor, the black people, the less well-off, as slow as possible. I mean, the Red Cross is doing everything they can. We already realize a lot of people that could help are at war right now, fighting another way—and they’ve given them permission to go down and shoot us!

Myers: And subtle, but in many ways even more profoundly devastating, is the lasting damage to the survivors’ will to rebuild and remain in the area. The destruction of the spirit of the people of southern Louisiana and Mississippi may end up being the most tragic loss of all.

West: George Bush doesn’t care about black people! (de Moraes 2005).

At this point, West was cut off as cameras moved back to another presenter. This part of the fundraiser was not aired on the West Coast. His statement created so much controversy that *NBC* replied by saying that the views of Kanye West did not represent those of the network (de Moraes 2005). Reactions to West’s statement added to growing public discussion concerning racial dynamics within the United States. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (*AJC*) posted a short article describing a parody of a Kanye West song using the language of his unscripted speech. In examining responses to the *AJC* article, I have found two main types of arguments: (1) more-prominent cultural arguments based on color-blind ideology and ideas of meritocracy, and (2) less-prominent structural arguments that focus on systems of inequality and unequal opportunities. Meritocracy and color blind ideology remain prevalent even as (or possibly because) race has been put in the forefront of discussions in the United States in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. To use the devastation in the Gulf Coast, particularly New Orleans, as an opportunity for social change, one needs to know how ideas of meritocracy remain persistent and find ways to successfully argue against them.

METHODS AND DESIGN

To understand public reaction after an event that brought race to the forefront of discussion in the United States, I examined responses to an article published online

by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (*AJC*) (Ho 2005). The short article described a parody of a Kanye West song, which incorporated the comments from his September 2, 2005, NBC appearance. The parody was played on an Atlanta radio station, and an article discussing the song was made available through the *AJC* web page (Ho 2005). The *AJC* provided the opportunity for readers to comment both upon the article and to each other online through an asynchronous discussion board.

I chose this discussion board because I noticed patterns of meritocracy and color-blind ideology. I incorporated these themes in my analysis, while looking for others. Anyone with internet access can comment on the article without limitations as to style, language, or spelling. The comment section serves as a source for public opinion and allows for responses from a more general audience than opinion pieces typically provide. This venue thus serves to voice opinions of people from various socioeconomic status groups and races.

Internet use is limited for those in lower socioeconomic status groups, and responses are limited to those who read the *AJC*, with the consequence that this sample does not represent the entire population. However, while the discussion forum is not a representative sample, it *does* represent various conversations taking place surrounding Hurricane Katrina and race. I focus on the responses for this particular article because it represents one avenue for the public to voice their opinion in direct response to a statement that clearly says race is an issue in the U.S. and in relation to the government response to Hurricane Katrina. The discussion board also brings into the same arena two sides of the debate who are not typically in close conversation with one another.

The article was posted on the *AJC* website on September 9, 2005 (Ho 2005), and the last response in the discussion forum was posted on September 12, 2005. There were a total of ninety-two responses from sixty-nine different user names. I was unable to obtain demographic information on each person who posted a statement because respondents at this site need only to provide a user name, which may be a first name that may or may not identify gender, but is often simply initials or else a code name. Some people identified their gender or race; however, not enough of the respondents did this in order to be able to examine differences and similarities in responses by race and gender. Using this discussion forum allowed me to investigate how cultural individualistic arguments were used, and to examine how they were refuted with structural systemic arguments.

Key arguments on this board related to the role of government, who is racist and who is not, and individual responsibility. I first copied responses from the internet into Microsoft Word files and then imported them into the visual data management system *Atlas.ti*. I coded responses based on existing theory using the coding scheme shown in Table 1.

I looked at relationships between the codes, particularly, at how race was talked about in relation to each code, and how color-blind ideology was used. I sorted the quotes associated with each code into various emerging themes. For example, as I read over the quotes coded as *Blame the Government*, I found that there were themes of blaming the federal government in general, President Bush as an individual or his administration, state and local government, or all levels of government. I then looked at how these responses overlapped with comments about race to investigate how opinions relied on race either overtly and covertly, and how inequality was rationalized. I repeated this process for the various codes to look for different relationships and themes. I have found that responses were racialized whether the government was blamed or not, and I discuss these findings in greater detail in the next section. People referred to race overtly, referred to stereotypes, or used code language that implied race.

Table 1. Coding Scheme

Initial Codes	Operationalization
<i>Blame the Government</i>	Stating that federal government, President Bush, state, and/or local government is to blame for response to the disaster and unequal distribution of damage from the hurricane. Includes blaming individuals and the system.
<i>Do Not Blame Government</i>	Stating that response to the disaster and unequal distribution of damage from the hurricane is not the Government's fault. Includes blaming individuals and the system.
<i>Meritocracy</i>	Blaming individuals. Rational choice. Equal playing field.
<i>Class</i>	Anything relating to class differences, poverty, or economic resources.
<i>Race</i>	Anything about race, whether implicit or explicit.

FINDINGS

Kanye West's comment on live television sparked conversation surrounding the role of government and race in relation to the devastation and response to Hurricane Katrina. Many of the postings in the discussion board focused on the role of the government and who was to blame. Within this discussion I found two main themes: (1) cultural arguments that blame individuals, and (2) structural arguments focusing on systems of inequality. Comments included those that contained no reference to race or racial implications and those that utilized the myth of meritocracy, color-blind ideology, and racist language. Most of the discussion on the board placed responsibility on individuals, whether or not blame was also placed on the government.

Racialized Responses

Race was discussed on the board both overtly and covertly. Many who were making statements about how the government was not to blame brought up race in relation to rappers and their role in society. The assumption that rappers should not be a part of the discussion of politics and race presupposes that they *are not* well informed, intelligent, or public figures that should be listened to. This argument is tied to Blackness, because *Black* is associated with rappers. Comments such as the following dismiss rappers and the ideas that they and Kanye West verbalize:

And Kanye West to be held as some type of Martin Luther King Jr. is absurd. It is truly sad that people take his comments as someone who "has finally said what we all feel".²

While discussing the role of the government, there was often a built-in accusation that rappers, who are mainly Black, should not be discussing political events. These quotes were in direct response to Kanye West saying that our White president does not care about Black people and in response to others on the discussion board

agreeing with Kanye West. Opinions were often angry, displaying outrage that anyone would bring race into the equation.

Others reacted to the accusation that the president and federal government are racist by redirecting the label of racist to other officials. These comments reflected the idea that, if the president, who is White, is racist, then so, too, are other government officials, regardless of their own race:

I think the New Orleans mayor hates black people. He avoided executing his own disaster plan and parked buses that could have delivered thousands of blacks to safety. He doesn't get it. I think the Louisiana governor hates black people. She didn't ask the feds to help evacuate poor blacks when they had a chance. She doesn't want the national guard federalized even now. She doesn't get it.

Another common theme was the idea that, because all of those affected by the storm were not shown discussing race in the media, this shows that racism and racial inequality must not exist. These comments show a lack of recognition of structural inequality and systemic racism beyond people discussing or not discussing racism:

Black people have become the children of America, everything is excused and god help you if you don't take care of their every need. I heard they had a bit of a problem in Miss and E Louisiana, but never mind that. Sing (I mean rap), Kanye rap!!

The above response illustrates the idea that, if race were a factor, then others hit by the disaster would also be talking about race. It assumes that, if the media has not covered the people of Mississippi and Louisiana, pointing out racial inequality, then racism must not be an issue. The above post shows how people actually incorporate racialized language when articulating their opinion that race does not play a role. It is an example of how racism is embedded in statements that claim that race has nothing to do with response to the disaster or disparity in disaster damage. These comments support the idea that Black people are not oppressed, but instead are overly taken care of in the United States. This implies that not only does White supremacy not exist in this country, but that Black people have it better than anyone else. This sentiment displays a lack of understanding of systemic inequality and is similar to what past research has found when asking White people about programs that target racial/ethnic minority groups, such as affirmative action (Ferber 1998; Bonilla-Silva 2003).

Hidden Racism

Many people have stated that they cannot understand how race has anything to do with a natural disaster. However, as they explain how the hurricane has nothing to do with race, they use language that is highly charged with racism. This demonstrates how race is very much a part of our culture, while color-blind ideology allows discussion of race to be hidden in covert language that appears rational instead of emotional (Perry 2001). The following response illustrates how someone stresses the natural disaster aspect of the hurricane, yet while discussing the response says s/he is "tired of" Black people bringing up race, and blames the Black people of New Orleans for the lack of help provided:

Screw Kanye West. What an ignorant jackass. And if you agree with this moron, you are a jackass too. Oh yeah, Bush hates black people. That's why he appointed so many of them to his cabinet. Kanye portrays a natural disaster as Bush's fault! Last time I checked, these hurricanes have been occurring long before Bush was alive. Kanye says that black people are "looters", while people are just "looking for food". It's amazing that this has now turned into a racial situation. You hear things like, "Bush was more eager to help the victims from 9-11 than Katrina because more victims were white." HELLO!!!! You could actually GET TO the victims in 9-11, and when the help arrived at the twin towers THERE WEREN'T PEOPLE SHOOTING AT THEM!!!! Yes it sucks to have this natural disaster, regardless of skin color. New Orleans happened to be a city where african-americans make up the majority. There may have been logistical problems concerning aid, which have been exposed, but it has nothing to do with race! Wake up America and start pointing the finger at yourself for once. I'm tired of everyone placing blame on everyone else (ie: Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson, Kanye West, etc).

This response also ties in ideas of meritocracy and displays the failure to comprehend systemic racism that locates many in their socioeconomic situations. It implies that if Bush appoints Black people to the cabinet he must *not* be racist—going along with the "one of my best friends is Black" argument. This is problematic because it reinforces the idea that, if the Black people on the cabinet were able to make it and take care of themselves, then so, too, should other people of color. These statements rely on the meritocratic idea that everyone has the same privilege, opportunities, and access to resources, while neglecting the advantages some groups have over others.

Statements are racialized by characterizing Black people as ignorant, uninformed, dangerous (as in the previous example), and abusing government assistance. The next responses provide further examples of the racist assumptions, this one concerning Black people and government assistance:

This disaster was terrible . . . but most of these people should not have sat around and waited for the government to come take care of them. This endorsement of whiners, looking for somebody to blame is ridiculous. The fact that people are still trying to blame the government need to get up, cash their welfare check and donate it to the Red Cross and get a real job. It's time people in this country start taking care of themselves . . . if we allow this type of behavior to continue WE are the only one's to blame!³

This response demonstrates how race was discussed using covert language. The person did not explicitly talk about race, but used coded language by talking about welfare, which is associated with Black people. This person implies that those most affected by the storm need to take care of themselves, without regard to who was receiving public assistance, who had jobs, and their circumstances. The response thus illustrates how ideas of meritocracy are tied to race. The assumption is that everyone has the same opportunities and the same ability to help themselves—if people wanted to get out of New Orleans, then they could have.

It's All About the Individual

Ideas of individual choice and meritocracy were often drawn on to rationalize inequality by stating that people had the ability and choice to have a plan for disaster. The

idea of choice fits with the myth of meritocracy in that it ignores structural inequality and unequal access to resources. Comments about choice focused on the individual's ability to make his or her own choices without any constraints of knowledge or resources. The following response is an example of how the language of choice was used:

It's about time people start accepting responsibilities for there OWN actions and stop blaming everyone else. I'm from New Orleans, and I know a lot of poor people that heeded the warnings and left town. Why were they able to and not the black people? Choices my friends, we all have to live with our choices.

Another person said:

The residents of the Gulf Coast lived there by CHOICE, not by mandate, so, in the years leading up to Hurricane Katrina, it was in their best interest to make provisions for when such an event occurred (as has been predicted for decades), but they did not; and now Kanye West wants to lodge protestations about how President Bush "doesn't care about Black people"?!

The myth of meritocracy perpetuates the idea that structural constraints and barriers do not exist and that anyone can succeed if they just work hard enough. Many drew on the myth of meritocracy in relation to the hurricane to say that anyone could have left the destroyed areas if they had wanted to. These comments stress themes of choice and individual responsibility:

At some point in time people have to realize that you have look out for yourself. You are living in America and you have your freedom, but with that comes the fact that you have to be responsible for your own family. You have to make sure that you have the means to get out whether it is your car, a rental car, a greyhound bus, hitchhiking, ANYTHING. I am so sick of hearing this turned into a racial issue. Why does it always have to be about race?

The theme of meritocracy is closely connected to color-blind ideology. If everyone has the same chances in life, then people do not have to think about their own racial privilege or recognize racial oppression. Although I cannot identify the race of these respondents, Bonilla-Silva (2003) has found that color-blind ideology is used by both people of color and White people. Because people of color live within the dominant culture, parts of the dominant color-blind ideology become a part of their ideology as well (Bonilla-Silva 2003).

Recognizing the Role of Race

While many of the responses reflected meritocratic ideals and displayed a color-blind ideology, there were others who had an alternative racial ideology, that of race consciousness. Some respondents' comments displayed a racial analysis of events surrounding Hurricane Katrina that challenged ideas of color-blind ideology. Many replied directly to other respondents' comments and made statements pointing out that systems of inequality are indeed related to race. The next example does this by focusing on socioeconomic status and the limitations of poverty:

It's their 'choice' to live there? Unfortunately, that's typically the stance that someone who has never lived in poverty takes. You or I can wake up one morning and say, "gee . . . Atlanta's not a nice place to reside any more. . ." We have the means to pack up and start fresh somewhere else. There are folks in this country that just can't do that. They are stuck where they are; in the system, with no education and no means to make their situation better. You want to know how I know??? I grew up in poverty! I was one of the very small percentage of lucky ones that had the ability to overcome my situation. There were a lot of us who wanted to, but just could not because of the situation. Moral of the story . . . don't assume that people can easily just up and move elsewhere when someone tells them that they 'may' be living in an unsafe area. They have more issues to deal with on a regular basis. And contrary to what you believe; it is up to the government to take care of all people, including black, poor, rich, whatever. . . . That's pretty much his job, don't you think? He is here to lead all Americans, not just the educated and wealthy.

This response discusses systems of education and class. It states that the people who remained in New Orleans had no option but to stay where they were and ride out the storm. Color-blind ideology makes it taboo to discuss race outright, which is why race is often coded by discussing class. Responses like the one above are actually about race because we know that those who were left behind in New Orleans were disproportionately Black.

This person also makes a point of saying that the government *does* have the responsibility to care for and assist everyone. Another example also stresses the role of the government, specifically in relation to race relations:

It's sad to think that our pres and our congress might put a higher priority on certain American lives but if you look at the last several years it's hard to argue that they don't. The president declined to participate in the 2004 NAACP Annual Convention (first president since Harding to do so), he gave scheduling conflicts as a reason . . . He also had scheduling conflicts that kept him from meeting with the Congressional Black Caucus through 6 invitations. I think the race issue is there because of his actions. And now this . . . He boarded Air Force One and left Crawford quicker to save one woman on life support in Fla than he did an entire region of this country . . . But these people were obviously not as important to our govt.

These responses are examples of respondents who argue with others on the discussion board and agree with Kanye West that inequality and structural barriers limit opportunities and block available choices.

While many opinions support the myth of meritocracy and color-blind ideology, there are some who recognize inequality. The challenge for the academic community lies in making these voices the ones that are heard as the country moves towards change.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Hurricane Katrina has forced the media to focus again on race in a way that it has not in recent years. Focusing on discussions after the disaster allows one to look at the types of logic being used to rationalize inequality. The themes that I find correspond to established frames of color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2003). In this case, the

types of color blindness most often used to discuss race in relation to Hurricane Katrina include (1) abstract liberalism, where one believes in equality, but it is up to the individual—success comes from individual values and hard work; and (2) minimization of racism, under the assumption that everyone has the same opportunities. I do not know the race of those who posted to the discussion board. However, past research shows that some of the frames of color-blind ideology apply to Black people as well as to Whites (Bonilla-Silva 2003). But while Black people often use the language of color-blind ideology and meritocracy, they also recognize inequality and racism (Sweeney 2006). This paper has not dealt with how opinions after the disaster vary by racial/ethnic group, but others have shown that the racialized political context influences group racial attitudes and perceptions (Bobo 1997, 1998).

While Hurricane Katrina and comments by those in the spotlight, including Kanye West, have brought race to the attention of people in the United States, many continue to rely on meritocracy and color-blind ideology to rationalize the obvious inequalities. They stress individual choice and responsibility, relying on cultural arguments and without recognizing structural barriers and limitations in opportunities. I did find some less prevalent voices that expressed a racial analysis incorporating structural systems of inequalities in relation to the disaster. Past literature would predict the themes of meritocracy that I found in response to the *AJC* article; however, we also need to focus on those who have alternative ideologies, which are race conscious and recognize structural limitations.

The academic community can use this information on how the myth of meritocracy was drawn on and argued against to further discussion on inequality and keep race in the forefront of national discussion. The challenge now is to make race-conscious voices the ones that are heard, to use the tragedy of the hurricane to adequately work towards social change. While the myth of meritocracy and color-blind racial ideology are deeply engrained in our society, making them extremely difficult to argue against, scholars need not be mute. The devastation from Hurricane Katrina has been displayed in the media, allowing public response to be heard. Understanding how the myth of meritocracy is used in relation to this disaster can help the academic community to argue more effectively against this ideology.

It is difficult for those who speak out about the racialized effects of this disaster to be taken seriously without evidence when they are accused of playing the blame game. Government officials are asking the public to hold back on trying to place blame because it is getting in the way of providing assistance (Loven 2005b). However critical immediate assistance may be, the deeper problem is why a disproportionate number of poor people are people of color (in this case, Black people), and how and why the situation of these groups continues to remain hidden from sight. As academics, we have the responsibility to raise our voices against the dominant ideology and keep discussions of racial inequality in the forefront of the national arena. This can be accomplished by making sure that racial privilege and disadvantage are a part of the discussions within our research, classrooms, communities, and homes. We can remain engaged in conversation with colleagues, write opinion pieces, and examine race in relation to the climate of our own universities and the larger community. If the academic community does not help keep discussions of inequality in public discussion, and accountability continues to be pushed to the future, then there will be little hope of learning from this tragedy and addressing structural inequities.

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NOTES

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2. Quotes are taken word for word without changing language or spelling. I think this is important in capturing the voice of the respondents.
3. Pauses expressed by “. . .”, spelling mistakes, and abbreviations are, again, original to the response.

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