

Editorial: This fall semester was more valuable than it seems

Letter to the Editor by Patrick White (<https://mainecampus.com/2020/12/letter-to-tl>)

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Racist narratives during natural disasters

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Sam Tracy (<https://mainecampus.com/author/stracy/>)

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Hurricane Harvey is the first Category 3 or higher hurricane to make landfall in the United States since 2005. The hurricane reached peak intensity as it hit southern Texas on Aug. 25 and barraged western Gulf states like Louisiana and Texas especially. With it, floods have destroyed hundreds of homes and displaced over 30 thousand people. At least 47 people are dead. Houston is particularly affected by flooding and many speculate the city will be uninhabitable for weeks to come. Economic estimates range from \$10 billion to \$190 billion, according to a report from the private weather firm AccuWeather. USA Today reports this as “equal to the combined cost of Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, and represents a 1% economic hit to the gross national product.”

Currently, mainstream news channels are broadcasting constant updates of the affected areas. Churches, mosques, high schools and other public buildings have opened their doors to evacuees of the storm as volunteers, boats, local authorities and federal officials work tirelessly to rescue thousands from Houston alone.

Amidst all of the physical damage and efforts to curb loss of life, the main narrative emerging is one of survival. Those affected by Hurricane Harvey are fighting for their lives and will go to great lengths for survival. Families must find food, clean water and safe places to perch in the midst of state-record-breaking floods. Price gouging — the practice of stores and vendors bumping prices up to unimaginable levels — is far too common during disasters. Recently, Best Buy was caught selling 24-pack cases of water for \$43 in Houston. The company later issued an apology.

Unfortunately, some families are allotted more leniency than others. Frequently you can see pictures of white people “finding” supplies like food and water from storm wreckage. When black people do the same, reports call it “looting.” This is an echo of the looting narrative during Hurricane Katrina, which focused predominantly on footage of black survivors searching through stores left unguarded by evacuations.

Tucker Carlson from Fox News spoke in a three-minute segment about looting during and after natural disasters. Carlson claimed that “These are small businesses... They worked their whole lives to keep their heads out of the red ink... You’re stealing their money and their livelihood because you have a sense of entitlement during a tragedy? That is deranged when you boil that down.” Carlson did not, however, bother to find out if the footage chosen for his show was cherry picked to show mostly black people scavenging, or even suppose that the accused criminals were, in fact, those hard-working Americans he was defending in the first place.

In an article about the history behind this racist narrative, ThinkProgress said this use of language isn’t new and dates back to the early 1900’s. During natural disasters, white populations fear the “Savage” minority “stealing from working class or wealthy white citizens... white victims were presumed innocent. Black victims and victims of color did not enjoy that luxury.”

A looting narrative affects black communities and families the most. In Houston, “45 percent of households earning \$10,000 or less in income are black,” according to

The Root's analyst Charles D. Ellison. Poor black people are struggling to survive but they receive no sympathy when pitted against the commercial worth of a white business. Instead of worrying about the safety of all those affected by Hurricane Harvey, we obsess over goods and wares that were taken during the crisis.

Mandatory looting in Houston puts marginalized communities at a terrible crossroads — stealing for survival and facing the law, or dying honorably and well-behaved.

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