

# KATRINA 101: A Black Studies Curriculum Challenge

by Abdul Alkalimat

**K**ATRINA. This one word now says so much to all of us. It is packed tight with meaning, and we all sense that in it we can find the answers to many important questions; a search that is likely to be on the agenda for some time. At the same time there will be tons of misinformation and misdirection that will have the impact of not only hiding the truth, but stopping people from continuing to search for the truth. Katrina should become and remain an important agenda item for Black Studies. Toward that end, this paper is a reflection on the resources and curriculum possibilities for Black Studies. Finally, as is appropriate at all times, Katrina is an opportunity to meditate on Black Studies theory.

The guiding philosophy of Black Studies professionals, as stated by the National Council for Black Studies, is the engendering of both academic excellence and social responsibility. First and foremost Katrina is a moral and political event/process that necessitates consideration. All decent people are called to respond, no matter their occupation or profession. For people in education and especially Black Studies, as we deal with Katrina, we commit to the highest standards of academic excellence. The issues of Katrina help us to renew our focus on fundamental questions: Who are we as African Americans and as people who live in the historical territory of black concentrations? What are our fundamental problems of quality of life? What power do we have to change things? What are the strategies and tactics needed for fundamental change and black liberation?

**T**HE TWO MAIN CONSENSUS POINTS for analyzing the black condition are race and class. The dead end of choosing one or the other will only lead to the same old polarities that have led us nowhere in the past. Either position (only black vs. white, or rich vs. poor) is dogmatic and while sometimes grounded in what looks like a reality that confirms the polarity (like extreme forms of racism, or the rich class making common cause with the black rich) most common sense in everyday life usually produces enough experience to promote more dialectical thinking. We face a complex structure of oppression and exploitation that involves the dynamic interaction of both. Virtually all social and historical analysis confirms this. We have to unpack the meaning of Katrina by being open to a more complex analysis than a simple polarity of good and bad people.

One last general point is that Katrina forces us to rethink our social reality in the context of this new age of globalization. Globalization is based on how the capitalist system is evolving into new economic and political systems and networks on a worldwide basis. Most people think in terms of living in a specific country. This is not how the ruling class thinks and operates. It is part of a global process—moving assets and wealth around the world via electronic messages more than via hard currency or material goods. This means that its global policies are going to be similar in one part of the world or another because its system is global.

The destruction in Baghdad can therefore be compared with that of New Orleans. Neither was an act of God or nature. Both were created by human decisions based on racist

design to liquidate large numbers of people in the interests of the corporations who are gaining billions from these great human tragedies. In both instances oil is the issue. Black people are being liquidated just as Muslims are being liquidated. Billions are being quickly allocated via no bid contracts to the same cronies of the leading officials of the Bush White House. And lies are told as public policy, and then repeated endlessly by the less than critical media.

**A**NOTHER WAY that globalization comes in here is the price of labor. The US ruling class has determined that they have a global work force, and contracts go to the lowest bidder for the price of labor. Even poor black labor in New Orleans is priced too high, so they have imported the new immigrant group, cheap Latino labor. Before Katrina, Latinos were 3 percent of the work force in New Orleans, now they are about 20 percent. Nearly half of the current clean-up and restoration work force is Latino. Now it's no luxury ride for these workers either, as they are forced to take subsistence wages and waive basic rights to safety, health care, and all other forms of benefits US workers have come to expect. The issue that has to be dealt with is how to turn the conflict of black versus Latino labor, into a conflict between labor and capital. However, the fact is that both dialectics are at play and must be dealt with.

Finally, the Cuban response to Hurricane Ivan and the US's to Katrina gives the entire world an opportunity to contrast how a small country like Cuba, even with the US blockade and forced occupation of part of Cuba (Guantanamo) deals with this form of disaster compared to the way the government with the largest economic might in the world deals with a similar challenge. From the perspective of general policy, Cuba bases its approach on the self-organization and mobilization of the Cuban people. Each neighborhood is organized to help itself and regularly does so in practical projects as well as in discussions of public policy and the issues of the day. Wikipedia puts it this way:

Almost all adult Cubans participate in the community-based Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, (CDR) which play a central role in daily life. These groups are designed to coordinate public projects, protect and ensure socialist ideology among the citizenry, and act as a neighborhood watchdog against "counter-revolutionary" activity.<sup>1</sup>

**W**HEN GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS in the US called for people to rely on their own resources in the case of Katrina, it was in itself an admission of the failure of our system of government and economic organization. People found this incredible (See August Nimitz, "Natural versus Social Disaster: Cuba and the Lessons of Katrina" this issue). New Orleanians had been stripped of their local culture and traditional forms of social support by a marketplace that only values what you can buy and not the sanctity of human social relationships. Katrina exposed the Market, exposed the government, and now we have to find out and agree on what all this means, so we can do something about it.

We have no CDR in the US. Since the 1960s, neoliberal policies have stripped us of our protective social safety net, and our hard-won social and cultural institutional norms and values that offered protection from the ravishes of the capitalist market. We need a movement; we need clarity. The horrors of Katrina can be turned into a source of invaluable lessons, lessons that can help us get clear and unite for common survival.

### Resources

**A**S IS USUAL these days with the digital transformation of knowledge production and distribution, the main source of information about Katrina is the World Wide Web. This has become a major instance of proof that we are experiencing an information revolution.

**I**N THE SIDEBAR of this essay we have selected twenty web sites in four categories around which our curriculum efforts can be constructed. The sites listed in the first category, "Portals to Information on Hurricane Katrina," are comprehensive and are each a general guide to other resources. Wikipedia is the best site for "one-stop shopping" as it is both an entity in itself, as well as being linked to many other related sites that lead to background information, greater detail, and a comprehensive guide to a variety of relevant sources. The other four include two university sites (Michigan State University, Louisiana State University) and two library sites (Librarians Internet Index and Middletown Thrall Library). These five sites will basically link you to all of the information you might need for any kind of research interest or curriculum focus you may have.

## KATRINA RESOURCES ON THE WORLD WIDE WEB

### PORTALS TO INFORMATION ON HURRICANE KATRINA

Hurricane Katrina (Wikipedia)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane\\_Katrina](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_Katrina)

Hurricane Katrina: Research and Resources (Michigan State University)

<http://www.lib.msu.edu/libinstr/katrina.htm>

Hurricane Katrina Information Resources (Louisiana State University)

<http://www.lsu.edu/faculty/mccarthy/katrina.htm>

Hurricane Katrina (Librarians Internet Index)

<http://lii.org/pub/topic/hurricanekatrina>

Hurricane Katrina Information Guide (Middletown Thrall Library Special Coverage)

<http://www.thrall.org/katrina/>

### MILITANT VOICES FROM THE PEOPLE STRUGGLES

The People's Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition

<http://www.peopleshurricane.org/>

People's Organizing Committee

<http://www.peoplesorganizing.org/>

Rebuilding New Orleans (ACORN)

<http://www.acorn.org/index.php?id=9703>

New Orleans IndyMedia

<http://neworleans.indymedia.org/>

And Injustice For All: Workers Lives in the Reconstruction of New Orleans

<http://newreconstruction.civilrights.org/details.cfm?id=46602>

### BLACK PERSPECTIVES ON THE DISASTER CALLED KATRINA

*The Unmasking of New Orleans: Documentary on Hurricane Katrina* (The Final Call video)

<http://www.finalcall.com/katrina/>

Black American Web dot com

<http://www.blackamericaweb.com/site.aspx/headlines/katrinaindex>

Katrina: An Unnatural Disaster

<http://www.kersplebedeb.com/mystuff/katrina/index.html>

Resurrecting New Orleans (AOL Black Voices)

[http://blackvoices.aol.com/black\\_news/resurrecting\\_neworleans\\_hub](http://blackvoices.aol.com/black_news/resurrecting_neworleans_hub)

Hurricane Song (R&B by Allen Watty)

<http://www.hurricanesong.com/>

Mos Def, "It's dollar day in New Orleans" (Rap video)

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-4062150873526199969&q=mos+def&hl=en>

### REPORTS OVER THE LAST YEAR

One Year After Katrina: The State of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast

(Institute for Southern Studies/Southern Exposure)

[http://www.reconstructionwatch.org/images/One\\_Year\\_After.pdf](http://www.reconstructionwatch.org/images/One_Year_After.pdf)

Katrina: One Year Later

(The *Times-Picayune* newspaper of New Orleans)

<http://www.nola.com/katrina/>

Katrina: One Year Later

(National Public Radio)

<http://www.npr.org/news/specials/katrina/oneyearlater/>

One Year After Katrina

(NAACP)

<http://www.naacp.org/home/>

Katrina: The Crimes of System

(*Revolutionary Worker* Newspaper)

<http://www.rwor.org/katrina/index.htm>

There is much to learn from these media sites, especially those of the major media (newspapers and TV). Documentary interviews conducted on the scene, photographs and video are key visual sources. However, we have to give special acknowledgement to IndyMedia, the media outlet for movement activists that frequently goes more to the grassroots and presents oppositional viewpoints more so than the mainstream outlets. In addition, the black media is critical for a full understanding. This is particularly demonstrated by the video documentary by the Final Call, *The Unmasking of New Orleans*.

My strong recommendation, if one wants to follow the events as they happened and think through the issues on a day-by-day, and month-by-month basis, is to follow two journalism archives that cover the entire year since the tragic days—the *Times-Picayune* newspaper of New Orleans and the *Revolutionary Worker* newspaper; the former represents the mainstream and the latter the left. We have no black media that has a comparable archive of analysis, though the “weblibliography” on “Katrina: An Unnatural Disaster” comes close as a compilation from various sources. In addition, there are cultural creations that should not be overlooked because we have to engage both cognitive and emotional issues to make sense of Katrina. For this, we can turn to Mos Def and Allen Watty for excellent musical statements that cut to the heart of the matter. These artists clearly articulate that black and poor New Orleanians were betrayed abandoned by government on all levels, by black officials and white.

**K**ATRINA IS THE SUBJECT of a large outpouring of journal articles in the popular and scholarly press. Especially important are essays by Mike Davis, the collection at the Social Science Research Council, Saladin Muhamad, and the Pew Surveys, etc. There is a small set of books that are important reference works for comprehensive coverage. In *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (1998), John Barry’s account of the 1927 Mississippi flood establishes it as the historical precedent for Katrina, and Douglass Brinkley’s *The Great*

*Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (2006) weaves together the most complete history of Katrina. Each chapter covers one day from August 27 through September 3, 2005. There are at least four other compelling critical books, written by Ivor Van Heerden and Mike Bryden (2006), Eric Mann (2006), Michael Eric Dyson (2006), and David Dante Troutt (2006).

## Curriculum

**G**IVEN THE MATERIAL that exists we can begin to reflect on various points of emphasis for a Black Studies curriculum.

### 1. Historical Perspective

The comparison of the 1927 Mississippi flood and the 2005 Katrina Hurricane is a rich terrain for analysis. Many have argued one is a precedent for the other—history repeating itself. The historical comparison can best be understood by examining each event in its own historical context: the 1927 flood happened during the rural, agriculturally based tenancy period, while in 2005 people are in the dislocation logic of the information revolution of global capitalism. In 1927, black labor continued to power Southern-based US cotton agriculture, thus blacks were forced at gunpoint to stay and work on the levees and then to stay to work the land. Our labor was needed then. In 2005, global capitalism has replaced our labor, moving manufacturing sites outside of the US or importing cheaper Latino, mainly Mexican labor to the US. Today, our labor is not needed, but ironically, our real estate is, so Katrina has facilitated a land-grab and we have been thrown out every which-a-way.

### 2. Science and Policy

The levees in the gulf should be a focus. The most direct focus should be on the planning and implementation of the levee system by the US Army Corp of Engineers. But one overall key issue is how we as a society relate to our natural environment. The focus in the gulf region is on water and oil. Black Studies can place these issues in the cultural and historical context of the African Diaspora. Black Studies can also evaluate all related govern-

ment and scientific practices to critically search for patterns of discrimination and inequality (See Rayvon Fouché, “The Wretched of the Gulf,” this issue). The African Diaspora stretches into Holland and therefore, Black Studies can play a role in learning from the Dutch experience.

### 3. Demography

Everybody in the Gulf Coast was hit, but not in the same way. Typical was New Orleans; the black and poor sustained the hardest hits. Blacks were at the bottom, thus they suffered the most. But there are so many more variables to examine—age, residence, social ties, educational level, church affiliation, access to communication and information, etc. Dyson (in Trout 2006) discusses demography in terms of migration. He has a typology of three kinds of migration: submerged, subversive, and subsidized. There has also been discussion that the Katrina dispersal has created a new diaspora. Where are people? Who has come back? Where have people begun new lives and how are they turning out? How are host communities being impacted by their new arrivals?

### 4. Political Economy

How does this crisis help us understand the general socio-economic security and stability of the black community in general? The focus here is on following the money, ownership, and power. On the one hand, we have the \$100 billion that was supposed to come from the federal government. An even more important focus is on land and home ownership. For example: the Ninth Ward was 96 percent black, with 54 percent home ownership. However, almost 70 percent had no flood insurance. Who is going to get the land? (See Lisa Bates, “Post-Katrina Housing,” this issue.) In general, though, our economic concern is mainly about jobs. Before Katrina, in New Orleans, 45 percent of African American males over the age of 16 were unemployed. Moreover, the black middle class’s welfare is dependent on its relationship to the majority of the black community. For example, teachers need the public schools full of children; social workers need welfare recipients, etc.

### 5. Culture

The cultural tradition of the Gulf region, especially New Orleans, was rooted in a historical community of intergenerational talent development and creative genius. Katrina dislocated the segregated black community on which this tradition was based. Who remains, who will return, and what difference will it make for the culture of the city and region? On the other hand, if our concern is the future, then there are grounds for a great optimism. Because of Katrina’s dispersal of black New Orleanians there is now some New Orleans energy in other communities. How will this lead to exciting new cultural developments? Will the underground, mixed-tape, independent, community based musicians offer one place to witness the new creativity? What will the new voices on the open-mike slam poetry scene have to say? How will they alter the content and style of the mixed-tape and open-mike slam poetry scenes? The images and stories will be about Katrina experiences but on a deeper level they will be about what it means to be a human being facing the limits of existence.

### 6. Politics

Katrina has contributed another tactic in the new disenfranchisement, along with Florida (2000) and Ohio (2004). The New Orleans Mayoral election suggests the end of democracy. Following a forced dispersal the system failed to maximize absentee balloting. New Orleans has an African American Mayor. His performance needs careful analyzing and evaluation. What power do black people have? Do poor black people have representation? What alliances are necessary—with labor, with Latinos, with poor white people, all unemployed, etc.?

### 7. Social Justice Struggles

The freedom struggle at the heart of all radical black traditions is reemerging in the aftermath of Katrina. How they respond to Katrina is a basis for comparing black leaders. Every national organization and movement has a position and some form of practical activity responding to this crisis. The key demand is the right of the evacuees to return. This battle faces many specific obstacles. On the other hand, what was there isn’t

there anymore, so if one were to return, it would have to be to something new. This requires a strategic vision for social justice.

## 8. Theory

The way I see it we are in an old ship in the midst of a great storm. Katrina was a bolt of lightning that lit up the sky and struck our ship. This is a moment of survival—remember people were floating down the street face down while others were being herded like livestock, then shipped out to points unknown. The government leadership was doing a three stooges routine with straight faces.

We have a responsibility to put revolution on the agenda. What's really hip, is that there are no model countries in the world to emulate out of historical necessity. Now we must find a basis for revolution, mainly based on our own experience. This has to be a new movement. The event that Bush uses to justify his revolution is 9/11. Our revolution is grounded in responding to the meaning of Katrina. The litmus test for all our analysis and conceptual creativity must be whether it is revolutionary or not. Is it something new, something different, and something that can solve our problems once and for all? Katrina is a challenge to Black Studies theoreticians—can we imagine and theoretically conceptualize a future with a road map to black liberation and social justice for all?

**I**N BLACK STUDIES we can begin by bringing Katrina into the curriculum. Whatever angle you take, familiarity with the actual experience in the Gulf can lead to connecting various threads of experience. Our most useful ideas can come from going to the people and, through research, letting them teach us.

Our mission is clarity of thought based on a careful analysis of all the historical evidence. If we have to climb a mountain, we must speak about what we see when the clouds cannot hide its height. If we face a beast, we must describe its abilities and learn its ways. If our goal is freedom then we must speak of it often.

Katrina. We will embrace your pain and use it for wisdom, cultural creativity, revolutionary thinking, and struggles for social justice.

## Works Cited

- Sharon D. Wright Austin, *The Transformation of Plantation Politics: Black Politics, Concentrated Poverty, And Social Capital in the Mississippi Delta* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2006).
- John Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998).
- Douglas Brinkley, *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (New York: William Morrow, 2006).
- Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* (New York: Perseus Books, 2006).
- Ron Eglash, *African Fractals* (Newark, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999).
- Ivor Van Heerden and Mike Bryden, *The Storm: What Went Wrong and Why During Hurricane Katrina-The Inside Story from One Louisiana Scientist* (New York: Viking, 2006).
- Eric Mann, *Katrina's Legacy: White Racism and Black Reconstruction in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast* (Los Angeles: Frontline Press, 2006).
- Kim Lacy Rogers, *Righteous Lives: Narratives of the New Orleans Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 1995).
- The Times-Picayune, *Katrina: The Ruin and Recovery of New Orleans* (Champaign, IL: Sports Publishing, 2006).
- David Troutt, ed., *After the Storm: Black Intellectuals Explore the Meaning of Hurricane Katrina* (New York: The New Press, 2006).

## Endnotes

1. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuba#\\_Government\\_and\\_politics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuba#_Government_and_politics)

