



SOUNDTRACKS

SONGS THAT DEFINED HISTORY

Kanye and Katrina: Environmental Racism in New Orleans

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What was Hurricane Katrina, and how did black Americans articulate the frustrations they felt in its aftermath?

OVERVIEW

(Note: this lesson contains some profanity. Teacher discretion advised.)



Photo: Bill Haber

In ancient stories, floods often serve as a great equalizer, washing away one world to allow another to start fresh. But in more recent history, floods take on a different significance: rather than cleansing wickedness, they often uncover persisting instances of inequality and injustice. As these flood waters reside, we find that it is all too often the poor and destitute who suffer most--victims to both environmental disaster and centuries of economic neglect and isolation.

Perhaps nowhere in recent history has this sense of injustice been more painfully revealed than during Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. On August 29, 2005, the Category 3 hurricane touched down on the Gulf Coast, breaching the New Orleans levees within hours and ripping the roof off of the Superdome stadium, which held 25 thousand residents taking shelter from the storm. The following day, 80% of New Orleans was flooded, with thousands of citizens stranded on their roofs or in the leaking Superdome. An estimated 1,400 people died as a result of the hurricane.

While the flood waters rose throughout New Orleans, it was the more disenfranchised citizens of the city that were the most affected, the majority of whom were persons of color. The pre-hurricane evacuation notices were of little use for the 9 percent of households in the city that lacked access to a vehicle. Many others were unable to leave due to having a disability or caring for a loved one with a disability. Still others simply had nowhere to go, no friends or relatives outside the state, and no money for a motel room. Due to traffic exiting the city, public busses tasked with evacuating people only made it as far as the Superdome before they too were submerged in the floodwaters. Even many who wished to leave found themselves unable to evacuate.

As those stranded in the flooded city experienced, Hurricane Katrina's force was compounded by a second tragedy: the federal government's inefficient response to the crises. After September 11th, 2001, the once-independent Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)

was absorbed into the Department of Homeland Security, whose overriding focus was counter-terrorism rather than natural disaster preparedness. With this organizational change, many of the FEMA officials most experienced in disaster preparedness left the agency. FEMA Director Michael Brown, who was appointed by George W. Bush, had little to no prior experience in emergency management.

Hurricane Katrina caught FEMA's inexperienced leadership team unaware and unprepared. As local and state officials and relief organizations frantically sought to contact FEMA for direction and federal approval, they were met with automated phone messages or continuously redirected to various sub-contractors FEMA employed to outsource their services. In the immediate aftermath of the hurricane, the agency failed to mobilize a myriad of resources that could have quickly provided aid to those suffering. The USS *Bataan*, a large marine vessel just offshore New Orleans with food, water, hospital beds, and helicopters waited for approval to begin relief efforts that never came. FEMA refused to authorize the entry of multiple aid organizations, from airboat captains anxious to rescue people from the floods to firefighters across the country to the Red Cross, an organization developed specifically to quickly respond to emergencies. The German government sent a military aircraft filled with supplies to New Orleans, only to be turned away. Those resources FEMA did allow into the city were often underutilized: a group of one thousand firefighters from Utah were asked to distribute FEMA flyers instead of attempting to save people. To those stuck in New Orleans, FEMA's response was a tragedy; to many witnessing the crisis on the nightly news, it was a national embarrassment."

Witnessing the suffering occurring in New Orleans day after day on the news, many Americans responded to FEMA's inefficient response to Hurricane Katrina with indignation. Such anger was manifested most spectacularly by rapper Kanye West, who during a televised fundraiser veered off-script and proclaimed, "George Bush doesn't care about black people." While the president and his administration took offense, Black Americans throughout the country saw more than a grain of truth in West's assertion. Many felt the federal government Bush represented purposely neglected the poor black community in New Orleans.

Such assertions were not without evidence: immediately after the hurricane, Bush famously flew over the flooded city without landing; in a televised speech he lamented the flooded house of Mississippi senator Trent Lott while not saying a word about those who lost everything in New Orleans; and as FEMA's failures mounted in the news, he continued to praise the agency and his friend Michael Brown. But Bush wasn't alone in its poor treatment of the African American population in New Orleans. In a drive for ratings, news organizations often overstated the amount of looting and violence that was occurring among the stranded community. They also leveled such unlawfulness more proportionally upon the black community, as was famously seen in newspaper picture captions describing whites "finding" goods and blacks "looting" them.

In this lesson, students analyze demographic data, and watch footage from CNN's Soundtracks series and a congressional hearing after the disaster to better understand the magnitude of Hurricane Katrina, and the way the federal government's response brought to light issues of racial neglect. Students also investigate how Kanye West's comments during

a national fundraiser articulated the disappointment and anger many black Americans felt following Hurricane Katrina.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- Hurricane Katrina and the governmental response
- Differing opinions Americans had about the disaster and its aftermath
- The history of racism and poverty in New Orleans

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE

- Students will be able to identify how issues of race and class played a role in the governmental response to Hurricane Katrina by analyzing demographic data and listening to first-hand accounts from hurricane survivors.

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Break students up into pairs, and display **Image 1, Paired Interview Activity**. Ask students to report what they discovered from their partner with the class. (*Note to teacher: students should come away from the activity being aware that Hurricane Katrina was a large-scale natural disaster in 2005 that most affected New Orleans.*)

PROCEDURE:

1. Tell students that shortly after Hurricane Katrina occurred, Kanye West appeared on a televised fundraiser and made a surprise statement. Play **Clip 1, Soundtracks - Kanye on Hurricane Katrina**. Ask students:
 - What reasons does West give for being critical of the government's response to the hurricane?
 - How does West criticize the media?
 - What war is West referring to in his comment?
 - What might have happened during or after Hurricane Katrina that would inspire West to proclaim that "George Bush doesn't care about black people"?
2. Show students **Image 2, Pew Poll Results**, explaining that it is the results of a survey taken by the Pew Research Center on the federal government's response to Hurricane Katrina. After students examine the image, ask them:
 - What kind of conclusions can you reach looking at these statistics?
 - Why might there be a discrepancy between responses from white Americans versus those of black Americans?
 - Who might have been most affected by the hurricane, and does that play a role in differing opinion?
3. Play **Clip 2, Soundtracks - The Levees Break**. Ask students:

- Did the hurricane come by surprise, or was there notice to evacuate?
 - Why might have some people not left the city?
 - What might have motivated some people to stay or go? What do you think might have prevented some from leaving?
4. Pass out **Handout 1 - Demographic Maps of New Orleans** (*Note: maps are easier to compare when printed on 2 different sheets of paper.*) Ask students:
- What are each of the three maps representing?
 - What sort of correlations do you notice between the three maps?
 - Why might the people living in high-poverty zones have a harder time evacuating before the hurricane?
 - Based on the data provided in these maps, who do you think was likely affected the most after the hurricane?
5. Play **Clip 3, Soundtracks - Stranded**. Ask students:
- Based on the clip, why might artists such as Kanye West have been critical of the government's response to Katrina?
 - How would you describe the demographic of people stranded at the Superdome after Katrina? (*Encourage students to consider the age, race, and gender of the people in the clip, and try to assess their socioeconomic status.*)
 - When talking about looting, New Orleans Bounce artist Big Freedia asks, "what were the people supposed to do?" Was Louisiana Governor Blanco's policy of employing "necessary force" against people looting appropriate? If not, what should the government had done in response to the ensuing crisis?
 - Do you think there might be other explanations for why the federal government respond slowly in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina? (*Encourage students to think about possible practical, political, and economic reasons why the government failed to rescue people affected by Katrina.*)

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Watch a clip from the special Congressional hearing, "**Hurricane Katrina: Voices from Inside the Storm**" held on December 5, 2005 when Katrina evacuees gave testimonials about their experience in front of representatives. After viewing, ask students:
- What reasons did the evacuees give for arguing that class played a role in the government's response to Hurricane Katrina?
 - What reasons did the evacuees give for arguing that race played a role in the government's response to Hurricane Katrina?
 - How did the issues of race and class intersect, according to the evacuees in the clip?



- Who did the evacuees find culpable for the ineffective response after the hurricane? What were some of the failures that led to the Hurricane Katrina tragedy?
- Did you find any evacuee's testimony particularly powerful? Why?
- According to the evacuees, what were some of the lasting effects of Hurricane Katrina for survivors?
- How might we prevent a situation like Hurricane Katrina from happening again? What do you think America has or hasn't learned since Hurricane Katrina and Kanye West's statement?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

1. Research other incidents of racism during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina or another natural disaster. Write a short essay summarizing the incident and how its an example of racial neglect or related to environmental racism.
 - The Danziger Bridge shootings
 - New Orleans' Hospitals Mercy-Killing Allegations
 - The Conditions at the Superdome
 - The Media's depictions of Katrina's aftermath
2. Read Jamelle Bouie's "**If You Want to Understand Black Lives Matter, You Have to Understand Katrina.**" Write a short essay on Hurricane Katrina's legacy and impact on black America based on the author's arguments.



COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading (K-12)

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 8: Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language(K-12)

Language 1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

Language 2: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-12)

Comprehension & Collaboration 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally. and orally.

Comprehension & Collaboration 3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

NATIONAL CURRICULUM STANDARDS FOR SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices



RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES

- Soundtracks - Kanye West on Hurricane Katrina
- Soundtracks - The Levees Break
- Soundtracks - Stranded

HANDOUTS

- Handout 1 - Demographic Maps of New Orleans