

# LEARNING FROM KATRINA: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON POVERTY, RACE, AND ETHICS THROUGH AN EXPERIENTIAL COURSE

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*In January 2006, students from CUSSW and Union Theological Seminary participated in an immersion course entitled, Katrina: Poverty, Race, and Social Work Practice. The aim of the course was to explore experientially the inequality exposed by Hurricane Katrina and its effect on some of the poorest communities and individuals in the United States. This paper presents an overview of the course development. In addition, the authors describe some of their experiences and observations before, during, and after their travels to the Gulf Coast and other communities affected by Hurricane Katrina. The specific focus of the article is on the themes of poverty, racism, violence, governmental irresponsibility and disregard in the wake of this tragedy, and describes some of the efforts made towards supporting social justice in the Gulf Coast as it rebuilds.*

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In January 2006, 45 graduate students, faculty, and staff members from Union Theological Seminary (UTS) and the Columbia University School of Social Work (CUSSW) embarked together on an immersion course to the Gulf Coast titled *Katrina: Poverty, Race, and Social Work Practice*. The course was designed to give students the opportunity to witness and reflect on the systemic inequalities exposed by Hurricane Katrina and its effect on some of the poorest communities and individuals in the United States. As participants in the course, we explored poverty and race relations along the Gulf Coast in towns and cities with displaced Hurricane Katrina evacuees. Throughout the experience, we were struck by the similarity between the systemic issues highlighted by Hurricane Katrina and the social justice issues with which we struggle as social workers in New York City and across the nation. There is a vividly clear need for an integrated, race-conscious, and class-conscious approach to recovery and change, and this approach must reach beyond the immediate horror of the disaster. The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina brought poverty, racism, violence, and governmental irresponsibility and disregard into the general

consciousness of the American public. These realities, however, were too quickly forgotten by the media and, as a result, have largely disappeared from public discourse. Race and class injustices were ignored throughout the processes of evacuation, planning, and rebuilding.

Our goal in writing this paper is twofold. First, we want to share our experience in this uniquely hands-on and codisciplinary immersion course with other social work students. We feel the immersive learning opportunity provided through this course was invaluable, particularly in light of the uniquely raw and overwhelming subject matter, which we feel is difficult to grasp through any medium but experience. Second, we have a strong desire, as well as a responsibility, to raise awareness about the ongoing struggles that face many people and communities hit by this disaster and how race and class are inherently embedded within these struggles. We will first present an overview of the course and its development. Next, we will describe some of our travel experiences and highlight some of the inequality, trauma, and macro level issues that we witnessed. Finally, we will briefly address efforts being made to continue working toward social justice in the Gulf Coast and nationwide. In writing this paper, we are mindful that the story we tell represents our personal experiences and not the multiplicity of experiences and stories that emerged for other participants in this course.

### Katrina: Race, Poverty, and Social Work Practice

The idea for this course started with students at UTS who were angered by the situation in the Gulf Coast following Hurricane Katrina. These students approached the Poverty Initiative<sup>i</sup> and asked for help leading a community response. UTS students then worked in collaboration with the Poverty Initiative to prepare, plan for, and develop the framework for an immersion course. Soon after, social work students from CUSSW were invited to share in the learning and advocacy experience. As a codisciplinary effort, the course offered a unique perspective on healing, recovery, treatment, and community in the wake of devastation, both natural and human-made, by utilizing both a social work and theological framework.

The central questions of the course, which developed out of student

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i “The Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary is a student-initiated program that brings poor people into all facets of Union’s life – classes, worship, workshops and informal discussions, where they are no longer regarded as objects of charity, but are appreciated as change agents, working for a more just society.” ([www.povertyinitiative.org](http://www.povertyinitiative.org))

discourse, were: What are social workers, religious leaders, and other people of conscience to do in the face of growing poverty, homelessness, and misery? How are we, as a country, responding to the aftermath of natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina? To explore responses to these questions, we embarked on this immersion experience to fuel ourselves with facts and stories to share with others, so that we would be equipped to publicize and expose the continuing injustices devastating the Gulf Coast. We documented much of what we observed through writing, audiotaping, videotaping, and photography.

This course gave us an opportunity to meet, engage with, offer assistance to, listen to, and learn from many different families, community organizers, and professionals of varied ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds. We explored the short and long-term impact of disaster and the ways in which trauma relief was and is delivered. UTS students and faculty contacted members of local congregations, community organizations, and other agencies involved in relief efforts to host our group during the week along the Gulf Coast. Specifically, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Baptist Church, the Episcopal Church, Common Ground Relief, Pastors for Peace, and member organizations of the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign<sup>ii</sup> organized forums for dialogue with community leaders who educated us about their own struggles when providing disaster relief. These groups connected us to families and organizations in need of support, as well as to individuals who were willing to share their stories.

We traveled with a strong and committed group of people led by Liz Theoharis and Willie Baptist of The Poverty Initiative at UTS alongside John Robertson of CUSSW. The social work and seminary students brought their perspectives and experiences to the group, which contributed to the richness of the codisciplinary learning that occurred. We engaged in dialogue to build sensitivity toward and knowledge about the issues of health care, housing, education, food, and living wages. We also examined response efforts to disasters with particular attention to the influence of poverty, homelessness, and racism. Throughout this experience, we made efforts to incorporate

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ii The Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign is "committed to unite the poor across color lines as the leadership base for a broad movement to abolish poverty. They work to accomplish this through advancing economic human rights as named in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, such as the rights to food, housing, health, education, communication and a living wage job." ([www.economichumanrights.org](http://www.economichumanrights.org))

what we saw and what we learned into our social work knowledge while renewing and deepening our commitment to social and economic justice.

### New York City: Groundwork

In New York City, we met for 2 days of intense preparation before our trip to the Gulf Coast. We began by introducing ourselves to the history and culture of the area, poverty programs in the South and nationally, and the economic and social impact of Hurricane Katrina and other natural disasters on communities and individuals. Through readings and videos, we studied the structure of race and poverty in America, the effects of the Hurricane on the poorest communities, and efforts to address short-term needs and long-term empowerment of affected families and communities.

Additionally, we learned from experts and other professionals as we prepared for our journey to the Gulf Coast. For example, David Billings from the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond<sup>iii</sup> provided a helpful framework for understanding the situation in New Orleans post-Katrina and described some of the experiences of Hurricane Katrina evacuees in the New York City area. Mary Ragan, a woman who worked with Hurricane Katrina survivors as they returned to their neighborhoods and their devastated homes, shared stories and images that she witnessed during her own trip to New Orleans. We found that hearing these first-hand accounts and viewing the photographs gave us a sense of what we might encounter on our trip, yet two days of speakers and pictures could not fully prepare us.

### Atlanta, Georgia: A People Displaced

Our group had decided to visit Atlanta, Georgia due to the large number of Hurricane Katrina evacuees relocated there; we arrived in Atlanta on Saturday, January 7th. We visited homeless shelters and met with grassroots organizations in the city to critically explore the structural manifestation

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iii The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond was created to "develop more analytical, culturally-rooted and effective community organizers. Over the past 24 years, The People's Institute Undoing Racism™/ Community Organizing process has impacted the lives of nearly 100,000 people both nationally and internationally. Through this process, it has built a national collective of anti-racist, multicultural community organizers who do their work with an understanding of history, culture, and the impact of racism on communities. These anti-racist organizers build leadership in and account to the constituencies where they are organizing." ([www.pifsab.org](http://www.pifsab.org))

of racism, classism, and poverty highlighted by the displacement of 200,000 Hurricane Katrina evacuees. Atlanta residents described increases in homelessness, housing shortages, and unemployment. As the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) winds down its emergency shelter program and plans to drop 20,000 people from its hotel subsidy program, the problems will be compounded. Although one could argue that money is better spent directly on housing vouchers rather than hotel subsidies, thousands of people are not receiving emergency housing benefits and are in need immediate shelter. Disorganized management of housing assistance is pushing locals and Hurricane Katrina evacuees into homelessness. Some Atlanta residents described their concerns about unemployment, fewer job opportunities with living wages, and an increasing number of day laborers who work for substandard pay.

We also visited the Task Force for the Homeless shelter, a privately owned and funded shelter that nightly houses between 300 and 500 men – the homeless from Atlanta and Hurricane Katrina evacuees. The shelter was an overcrowded, dirty, and noisy warehouse. The already overburdened shelter system in the city will be further taxed by an influx of Hurricane Katrina survivors as they lose their housing subsidies. The inadequate government response has pitted the poor against the poor in competition for scarce resources. Atlanta had few systemic responses, and little support from the federal government, to address these housing and employment issues. The situation will likely deteriorate as recovery efforts are discontinued and the pervasive problems of homelessness and unemployment are once again deprioritized.

### Pensacola, Florida: Community in Convalescence

Although our country's experience of Hurricane Katrina may have been unique in that it forced many, if only for a moment, to consider race and class inequity, this storm was not the first to wreak havoc on vulnerable people. After 2 days in Atlanta, we moved on to Pensacola, Florida to look at recovery and rebuilding a year and a half after Hurricane Ivan ravaged the area. As in Atlanta, we met with local church leaders, as well as a social worker and a case manager from United Ministries, a cooperative crisis assistance effort of many different denominations in Pensacola. We discussed needs assessment systems that were used by these individuals and examined the role of social workers in coordination and case management following

Hurricane Ivan. The social workers and community leaders highlighted the importance of monitoring systems and formal documentation, not only for accessing support but also as a means to establish the extent of the destruction that occurred and the number of lives lost.

Although many people are aware of the more immediate and tangible impacts of a hurricane, less obvious consequences radiate well beyond the storm and reverberate through already marginalized communities. On several occasions, we were told by church and community leaders that the rates of child abuse, substance use, and domestic abuse significantly increased in the year following the disaster of Hurricane Ivan. Additionally, a pastor who spoke with us shared that due to the high levels of stress and lack of appropriate outlets and support, some individuals were channeling their stress through family violence. In Pensacola, even though the local leaders we met had an awareness of these social concerns, they continued to struggle with how best to address post-Ivan problems. We became aware of the extent to which a community continues to suffer years after a disaster without adequate supports and resources. Post-Katrina rebuilding efforts could benefit substantially from the knowledge of what was effective and ineffective in supporting communities in Pensacola in the aftermath of Hurricane Ivan and use this knowledge to anticipate long-term effects in the Gulf Coast.

#### Biloxi, Mississippi: Inadequate Assistance

After 2 days in Pensacola, we drove by van to Mississippi and worked in demolished communities. We were told by residents that the death toll from Hurricane Katrina in Mississippi alone was 5,000, although this number was not found in media reports. As freezer trailers for unidentified bodies were pointed out to us by church leaders acting as our guides, we were struck by the sheer number of people still missing in Biloxi. We also saw FEMA trailer parks throughout the city where people have been living in cramped quarters for months. Others have yet to receive their FEMA trailers due to problems accessing and completing forms. Residential areas closest to the water were completely destroyed and laying in ruin. In contrast, the neighboring casinos were rebuilt and fully functioning, seemingly untouched by the storm. Residents told us that current casino patrons were primarily locals from Mississippi, struggling in desperate attempts to regain some of what was lost.

In addition to the homes destroyed along the coastline of Mississippi, many houses further inland were also significantly affected by the storm surge that accompanied Hurricane Katrina. We helped some families gut and remove up to 6 feet of moldy, black sheetrock inside of their homes. They were living in FEMA trailers on their front lawns while working to make their houses habitable again, which was clearly an emotionally and physically daunting task.

We worked with churches in Mississippi that were actively providing basic assistance to families in the area. We canvassed communities, providing outreach to residents by asking them about their immediate needs. During our time in Biloxi, we saw church groups and social service organizations working with Hurricane Katrina survivors. We noticed that most of the interventions being provided only addressed their basic needs, as the physical rebuilding of communities had barely begun. In the months that follow our trip, the need for extensive mental health support will increase dramatically as survivors move beyond physical recovery and struggle to recover emotionally from the trauma they experienced. Indeed, the extent of the trauma experienced by Hurricane Katrina survivors became increasingly clear to us as we moved through Mississippi and on to Louisiana.

### New Orleans, Louisiana: Abandoned Citizens

Our final 2 days were spent in New Orleans. We had the privilege of spending time at the Ashé Cultural Arts Center<sup>iv</sup> where we spoke to local residents and professionals who lived through Hurricane Katrina and continue to work in the city. Throughout our conversations, we took on the role of listener, feeling that these individuals wanted and needed to be heard as we listened to their stories of trauma and survival. Many individuals shared stories of how they were affected by the lack of sufficient aid and the woefully inadequate intervention efforts before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina. Most of the stories we heard had undertones of racism and classism. Although the New Orleans residents with whom we spoke experienced class and race disparities pre-Katrina, the disaster reinforced their worldviews that the local and national governments did not value the lives of minorities

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iv "Ashé is an effort to combine the intentions of community development and economic development with the awesome creative forces of community, culture and art to revive and reclaim a historically significant corridor of New Orleans' Central City community." ([www.ashecac.org](http://www.ashecac.org))

and the poor. We were told by a community leader that 80% of New Orleans residents had not returned to their city, and those who had returned were predominantly white and wealthy. Many residents expressed frustration and anger about the government neglecting to ensure that non-white residents were able to return to their homes, demonstrating a lack of commitment to rebuilding the city for all of its citizens.

Those who shared their stories with us were each unique in their recounting. The following account by Tim, an African American man in his mid-fifties who has lived in New Orleans for many years and is a professor of music, provides one example of the many powerful experiences that were shared with us.

I tried to leave the city but it was too late. They turned us back. I was stranded with my 3 sons on the bridge in utter blackness for 7 hours with many, many others. I sat on top of them throughout this time to ensure that they were still there with me in the morning. We saw helicopters overhead but could not get them to stop for us. I felt helpless and scared. It has been 5 months since the storm and since the levees were breached, but this is the first time that I have been able to share my story in this way.

Tim's story highlights the human experience of disaster and its consequences, but does not begin to describe the work yet to be done. In New Orleans we saw the need for extensive rebuilding months after the disaster and the need for repairing and implementing basic systems like water and electricity before survivors could be treated for trauma. Relief workers found another body one day after we left the area in mid-January, 5 months after the storm. The city of New Orleans remains in a state of emergency with most residents unable to return. Local advocates describe how few public housing units have been reopened and landlords intend to evict people in mass numbers upon their return. Many residents shared their feeling that the local and federal governments had abandoned them in their recovery just as they were abandoned during the first days of the storm.

### Where Do We Go From Here?

Upon return from the Gulf Coast region, our group took time to reflect on the social work implications of the visit and the course. Social work

students met for three seminar sessions in the month following our return. We continue to encourage each other to value social change and to incorporate racial, cultural, and socio-economic considerations into our practice.

This paper is a brief overview and an introduction to our immersion experience in Atlanta, Pensacola, Biloxi, and New Orleans through the course *Katrina: Poverty, Race, and Social Work Practice*. One goal of our trip was to reclaim public attention for the continued plight of Hurricane Katrina's survivors as well as the long-standing race and class inequality pervasive along the Gulf Coast and throughout the United States. We have sought to share our awareness by developing consciousness-raising efforts through presentations, writing articles, displaying artwork and photography, and holding public forums at CUSSW and outside communities. As we reflect on our experiences, we hope to continue these conversations and inspire others to participate in the dialogue and take action.

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