

# **KATRINA, BLACK WOMEN, AND THE DEADLY DISCOURSE ON BLACK POVERTY IN AMERICA**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the suffering and resilience of Black women who were impacted by Hurricane Katrina in August of 2005. It also explores the ways in which the pre-existing national discourse on poverty, race, and gender set the stage for victim blaming and the neglect of poor Black women and children after the storm. African American women in the Gulf Coast region are some of the poorest in the nation. Women in general are more vulnerable in times of natural disaster because they are the primary caretakers of the young and the old. These factors and others meant that poor Black women were among those most severely impacted by Hurricane Katrina. They also had minimal resources to cope with the disaster and its aftermath. However, instead of sympathy and support, some conservative pundits have sought to link the suffering caused by Katrina to the lack of patriarchal Black family structures, which they argue could have helped individuals survive in the crisis. Contrary to these stereotypes, many Black women have not only been resilient and self-reliant, but creative and heroic in the face of crisis. It is their stories that offer hope for the future of New Orleans and our nation.

**Keywords:** Hurricane Katrina, African American Women, Poverty, Stereotypes, Resilience, Self-help

## **INTRODUCTION**

Most observers, even some of the most conservative and purportedly color-blind observers, have conceded the overwhelmingly racial character of the social disaster that followed in Hurricane Katrina's wake. Journalists covering the story could not help but acknowledge that those left behind to endure nature's wrath, and for whom little help and few resources were provided in the critical days following the hurricane, were disproportionately poor and Black. What does not often get added is that by most accounts those hardest hit and least able to rebound from it were also

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women: poor Black women who waded through chest-high water with sick and elderly parents, with young children on their hips and meager belongings in tow. This should not be surprising given the correlation between gender, race, and poverty. Black single mothers are more likely to be poor than any other demographic group, and New Orleans was no exception to the rule. In fact, a study by the Institute for Women's Policy Research points out that the percentage of women in poverty in New Orleans before the storm was considerably *higher* than in other parts of the country: more than half of the poor families of the city were headed by single mothers, and the median income for African American women workers in New Orleans before the storm was a paltry \$19,951 a year (DeWeever 2005).

The effect of the hurricane on African American women was not merely a consequence of demographics; it was also fueled and framed by the rabid antipoor discourse that has cast Black single mothers as unworthy of public aid or sympathy. In this paper, I will discuss several aspects of the gendered nature of the disaster: the effect of government inaction on Black women in New Orleans after the hurricane, the pre-Katrina discourse on Black female poverty that set the stage for that inaction, and how Black women activists have responded. Even though this was clearly a regional crisis, the various contradictions came together with particular vividness in New Orleans, so I will focus my observations on that city alone.

## WOMEN IN KATRINA'S WAKE

When Katrina slapped New Orleans, she slapped everyone hard, but she slapped women especially hard. The impact is not simply measured in the number of injuries, deaths, and the amount of property loss, but in the kind of human currency that is difficult to measure. Women were more encumbered and less mobile. One gets a window into how women's lives were turned upside down by this crisis by looking at what women did and where women were situated in the community in ordinary times. As a number of commentators and experts have pointed out, there was a social crisis in New Orleans that had been fueled by the widespread prevalence of poverty and the absence of resources long before meteorologists sighted a category five hurricane bearing down on the Gulf Coast. There was already a 40% poverty rate among single mothers in the city. A state-by-state breakdown of poverty statistics ranked Louisiana number forty-seven out of fifty-one, and forty-third in terms of health-care insurance coverage. And 13% of Louisiana's children live in extreme poverty, which is defined as a family of four surviving on less than \$10,000 a year.<sup>1</sup> A large percentage of New Orleans' poor single mothers also lived in the historic Ninth Ward, the low-lying area of the city most vulnerable to flooding. So, as in any crisis, those with few assets, little money, and even less maneuverability were hard-pressed to get out of the path of the storm and further compromised in their ability to recover after the blow.

## ORAL HISTORIES

The impact of Katrina on women of African descent in New Orleans is best reflected in the stories and anecdotes that emerged from the storm. Our understanding of this tragedy and its aftermath is aided by the plethora of oral history projects that have emerged in response to the situation.<sup>2</sup> Some of them are an extension of pre-existing archival or public history projects, and some are grassroots interventions by students,

artists, historians, and activists determined to document what actually happened and provide an outlet for those who want to tell their stories. The narratives, testimonies, and profiles of real flesh and blood people are the best rebuttal to one-dimensional stereotypes. One very powerful story, collected by *Alive in Truth: The New Orleans Disaster Oral History and Memory Project*, tells of the experience of a woman named Clarice B. (later identified as Clarice Butler), who describes her life before and after Katrina. "I worked all my life," she explains:

I worked all my life for Metropolitan Homecare for 28 years: homecare, nurse's assistant. I took care of a lot of people in my life, a lot of people. I was good at my job, oh, yeah. It's not a clean job and it's not no dirty, dirty job. But no job is clean all the time, but it's a job. And I did good. I had to go to school: I went to school and wound up working in a nursing home.

Here is how she describes her ordeal after the levee broke and she found herself stranded on the interstate highway with thousands of others:

And you want me to tell you the truth, my version of it? They tried to kill us. When you keep somebody on top of the Interstate for five days, with no food and water, that's killing people. And there ain't no ands, ifs, or buts about it, that was NOPD [New Orleans Police Department] killing people. Four people died around me. Four. Diabetes. I am a diabetic and I survived it, by the grace of God, but I survived it. . . . Look, I was on top of the Interstate. Five days, okay? Helicopters at night shining a light down on us. They know we was there. Policemen, the army, the whole nine yards, ambulance passing us up like we wasn't nothing. Drove by and by all day. At night when they got ready to pull out, they pulled out and left us in darkness. We was treated worse than an animal. People do leave a dog in a house, but they do leave him food and water. They didn't do that . . .

Clarice goes on to recall the trauma of leaving her home:

And of course I had to leave my birds and my dog. Of course I didn't want to. But I didn't have no other choice. Didn't have a choice. So I brought my dogs and my bird to as far as I could bring them. And I left them there upstairs. And I'm hoping I can retrieve them. I'm hoping. I have to call the SPCA [Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals] or somebody. I left them upstairs on the deck, and I think if they was captured I should get them back. I'm hoping, anyway. I had a little Chihuahua. He was 9 months old. I had five birds. Two parakeets and two cockatiels. And my cockatiels just had a baby bird which was five weeks old. So you know I'm heartbroken. But again, my life was more important at that moment.

Finally, she wonders aloud:

Now why our Mayor and government did this I'll never understand it. I never would understand what happened to New Orleans. That is really a disaster. Nobody would never believe it until you get into that situation. I go to bed one night with everything that I needed, and wake up the next morning with nothing.<sup>3</sup>

There was another woman's story that made a powerful impression on me, and which I could not get out of my mind for weeks after I saw it on *CNN*. The scene was of a middle-aged Black woman, dirty, desperate, and crying. She looked into the camera and said to the viewers, "We do not live like this."<sup>4</sup> She repeated it over and over again. Contradicting the image of slovenly, hapless, poor folk, this woman's face reflected not simply fatigue and hunger, but humiliation as well. Most poor people spend a lot of time and attention making sure their homes and their children are as neat and clean as possible so that they will not be straightjacketed into the stereotypes associated with poverty. And here this seemingly hard-working woman was left with nothing, not even her dignity.

Whatever circumstances led to poor Black women's lives being battered and devastated by this storm, as Clarice's story so painfully recounts, the real unforgivable disaster is the fact that they were abandoned by those whose job it was to intervene and help in such situations. The local government was paralyzed, and the federal government looked the other way. Despite the tens of millions of dollars spent on the various apparatuses of the Office of Homeland Security (OHS), no one seemed to have spent much time worrying about the widely predicted hurricane that terrorized the Gulf Coast region or the security of those who were its victims. There was no plan to help those who could not help themselves, and even after the failure of FEMA and the OHS to aid and coordinate relief efforts, the president's silence and the federal government's inaction for days after the crisis occurred left tough veteran journalists dumbfounded, angry, and sometimes even in tears. Initially, President Bush seemed not to take the crisis and human suffering seriously. Perhaps his mother spoke for the family when she visited displaced families forced to flee to Houston. During that visit she made the following disturbing comment: "so many of the people in the area here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this, this is working very well for them."<sup>5</sup> In her mind, those poor families really didn't need to have real homes or familiar communities; instead, like animals, they just needed basic shelter and food, no matter under what conditions.

On one level, many of us could not help but be surprised by the level of disregard for the collective well-being of New Orleans' Black poor, White poor, its elderly and infirm. However, when we zero in on the plight of Black women, again, the stage was set long before the scandalous treatment they received after Katrina. The dismantling of welfare for the poor in 1996, which climaxed with President Clinton's Personal Responsibility Act, was surrounded by a public discourse that dehumanized and denigrated the Black poor, charging them as the main culprits in their own misfortune. Black women were implicitly deemed lazy, promiscuous, and irresponsible; hence the withdrawal of public aid was ostensibly designed to jolt them into the labor force and into more responsible sexual behavior. Never mind that there were shrinking jobs for applicants with few skills and little education, and never mind that the president himself was breaking the very same sexual moral code that he was so mightily imposing on single mothers. Still, the problem was defined as that of Black women having babies out of the confines of heterosexual marriages, rather than the low pay and lack of jobs and affordable housing that marked their condition and compromised the future of their children.

Post-Katrina pundits continued the "blame the Black poor" rhetoric even as the blame clearly lay elsewhere. Six weeks after Katrina wreaked havoc on the Gulf Coast region, Mona Charen, columnist and former staffer for President Ronald Reagan, wrote: "Still it is true as the aftermath of Katrina underlined that parts of the black community remain poor and dysfunctional" (Charen 2005). The word *dysfunctional* is usually offered to modify *family*, and the association Charen is making is clear. The

rest of her article goes on to make the case that the biggest problem facing the Black poor before and after Katrina is that of single-mother families. But Charen was just one of many making this argument. Conservative pundit Rich Lowry of the *National Review* argued that “If people are stripped of the most basic social support—the two parent family . . . they will be more vulnerable in countless ways” in times of crisis. He went on to propose government programs that “include greater attention to out of wedlock births” (Lowry 2005). Liberals such as *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof even jumped on the bandwagon, giving a positive nod to Lowry’s proposal (Kristof 2005).

## BLACK CONSERVATIVES WEIGH IN

The attack on Black mothers did not stop with journalists such as Kristof and Lowry. Black conservatives weighed in with a vengeance. In a gush of patriarchal nostalgia, Reverend Jesse Lee Peterson, founder of the Los Angeles-based Brotherhood Organization of a New Destiny (BOND), blamed Black people and the absence of strong Black men in charge: “Prior to 40 years ago, a pathetic performance by the Black community in a time of crisis would have been inconceivable. The first response would have come from Black men. They would take care of their families, bring them to safety, and then help the rest of the community” (Peterson 2005a). Even more bluntly, Peterson wrote: “it was the lack of moral character and dependence on government that cost Blacks when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, not President Bush or racism” (Peterson 2005b). If Peterson were an irrelevant voice on the far-right fringe he could be ignored. However, his voice has been cited, invoked, and amplified by various conservative organizations, publications, and websites.

Syndicated columnist George Will (2005) was one of the most outrageous in his slander of the Black women of New Orleans. He first contended that there was too much obsession about race. In his words: “America’s always fast-flowing river of race-obsessing has overflowed its banks,” in discussions about Katrina. Those who are poor are poor because they don’t follow the rules, Will insists, and those rules mean conforming to his code of sexual and social behavior. He offered “three not-at-all recondite rules for avoiding poverty: Graduate from high school, don’t have a baby until you are married, don’t marry while you are a teenager. Among people who obey those rules, poverty is minimal.” If only things were so simple. Will drives the ill-conceived argument home, however, by making an even more explicit point:

. . . it is a safe surmise that more than 80 percent of African American births in inner-city New Orleans—as in some other inner cities—were to women without husbands. That translates into a large and constantly renewed cohort of lightly parented adolescent males, and that translates into chaos in neighborhoods and schools, come rain or come shine (Will 2005).

So, in Will’s view, the chaos of Katrina was an extension of the self-inflicted chaos created by homes without strong father figures. These are the distorted realities that conservatives have to craft for themselves in order to sleep at night, I suppose. The reality on the ground is of course quite different, as the stories of Clarice B. and others illustrate so compellingly.

A powerful hurricane ravaged the lives of poor Black women and their families and neighbors, not because the women did not have wedding bands on their fingers,

nor because their sons lacked strong paternal figures in the home to enforce curfew. To suggest as much is another way of devaluing the suffering and strivings of these families. Putting the issue in an international context, writer and activist Ritu Sharma, who works with the Washington-based advocacy group *Woman's Edge* (the Coalition for Women's Economic Development and Global Equity), writes that "women are the vast majority of the world's poor and money is the great protector" (Sharma 2006). Those who have little or none are more vulnerable than others to hurricanes, tsunamis, and all other forms of natural disasters that quickly escalate into human and social disasters.

## WOMEN TAKE ACTION AFTER THE STORM

While they may have little else, poor Black women are creative and resilient. They have to be in order to survive in such difficult and challenging times. So, if one part of this story is what happened to African American women after Katrina hit, the other half of the story is how they responded. And if part one is depressing and disturbing, part two is uplifting and encouraging. African American women have responded to the crisis as individuals and in groups. One individual response was that of long-time New Orleans resident and organizer Diane "Momma D." Frenchcoat, an older resident who became a self-appointed relief worker after the storm. In the weeks following the hurricane, each day she would collect food, pile it in her cart, and navigate the flooded and filthy streets to deliver meals to hungry and isolated neighbors. She eventually recruited others to help in her efforts, dubbing them the "Soul Patrol." When asked by a newspaper reporter why she did not evacuate the city for safer ground, she replied: "Why would I leave now? Why would I leave my people when so many of them are still here and suffering?" The reporter described her in this way: "Graying dreadlocks flowed down the nape of her neck, spilling over her sturdy, sloping shoulders as she spoke of a city she hopes will be reborn" (Lee 2005).

Another inspiring story of determination against the odds is that of Beverly Wright, initiator of the volunteer-driven *A Safe Way Back Home* project. A professor of Environmental Studies at Dillard University and a lifelong New Orleans resident, Dr. Wright's project has educated New Orleans residents about the toxins still prevalent in the soil and in their homes. She was particularly concerned about the lawns of contaminated homes. With advice from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and donations from several foundations, *A Safe Way Back Home* has provided equipment, information, and protective gear for dozens of residents to skim off toxic topsoil and replace it with healthy sod. The coalitions that Wright was able to forge were an interesting and important aspect of the project. Based on her past research and consulting for national labor unions about environmental dangers in the workplace, she was able to enlist the United Steelworkers Union to help train volunteers and to provide tools and equipment for the project. College students were recruited, and the National Black Environmental Justice Network, to which Wright belongs, lent its support and resources as well. A creative team effort of some unlikely allies is making a difference in the lives of dozens of families.

On the surface, a very masculine and muscular image of relief workers dominates popular images. Men are pictured lifting boxes, operating heavy equipment, and toting guns, ostensibly to keep the peace. However, women are working tirelessly and courageously in the trenches, as has so often been the case. Even within the larger coalitions and community-based organizations such as the *People's Hurricane*

*Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition* (PHRFOC), women are important actors, leaders, and contributors. The PHRFOC even has a women's caucus to highlight and make visible the work of women, providing a forum where women can support one another within the larger effort. The work of Diane Frenchcoat, Beverly Wright, and the women of the PHRFOC are but three examples of African American women taking initiative, being imaginative, and acting boldly. These real stories stand in stark contrast to what the George Wills and Rich Lowrys of the world would have us believe.

A sober read of the situation in New Orleans nearly one year after the storm hit is still worrisome. Some biased and shortsighted city builders are trying to push Black women and children out of the picture altogether, to reconfigure a city without what must be perceived as the burden of the Black poor. PHRFOC and others have fought this scheme by demanding the right to return and by insisting upon voting rights for displaced citizens. A number of scholars and activists have referred to this period of rebuilding and remapping of this southern subregion as another "Reconstruction." At stake today, as they were in the years following the Civil War, are land rights, voting rights, control of the military, accountability, jobs, and the reconstitution of families and communities. Wherever New Orleans is headed in the future, hardworking Black women with big hearts and steel-willed determination will be a part of the picture. They have needs and problems to be sure, but their presence adds to rather than detracts from the strength and vitality of a remarkable American city.<sup>6</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Statistics taken from DeWeever, Avis Jones (2005). *The Women of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast: Multiple Disadvantages and Key Assets for Recovery, Part I*. Published by the *Institute for Women's Policy Research*, Washington, DC, October 11, 2005. (<http://www.iwpr.org/pdf/D464.pdf>) (accessed May 25, 2006).
2. A few of the projects that are attempting to document the stories of hurricane survivors include: the I-10 Witness Project (<http://www.i10witness.com>), which emerged out of a group of artists, teachers, and activists; the Story Corps radio project; projects hosted by the Center for Cultural Resources in Baton Rouge (<http://www.hurricanestories.org>); and projects initiated by the University of Southwestern Mississippi and the Mississippi Humanities Council.
3. Oral history collected by *AliveinTruth.org*, and posted at (<http://www.Alternet.org>) on October 29, 2005.
4. Claudette Paul was also quoted in the *New York Times* as saying that "We need help. We don't live like this in America" (Appleborne et al., 2005).
5. Barbara Bush interviewed on Marketplace, *National Public Radio* (NPR), September 5, 2005.
6. Thanks to Joseph Lipari for his assistance with the research for this essay.

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## **APPENDIX: OTHER SOURCES ON KATRINA AND WOMEN AND ON WOMEN, RACE, AND POVERTY**

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