

Solidarity Syllabus – August 2018

Mother Earth

On the 13th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, Deepa Iyer speaks with Colette Pichon-Battle about climate justice and multiracial organizing in the Gulf Coast. Colette is the founder and executive director of the Gulf Coast Center for Law & Policy, which focuses on climate justice and ecological equity. In 2008, Colette was awarded the US Civilian Medal of Honor from the State of Louisiana for multiracial and cross-regional alliance building in Katrina recovery efforts. In 2016, Colette was named a White House Champion of Change for Climate Equity by the Obama administration.

Hurricane Katrina: Facts to Know

In late August 2005, Hurricane Katrina, [a Category 5 storm](#), landed near Miami and moved up the Gulf of Mexico. At least [400,000 people](#) were displaced from their homes, and media outlets reported around 1,833 deaths – though [researchers say](#) “the true number will probably not ever be known.” Nearly [60% of victims](#) were over the age of 61, and over [40%](#) of victims were Black. In New Orleans, some 30,000 evacuees were moved [into the Superdome](#), where there was a lack of food, the air conditioning broke, water stopped running, and sewage overflowed. The ultimate cost of Katrina, in private sector and government expenditures, was over [\\$160 billion dollars](#).

New Orleans: Katrina led to a large demographic shift in New Orleans. Four of the poorest neighborhoods, including the Lower Ninth Ward and BW Cooper, have [less than half](#) the population they had before the storm, and public housing sites were demolished to make way for ‘mixed-income housing.’ Between 2000 and 2010, the number of children living in New Orleans [decreased by 43 percent](#), and as of 2014, [100,000 fewer](#) African Americans lived in the city.

Mississippi: Mississippi bore the most damage behind Louisiana. In MS, Katrina claimed [238 lives and left over 100,000 homeless](#). The unemployment rate rose to ~25%, and the storm caused over \$25 billion in damages.

Recovery Efforts: Privatization and Government Failures

As Colette Pichon-Battle points out in this month’s episode, the recovery was hindered by the failures of government and of corporations. In the years before Hurricane Katrina, the government privatized FEMA and, lacking resources and support, the agency [outsourced disaster relief](#) to major multinational corporations. With little to no oversight over contractors’ work or billing practices, costs quickly spiraled out of

control and delivery of resources lagged. After Katrina, the education and healthcare systems were privatized, and housing built after the storm has been gentrified. After Bobby Jindal became governor, he gutted mental health services when Louisiana's residents were dealing with unparalleled collective trauma.

After Katrina, Louisiana laid off 4,000 teachers and closed public schools in low-income, predominantly Black neighborhoods, overhauling them into the first all-charter school district in the nation, the [Recovery School District \(RSD\)](#). RSD is one of the worst-performing school districts in the nation.

As Colette Pichon-Battle makes clear in the podcast, the recovery hasn't happened yet due to the prioritization of profits over people.

Multiracial Solidarity after Katrina

Multiracial organizing existed well before Katrina, but it took on a greater urgency in its aftermath. Colette Pichon-Battle talks about how the Greater New Orleans Organizers Roundtable brought community leaders and activists from various groups and issue areas together.

One example of multiracial solidarity occurred between [Vietnamese American and Black](#) community members in New Orleans' Versailles (AKA Village de l'Est) neighborhood. Father Vien Nguyen opened the Mary Queen of Vietnam Church (MQVN) as a temporary shelter for returning community members and as a meeting space for Black leaders.

When Mayor Nagin opened the Chef Menteur landfill to hold toxic storm debris – less than two miles from Village de l'Est – community members engaged in direct political actions to [ensure the close](#) of the waste site. The support was mutual. Father Vien "became a regular presence at meetings and events concerning the rights of displaced black residents." [Minh Nguyen](#), who helped organize youth to oppose the landfill, went on to found the Vietnamese American Young Leaders of New Orleans ([VAYLA-NO](#)), allying with MQVN Community Development Corporation ([MQVN CDC](#)) and forming cross-racial alliances to combat environmental racism.

Climate Justice

Climate justice goes beyond addressing the disastrous consequences of climate change, explains Colette Pichon-Battle. It means including the voices and perspectives of Brown and Black, poor and working class communities who stand to lose the most

as a result of climate change . As [Colette Pichon-Battle explains](#), “[T]o really advance equity, the Climate movement needs to meet the Black Lives Matter movement. The gender justice movement needs to meet the Indigenous movement. We’ve got to start intersecting on purpose.”

Pichon-Battle highlights one initiative in particular that is aiming to make these intersections happen in a thoughtful and strategic manner. The Southern Movement Assembly is a movement of community leaders across the South working for collective governance, fighting “on every frontline for justice,” including climate justice.

Additional resources:

If you’re visiting New Orleans, check out [Hidden History Tours](#) to learn about the city’s revolutionary history.

Southern Movement Assembly: <http://southtosouth.org/#GulfSouthRising>: <http://www.gulfsoutrising.org/>

Kerala Relief

Kerala, a state in South India, is experiencing disastrous floods – over 200 people have died and [over 1 million people](#) have been displaced to relief camps. To support recovery efforts, please consider donating relief materials via this link: <https://www.donatekart.com/Goonj/kerala-relief/#/>