

Five Years After the Levees Broke

Bearing witness through poetry

BY RENÉE WATSON

This is an oral history lesson
just in case the textbooks neglect the truth:
Natural disaster holocausts
are destroying
the poor.
Tens of thousands of bodies
lie in Haiti's ditches.
Hundreds of deferred dreams drowned in Katrina's
waters . . .

MY HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS stood on stage performing their collaborative poem at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem. How fitting that these budding protest poets would be given the opportunity to have their voices rise in the Langston Hughes Auditorium. DreamYard's annual spoken word poetry

festival gave parents, teachers, youth, and even politicians a chance to witness New York City's teen poets speak their truth. I sat in the front row, beaming with pride, not only because their performance went off without a hitch, but also because I knew these students meant every word they were reciting. I beamed with pride because I was witnessing the power of arts integration. What started out as a compare-and-contrast assignment for a social issues unit turned into a piece of art. A declaration.

As a teaching artist in public schools, I am paired with classroom teachers to teach poetry and to give students an opportunity to experience their academic curriculum through the arts. At the beginning of the school year, I gave my students the ongoing, yearlong assignment to watch



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In the shadow of the Superdome: People seek high ground just after Katrina.

the news, to pay attention. We studied Gwendolyn Brooks, who wrote about Emmett Till, and Langston Hughes, whose poetry can be used as a literary commentary on the black experience in America. “Great poets listen to their world and speak back,” I told my students.

Our poetry class started off with the sharing of works-in-progress and the reporting of current events students felt passionate about. At that point, headlines and news stories inspired students to write about human trafficking, Chris Brown and Rihanna’s public display of domestic violence, and the HIV epidemic in the Bronx—where they live.

Just after winter break, on Jan. 12, 2010, five years after New Orleans’ levees broke, Haiti’s earth quaked. The next day, every student wanted to talk about it. But how do you talk about something so devastating, so heartbreaking, without repeating clichéd responses like “That’s so sad” or “Can you believe what happened?”

I encouraged students to look at the situation with empathy, but also with a critical eye. Knowing many of them were working with their classroom teachers on sharpening their skills for writing compare-and-contrast essays, I asked them to apply what they were learning to our poetry class. I posed the question: How do race and class affect the aftermath and recovery from a natural disaster?

A Study in Contrasts

I gave students the task of investigating the similarities and differences among three natural disasters: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans 2005; the San Diego wildfires, California 2007; and the 7.0 Port-au-Prince earthquake, Haiti 2010.

Most of my high schoolers were in elementary or middle school when Katrina swept through New Orleans. They had faint memories of something bad happening in Louisiana, but

had no emotional connection to it and knew very few facts about the aftermath of the storm. When I asked how many knew anything about the wildfires in California, no one raised a hand.

The following week, I started class differently. I passed out the lyrics to Jay-Z’s rap “Minority Report.” Knowing my students’ love of hip-hop from previous inquiries, I thought this would present the history to them in a way that would immediately capture their attention. I knew I would have them read articles and look at hard facts in the next lesson, but I wanted to begin by giving them accurate information in a creative way. “Minority Report” is a four-minute history lesson about New Orleans. I decided to use

Jay-Z’s song to help students understand what took place in 2005. Using music in my classroom has given many students who resist writing—especially poetry—a way in. Printing out the lyrics for them helps me show the similarities between verses and stanzas, and students are able to point out literary devices that singers and rappers often use.

I played the song and instructed students to read along and underline lyrics that

stood out to them because they liked the way Jay-Z said it, or because they agreed. “Circle phrases you don’t understand,” I added.

After students listened to the song, I led a brief discussion and wrote their answers on the board. What is this song about? When did Katrina happen? How does Jay-Z feel about how things were handled in New Orleans? Students volunteered to share what they underlined and circled.

Many students underlined the lyric “Wouldn’t you loot, if you didn’t have the loot?/Baby needed food and you stuck on the roof.” Students also underlined phrases that referred to how poor the people in New Orleans were before the hurricane. Several students circled lines about the Superdome and the lack of water and supplies.

I gave students the task of investigating three natural disasters: Hurricane Katrina, the San Diego wildfires, and the Port-au-Prince earthquake.

After discussing the song, I asked students to turn their handout over. On the other side, a worksheet had a three-column chart with the headers **Before**, **During**, and **After** at the top, and three rows labeled New Orleans, 2005—Hurricane Katrina; San Diego, 2007—Wildfires; and Haiti, 2010—Earthquake.

I showed students a slide show with images of all three places before, during, and after the tragedy. First, we watched the entire slide show without stopping it or talking. The second time through, I stopped the slide show and gave students time to fill out the worksheet. In the images of life before, I asked: “What do you see?” “What do you notice about the houses?” “How would you describe this community?”

When I showed the slides of San Diego, students blurted out: “I want to live there!” “That house is tight!” Words students wrote in the Before column for San Diego included *fancy*, *wealthy*, *vacation*, *big*.

When we looked at the slides of Haiti, one student pointed to the screen, which held an image of children so thin their bones could be seen, and asked, “Is that really how Haiti looked before the earthquake?”

The next slides showed the devastation that happens when storms come, fires spread, and buildings crumble. Words students wrote in the During column were solemn: *death*, *destruction*, *demolished*, *memories vanished*, *helpless*, *fear*, *tragic*. Whether the house had been flooded, sizzled to ash, or collapsed to dust, it was clear that these three places, which in the previous column had obvious disparities in regards to class, all suffered enormous grief and loss.

The next photographs showed what happened in the immediate aftermath of each natural disaster. “What do you see?” I asked again. For New Orleans, students noted: *crowds*, *handwritten signs pleading for help and for water*, *sick elderly people*, *despair*. For San Diego, students wrote: *buffets*, *massages*, *sleeping on cots*, *pets playing with their owners*. And for Haiti: *people sleeping outside in the dark*, *wounded people*, *sadness*, *loss*, *dead bodies thrown on top of each other*.

I gave students time to silently write a response to these images. “How do these images make you feel? What are your gut reactions to these images?” Students wrote for about three minutes and then we discussed their findings.



Street life Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in the years before the earthquake.

UNICEF

I asked students not to draw any conclusions yet, but rather to share with the class what they wrote on their chart. “Just tell us what you noticed,” I said.

The first comment was about the loss. “I noticed that all three places had a lot of damage done to their homes.”

Another student saw that the homes in San Diego had cars parked in the driveway and many of the homes in New Orleans didn’t.

“I noticed that the people in New Orleans looked hot, frustrated, and stranded, and the people in San Diego looked relaxed and taken care of.”

“The people in San Diego looked organized and calm, and the people in New Orleans and Haiti looked chaotic and a lot more stressed out.”

Adding Research to Rap

To help students add facts to their observations, I read an article to them, “Football Stadium Now a Shelter for Fire Evacuees,” by the Associated Press, dated Oct. 23, 2007. I asked students to add pertinent information to their charts. “This article will give you facts to add to your feelings and observations,” I explained. Occasionally, I stopped the class to see if anyone had a question or to make sure students understood what I read to them. By the time I finished the second paragraph, students were gasping in disbelief. The article further explained what the images showed:

San Diego—Like Hurricane Katrina evacuees two years earlier in New Orleans, thousands of people roused by natural disaster have fled to an NFL stadium, waiting out the calamity outside San Diego and worrying about their homes. The similarities ended there, as an almost festive atmosphere reigned at Qualcomm Stadium. Bands belted out rock ’n’ roll, lavish buffets served gourmet entrees, and massage therapists helped relieve the stress for those forced to flee their homes because of wildfires. . . .

The New Orleans evacuees had dragged themselves through floodwaters to get to the Louisiana Superdome in 2005, and once

there endured horrific conditions without food, sanitation, or law enforcement.

I also read them an article from the *New York Times*, “What Happens to a Race Deferred,” by Jason DeParle, which I first discovered in Linda Christensen’s essay “Hurricane Katrina: Reading Injustice, Celebrating Solidarity.” After looking at a graph in the article titled “The Reach of Poverty in New Orleans,” which details by race who had cars and who did not, students began to draw conclusions about how race and class play a role in natural disasters.

It was clear to students that there were many differences in the response, resources, and rebuilding of New Orleans and San Diego. I asked students, “Why do you think there is such disparity? Should anything have been done differently? If so, what? Why or why not?”

Students were full of answers and suggestions. “If the government knew the people of New Orleans didn’t have much to begin with, they should have been more prepared to handle something like Hurricane Katrina,” Urias answered.

Destiny pointed out that maybe by 2007, two years after Katrina, the government had learned a lesson and that’s why Qualcomm Stadium had so many resources. “And besides,” she added, “Hurricane Katrina affected everybody in New Orleans. But not everyone in San Diego had to leave their home, so more people were able to volunteer and help out.”

Lydia saw her point, but was adamant that more could have been done for Louisiana. “But five days?” she yelled. “They had no water for five days!”

“How is it that we can get stuff to other countries overnight but can’t help our own?” Vaughn asked. “I’m not saying California didn’t deserve help, I just think that New Orleans deserved it, too.”

After comparing the hurricane and the fires, we took a closer look at the earthquake. Students learned that Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, and they quickly drew the conclusion that if, five years later, New Orleans was still rebuilding, Haiti had a long road ahead. “I think it’s good that everyone is donating money



Alan Wieder

New Orleans 9th Ward six months after Katrina.

to them now, but where were all these donations before the earthquake?” Urias asked.

I didn’t want to end the discussion, but I needed to bring our conversation to a close so I could prepare students for their assignment and end class. I could tell students had lingering questions and I wanted to give them a chance to ask them. I tore pieces of blank scrap paper and handed out colored strips to the students, asking them to write down any question or thoughts that they didn’t get to share. They didn’t have to put their name on the slip of paper. I explained that we might not be able to answer their question in class, but that they should search out the answer. The slips of paper included the following questions:

- What would happen if a tragedy took place in New York City? Would Times Square be restored before neighborhoods in the Bronx?
- Do the poor know how to save money? Do they have enough money to save for a “rainy day”?
- How does a homeowner choose an insurance policy?

- Are there places that are currently in great need but may never get help unless tragedy strikes them?
- Whose responsibility is it to help the poor?
- Will history books tell the truth about what happened in New Orleans?

Although not the purpose of our class, these questions could lead into units on a variety of issues in many different subjects, including math, economics, and history. Students were beginning to see that what happened in New Orleans and Haiti—and what happens in their neighborhood—is rooted in deep issues that span a variety of aspects of their lives.

‘What Do You Have to Say?’

In our next class, students began their poems. I mentioned Jay-Z’s song as an example of an artist who lent his pen to a cause. “Write your version of ‘Minority Report.’” I asked them: “What do you have to say to New Orleans, San Diego, Haiti? What do you want to say to America?”

I encouraged my students to incorporate phrases from the articles, the rap, their free-write, and their chart into their poems. “You’ve collected

a lot of information and documented your feelings very well. Use the material you've gathered in your piece," I instructed. "If you don't know how to begin, state a fact from the article or a lyric from the song and start from there."

Students got right to work. And so did I.

Whenever possible, I model doing the assignment so that students see and hear a "real writer's" process, and so that I encounter possible frustrations and stumbling blocks before they do. I let them hear my first drafts, revise them, and read them to the class again as an example of how even adult writers revise and edit their work. I also want to show my students that I am willing to take the risks I daily ask them to take. To write their opinions; to express their anger, hurt, and joy; to shout out questions to a world that may not respond with the answer they hoped for is a brave thing. I encourage them to take those risks with me.

After everyone's poem was complete, I took lines from all of our poems and combined them to create a collaborative piece.

Destiny and Vaughn both wrote about the lack of resources in New Orleans:

2005.

New Orleans flooded . . .
they named it
Hurricane Katrina.
And Katrina means Pure.
But the Superdome
had no pure water . . .

New Orleans,
for five days
you drank your salty tears
and there were no medical supplies
for your heartache.

And the ignorant asked: why didn't
you get out?
Not realizing the poor have no cars to
drive to hotels to wait out a storm . . .

Urias, Lily, and Jazmin created stanzas about the neglect of Haiti:

Haiti's earth quaked
five years after New Orleans' levees broke.

And we are the aftershock. Shocked
that it took a catastrophe to pay attention to
the poor.

Why is it that it takes tragedy to unify a
world?

Haiti, we never remembered you. We knew
your people
stood in line for their only meal of the day—
beans and rice—
and we looked away.

Long before buildings barricaded your
children under tons of bricks
we knew you were the poorest country
in the Western Hemisphere.
And we looked away . . .

Denisse, who takes dance classes, volunteered to create an interpretive dance to go along with the poem. She rallied her peers together to rehearse outside of class. Observing them practice, I realized that, just a month before, all they could articulate about Haiti was that what happened was "sad," "a tragedy," "so unfortunate."

Now, they had facts and critical ideas to support them as they expressed their emotions. They took the skills they learned with their classroom teacher and applied them to their art. And instead of keeping silent, instead of hiding their questions, fears, and frustrations, they did what the poets they studied have done: They sounded the alarm. "Every time we say this poem, people will remember," Destiny told me. She understood that her words would not change what happened and her teenaged wallet might not be able to donate funds for recovery, but she could lend her pen.

Her voice.

There was a consensus in the group: "This is a tribute for people everywhere who are struggling. We have to make it special."

And they did.

And what happened on stage, in Langston's beloved Harlem, was more than a poetry recital. My students joined a new generation of poets committed to being recorders, responders, rebukers, rejoicers, and rebuilders.

What happened was the rising of voices:

Santa-Ana winds come again.
Blow relief to the Ninth Ward, to Haiti . . .
Let the fire of revival spread to Bourbon Street
and Port-au-Prince . . .
Let our words be the rope you hang onto.
May they pull you out of the
rubble.
Syllable by syllable let each verb,
each noun
build a fortress on your insides. Strengthening
the levees of your soul

so you do not break.
May you never break.

And if the history books forget to add
a footnote apologizing
for not being proactive but reactive . . .
take this account. Take this truth
and write it in stone. Carve an
evacuation plan
and post it in every poor city, every
desolate nation . . .

there is a way out . . .

tell every child that lives lacking: as long as
you can speak you
can survive

because words are seeds and this oral
history will bring a harvest.

We plant your name in the ground
of hope,

Haiti.

New Orleans.

Ethiopia.

Flint, Michigan.

Bronx, New York.

You will not be forgotten . . . You will rise.

You will rise
because we will lift you up.

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