

It's not about a hurricane. It's about America.

Trouble the Water



STUDY GUIDE

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Trouble the Water

Set against Hurricane Katrina and the abandonment of one hundred thousand New Orleans residents to deadly floodwaters, the documentary film *Trouble the Water* tells a story of ordinary people navigating hard times, through storms natural and man-made.

The film celebrates the resilience of community in the face of massive government failures, and raises questions that continue to haunt America years later: Who is vulnerable in our society, and why? What is the responsibility of a government to its citizens? And what does it take to beat the odds and survive?

It is in the spirit of addressing these very questions that a group of teachers, researchers, community organizers, artists, editors, and students came together and created the *Trouble the Water* Study Guide. The goal of this project is to deepen the discussion about issues related to race, class and privilege laid bare by Katrina, and brought to life on film in *Trouble the Water*, by engaging young people in learning activities that inspire, encourage and facilitate agency.

Intended for use at the middle school, high school and university levels, the modules can also be adapted for use by community groups, civic groups and NGOs. Teachers and facilitators may wish to use the entire curriculum, or select individual Units as appropriate to the needs of their group.

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THE STUDY GUIDE LESSONS

1. **CRITICAL RESISTANCE IN AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSICAL TRADITIONS,**
by Prof. Fo Wilson, University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee
Explores the role of music as a tool of resistance, and as a resource to sustain faith and channel commentary in times of crisis, historically, and in response to Katrina.
2. **MEDIA, ART AND ACTIVISM,**
by Prof. Broderick Fox, Occidental College
This Unit is designed for groups and individuals who seek to understand the role of media in society and to produce media addressing issues of importance to themselves and their communities.
3. **FAITH AND FOLK,**
by Professor Mona Lisa Saloy, Dillard University
Trouble the Water provides a framework to learn the history and study of Folklore, the lore of the Folk, and Faith as a cultural construct, and for students to themselves engage in cultural investigation.
4. **ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE,**
by Prof. Amity Doolittle, Yale University
Encourages deeper thinking about the natural environment by exploring the history of environmentalism, the responsibility of government to its citizens, and the roots of structural racism.
5. **PROBLEM SOLVING IN A CRISIS,**
by Barb Sniderman and Brent McGillivray
The Dramatic Arts as a means to help students identify and learn leadership skills, set positive examples during times of stress, and think critically.
6. **SUSTAINABILITY AND CULTURAL ECONOMY,**
Prof. Joyce Marie Jackson, Louisiana State University
Understanding the rebirth, recovery and rebuilding of the city of New Orleans through the lens of the city's rich cultural life and history.
7. **COMMUNITY CONSCIOUSNESS AND ACTION,**
by Prof. Fatima Hafiz, Temple University
Building dialogue, action and reflection about Representation, Racism, Resilience, Reconstruction, and Reinvestment with human service agencies staff, high school students, and community-based organizations
8. **KEYS TO RESILIENCY,**
by Prof. Evelyn Ang, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
This Unit explores the concept of Resiliency and its role in social activism, and creates opportunities to elicit students' connections to their own personal journeys.
9. **CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND THE PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX,**
by Mayaba Liebenthal
An introduction to the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) framework as a means of understanding the interplay between criminal justice and privatization in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.
10. **CIVIC AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY,**
by San Francisco Film Society Youth Education Program
A guide to facilitate discussion among high school and advanced middle school students about social and civic responsibility, the role of media, racism, and poverty.

PRODUCTION NOTES

BIBLIOGRAPHY

DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

When Hurricane Katrina made landfall, we were at home in New York City. We were horrified by the televised images of elderly people laid out on baggage claim carousels at the airport, bloated bodies floating in the flooded streets, people standing on their roofs. Where was the help? We wanted to know why New Orleans had not been evacuated before the storm, and why aid was so late in coming after the levees collapsed.

We set out for Louisiana ten days later, wanting to make sense of the disaster—not by talking to experts or officials, but to people who were surviving it. We were in search of stories not being widely reported—acts of bravery by residents, inmates locked in flooded jail cells, local national guardsman returning from Baghdad. Our challenge was to tell an intimate character-driven story that brought new voices to the screen, and to distill it all into a fluid narrative without recycling the images that had saturated the news.

In Kimberly and Scott Roberts, and their friend Brian Nobles, we encountered smart, funny, undefeated, indignant and determined survivors; by documenting their two and a half year journey to recreate their lives, we were able to put faces and voices to so many others left behind—the poor, the incarcerated, the elderly, the hospitalized.

We grounded *Trouble the Water* with approximately 15 minutes of extraordinary home video that Kimberly had recorded in her neighborhood the day before and morning of Katrina on her Hi-8 video camera. A lack of electricity forced her to stop filming shortly after the levees failed, so we incorporated this extraordinary video as flashback to the drama we were documenting in the present, and used other home video and audio recordings when needed to keep the story personal and at ground zero. Behind the camera, we avoided sit-down interviews and narration, and directed our crews to shoot handheld, with available light, recording life as it happened, direct cinema style. As a result, we were able to give viewers an “experience” of a two and half year journey and not just tell them about it—from the devastation caused by the failed levees, the escape from New Orleans, resettlement in Memphis and eventual return home.

As outsiders to the city and the community, we struggled to get it right, to be true to voices and experiences that were very different from our own. We determined not to depict those who appear in the film as helpless victims, or as the broadcast media did with so many survivors, criminals. And while Kimberly and Scott identified themselves as “street hustlers,” and talk openly on camera about selling drugs, we focused on the direction they were headed as they tried to turn crisis into opportunity and seize a chance for a new beginning. We were determined to avoid typecasting portray them as streetwise and resilient survivors, working to change their lives and their community for the better.

And although *Trouble the Water* documents a tragic event, we hope to have created, in the end, a life-affirming, inspirational, and hopeful story about transformation, heroism and love.

Our work as producers of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Bowling for Columbine*, and other films has showed us that movies can and do make a difference by getting people to engage and converse and empathize. In addition to receiving many awards, including the Sundance Grand Jury Prize, an Oscar® nomination for feature documentary, playing theatrically in some 300 cities, and a national broadcast on HBO, *Trouble the Water* has brought large audiences together at hundreds of screenings in schools, houses of worship, community centers, museums, government agencies, and policy conferences.

In these community settings, and through partnerships with dozens of organizations at the forefront of Gulf Coast recovery and social and economic justice work, like the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation, PolicyLink, and Amnesty International, the film has helped bring additional attention to the underlying problems that remained along the Gulf Coast after the floodwaters receded — failing schools, record high incarceration, poverty and government accountability.

With the release of this Study Guide, it is our hope that *Trouble the Water* will continue to help create, and provide support for, additional opportunities for dialogue, engagement, and action, and to help young people identify and understand ways in which Hurricane Katrina, and the underlying issues at play in the film, are relevant in their lives.

— Tia Lessin & Carl Deal,
Directors & Producers of *Trouble the Water*

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EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS' STATEMENT

When Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf and the floodwaters rose and tore through New Orleans, plunging its remaining population into a carnival of misery, it did not turn the region into a “Third World country”, as has been disparagingly implied in the media; it revealed one. It revealed the disaster within the disaster; grueling poverty rose to the surface like a bruise to our skin.

But the storm not only revealed the poverty of those most vulnerable, those left behind. It revealed the poverty of skewed priorities – of a government that had subcontracted its responsibilities to the private sector and abdicated responsibility altogether when it came to housing, health care, education and even evacuation.

This can be seen as symptomatic of a deeper pathology: a nexus of structural racism, poverty, disenfranchisement and violence that is the daily lived experience of many Americans in New Orleans and indeed in every other city of this country.

Hurricane Katrina revealed the poverty of a mindset that had become blind to the role of culture in sustaining the mental health and social wellness of people; blind to the role of culture in education, through which we are prepared for our responsibilities in a democracy; and hostile to the role of culture in the search for truth. Perhaps more than anything else, it revealed a poverty of imagination.

Trouble the Water got deeply inside of this conundrum, by getting inside the experience of people living it directly. People who were living on self-described margins who, in responding to the terrible crisis of the storm and its aftermath, came to realize their own self-worth and see their lives in a different way, and be transformed by that experience. When, as a viewer, you feel the power of that, you start to think about all the structural injustice you see in every day life, and you start to think about it in a different way. Mainly you start to think: it doesn't have to be this way.

As the great actor, singer and activist Paul Robeson once said, “It's not enough for an artist to create the reality he sees, it is incumbent upon him to create the reality he can imagine.” Trouble the Water powerfully illustrates the role that cultural production and art can play in provoking empathy and connection among us all.

The accompanying materials will help to guide the dialogue, and deepen our understanding of the structural causes of injustice, even as the film cultivates that most powerful instrument of response: our imaginations.

—Danny Glover & Joslyn Barnes, co-founders of Louverture Films

A TEACHABLE MOMENT

Trouble the Water provides a teachable movement with strong implications for pedagogy, practice and policy. Using these modules can support your instructional practices by identifying important thematic issues.

Each lesson is designed to provide students with a guided and sustained discussion on this national disaster. Pedagogical practices embedded in these modules link activities to practice. The events of Hurricane Katrina make visible social justice issues such as race, class, poverty and more. It is our goal for students to better understand the implications of this national disaster.

Using these curricular module means choosing to engage students in learning activities that link theory to practice. Learning objectives within each of these modules suggest policy implementations at the local level. And pedagogical practices are designed to scaffold a student's learning with practical applications.

We encourage you and your students to use these modules to maintain a sustained discussion that reminds us as a nation of the lessons of Hurricane Katrina.

— Dr. Cheryl Ajirotutu, Project Coordinator

Tia Lessin and Carl Deal directed and produced the 2009 Academy Award®-nominated feature documentary *Trouble the Water*, winner of the Gotham Independent Film Award and the Sundance Film Festival's Grand Jury Prize. They were also producers of Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, winner of the Cannes Film Festival's Palme d'Or, Oscar®-winning *Bowling for Columbine*, and *Capitalism: A Love Story*. Tia received the Sidney Hillman Prize for Broadcast Journalism for her documentary short *Behind the Labels*. She line produced Martin Scorsese's *No Direction Home: Bob Dylan* and was associate producer of Charles Guggenheim's Oscar®-nominated film *Shadows of Hate*. In television, her work as producer of the series *The Awful Truth* earned her two Emmy nominations and one arrest. Tia is an Open Society Institute Katrina Media Fellow, and was awarded the Women of Worth Vision Award by L'Oréal Paris and Women in Film. Carl Deal has contributed to many documentary films, and was the 2005 recipient of the FOCAL International/Associated Press Library Award for best use of footage in a feature film. Previously, he worked as an international news producer and a writer and has reported from natural disasters and conflict zones throughout the U.S., Latin America, and in Iraq. In addition to his work as a filmmaker, he has authored investigative reports for Greenpeace, Amnesty International and Public Citizen. Tia and Carl are Creative Capital Artists and Sundance Institute Fellows.

Joslyn Barnes is a screenwriter and Emmy® award nominated producer and the author or co-author of numerous commissioned screenplays for feature films including the upcoming epic *TOUSSAINT* and the award-winning film *BATTU*, directed by Cheikh Oumar Sissoko (Mali), which she associate produced. Barnes has also served as an expert consultant and programme officer at the United Nations. She has lived and travelled widely in Africa and Asia, and has written numerous articles covering trade and social development issues, as well as contributing to books on the establishment of electronic communications in developing countries, food security and production in Africa, and strategic advocacy for the inclusion of gender perspectives on the international development agenda.

In addition to being one of the most acclaimed actors of our time, with a career spanning 30 years from *Places in the Heart*, *The Color Purple*, the *Lethal*

Weapon series and the award-winning *To Sleep with Anger*, **Danny Glover** has also produced, executive produced and financed numerous projects for film, television and theatre. Among these are *Good Fences*, *3 AM*, *Freedom Song*, *Get on the Bus*, *Deadly Voyage*, *Buffalo Soldiers*, *The Saint of Fort Washington* and *To Sleep with Anger*, as well as the series *Courage and America's Dream*. The recipient of countless awards for his humanitarian and advocacy efforts on behalf of economic and social justice causes, Glover is a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador and a recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award from Amnesty International.

Since co-founding Louverture Films, Barnes and Glover have produced or executive produced *BA-MAKO*, *AFRICA UNITE*, *TROUBLE THE WATER*, *SALT OF THIS SEA*, *SOUNDTRACK FOR A REVOLUTION*, as well as the forthcoming *DUM MARO DUM* and *THE DISAPPEARANCE OF MCKINLEY NOLAN*. They also associate produced *THE TIME THAT REMAINS* and the 2010 Cannes Palme d'Or winner *UNCLE BOONMEE WHO CAN RECALL HIS PAST LIVES*.

Cheryl Ajirotutu is the Associate Director of the Cultures and Communities program and an Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM). She served as the curriculum coordinator on the *Trouble the Water* curriculum. Currently, Dr. Ajirotutu is the Director for two applied anthropology programs at UWM, *Cultural Traditions in Senegal* (2000-2006) and *UWinteriM in New Orleans: Katrina and Its Aftermath: Multicultural Learning Through Study and Service Learning* (2008-present). To her credit Dr. Ajirotutu's publications and creative productions include numerous articles, a co-edited volume and an award winning film on educational transformation issues in South Africa.