

*Boj Feerey*  
**A Teaching and Learning Methodology  
for Healing the Wounds of Distance,  
Displacement, and Loss Caused by  
Hurricane Katrina**

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This article examines the project “The Saddest Days: Katrina Experiences Through the Eyes of Children,” developed by the authors. The project uses the Gao School Museum (GSM) approach to develop instructional material that includes student experiences and voices. Specifically, the authors investigated how the “Saddest Days” Project, using the GSM methodology, develops *Boj Feerey* (a concept in the Songhay language that means “the process of opening one’s mind and accepting new ideas and approaches so as to integrate these new perspectives into one’s daily life”), which urges students and teachers to ponder how Katrina’s aftermath continues to affect African American youth. The disaster has affected not only African American youth from New Orleans but also those teachers and students located in the cities in which New Orleanians are hosted.

**Keywords:** *Afrocentric education; Katrina studies; Afrocentric curriculum development; cultural aesthetics in education*

**THE SADDEST DAYS: BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

“The Saddest Days: Katrina, Its Aftermath and Impact on the New Orleans African American Community Project” was conceived during the early days of the crisis by Dr. Clyde C. Robertson,

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visiting scholar at the University of Memphis Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change and former Director of the New Orleans Public School District's Africana and Multicultural Studies Department. Dr. Robertson recognized that both national and local media almost exclusively reported on the storm's impact on New Orleans's Caucasian community, virtually ignoring Katrina's African American victims. As a result, the "Saddest Days" project is a multistate, multidimensional endeavor, which gives voice and volume to the voiceless and is sponsored by the Hooks Institute. Dr. Robertson and Hooks Institute Director and "Saddest Days" Project Codirector D'Ann Penner, PhD, are organizing the University of Memphis staff and students to conduct the following programs: (a) oral interviews/histories, (b) "Reclaiming Existence Archival Retrieval" activities, and (c) the "Saddest Days" dance and stage performances. Finally, "Katrina Experiences Through the Eyes of Children" is an Atlanta-based documentation and curriculum building component of the "Saddest Days" initiative that is outlined in this article. The project builds on the scholarship and experience of Dr. Robertson, Dr. Joyce E. King, and Dr. Hassimi O. Maiga, who have worked together in the past to create innovative learning experiences in New Orleans and other cities (Robertson, 1997/2005; Maiga, 1995; King, 2005a, 2005b).

**"THE SADDEST DAYS": KATRINA EXPERIENCES  
THROUGH THE EYES OF CHILDREN**

New Orleans is recognized as one of America's most African cities. Many of the well-known "African survivals" preserved in the history and heritage of New Orleans can be directly traced to the peoples of West Africa (Maiga, 1998). *Boŋ Feerey* is a concept in the Songhay language of Mali, West Africa, that means "the process of opening one's mind and accepting new ideas and approaches in order to integrate these new perspectives into your daily life" (H. Maiga, personal communication, December 1, 2005). One aim of the project, "The Saddest Days: Katrina Experiences Through the Eyes of Children," is to open the minds of students and teachers in host communities to heal the wounds caused by distance, displacement, and loss as a result of Hurricane Katrina.

The Songhay people of Mali are the inheritors of the classical West African Songhay Empire of the 15th and 16th centuries that encompassed more than 10 contemporary African states. The prowess of Songhay intellectual traditions has been preserved in the famous manuscripts of Timbuktu, the fabled city of northern Mali. The University of Gao at Gao, the cradle of the Songhay Empire, as well as the Universities of Sankor (Timbuktu) and Djenné were also developed by the Songhay emperors.

The project will use the Gao School Museum (GSM) approach to develop lessons and instructional materials that incorporate student experiences and voices. The GSM approach was developed in the ancient and historic city of Gao, Mali (West Africa). The GSM approach is necessary because

it creates a dialectical relationship between curriculum adaptation, teaching and learning often fragmented in other reform efforts. . . . The GSM incorporates a pedagogical strategy that can be used in any school setting where the goal is to infuse practical culturally relevant, experiential learning across the existing curriculum. (Maiga, 1995, p. 211)

In addition, Dr. Etta Hollins notes that the GSM approach is a “universal teaching tool” that “provides a fresh new approach to schooling for children that builds upon and extends their home learning” (personal communication, January 1, 2005).

This article will describe how a curriculum building project using the GSM methodology can develop *Boŋ Feerey*, that is, open the minds of children and teachers about the Katrina experience, its aftermath, and impact on African American youth. The impacts of this disaster affect not only New Orleans’s youngest victims but also those students in the cities that are hosting the evacuees and their families. As Dr. Hassimi Maiga (1995) has elaborated,

The Gao School Museum is not a conventional museum where objects of art and folkloric artifacts are on permanent display. Rather it is a pedagogical strategy that gets teachers and students involved in a collaborative inquiry process. . . . Teachers and students are the main actors/researchers in this rich and deep process of democratic

knowledge production. . . . Each classroom's museum or resource bank embodies aspects of the living legacy of the community and students' culture. (p. 211)

Through documentation activities conducted by teachers with New Orleans students (interviewing, collecting memorabilia), this project will assist students who are Georgia residents learn about the Katrina experiences of their peers in subjects across the curriculum. Using the stories and memories of the young New Orleans evacuees in Atlanta-area high schools, the project will produce, pilot, and evaluate thematic, standards-based teaching and resource materials that will enhance existing lessons, units, and curriculum content. The project will engage teachers in the research process documenting students' experiences and perspectives. Students will be interviewed and then encouraged to bring and share artifacts, memorabilia, family stories, and unique New Orleans memories that will comprise an exhibit to support the lessons the teachers will develop using these interviews. This collaborative research process will create new opportunities for adult and student interactions that transcend traditional teacher-student relationships. Implementation of this kind of approach requires assessment strategies that encompass new forms of learning by doing (Maiga, 1995).

Prior to conducting the interviews, a group of lead teachers will participate in a day-long professional development experience that will include a focus on

1. teachers as researchers of cultural heritage knowledge,
2. the unique history and culture of New Orleans, and
3. teaching and learning methods for healing the wounds caused by distance, displacement, and loss.

During a summer institute, participating teachers will develop curriculum materials for "teaching, learning and healing" using the analysis of these interviews with New Orleans student evacuees and the GSM approach. The curriculum/lessons/materials produced will be piloted in schools as well as in after-school and community contexts.

## TEACHERS AS RESEARCHERS OF CULTURAL HERITAGE KNOWLEDGE

The Africana and Multicultural Studies Department of the New Orleans Public Schools, the unit that I directed for the past 13 years, developed a large body of curriculum materials and resources to enhance instruction in the areas of

- Africana and multicultural studies, community knowledge of African, African American, and African diaspora history and culture;
- historical and contemporary information affecting vital national and international issues;
- professional development summer institutes for teachers focusing on African history, African, and African American art and the global impact of the African Russian Alexander Pushkin;
- international student travel and research sojourns to the continent of Africa (Ghana, Benin, Togo, Gambia, Senegal and South Africa) as well as study/travel to the Dominican Republic, Brazil, and Peru; and
- Fulbright exchange experiences (Robertson, 2003/2004).

The forced displacement of the majority of the New Orleans Public School students and teachers creates an imperative to build on this rich experience and knowledgebase. To continue the types of interactive programs that disseminated knowledge about the Africana experience that were developed during the past 13 years, we are embarking on this project to engage teachers in the development of new curriculum materials.

However, simply providing teachers with prepackaged materials is insufficient and ineffective. Teachers must be active participants not just in the use and dissemination of this kind of curriculum content knowledge but also in its development. Furthermore, creating a cultural community perspective is essential for good teachers and good teaching. As Joyce E. King (2005b) has observed, such community perspectives are missing from “prevailing conceptions of high quality teaching and learning” (p. 1).

In articulating the rationale for the GSM approach, Hassimi Maiga (1995) cites an important observation of

philosopher, teacher and activist Grace Lee Boggs [who] stressed that “the community itself with its needs and problems must

become the curriculum” if students are to achieve not only academic success but contribute to the develop of their communities as well. (p. 209)

At present, New Orleans students are being hosted by schools and taught by teachers who have not had the benefit of the professional development provided by the Africana and Multicultural Studies Department of the New Orleans Public Schools. What is more, the media have painted a devastating image of people from New Orleans. In nearly every community in which New Orleans’s displaced students now find themselves, hostility, misunderstanding, and misinformation about the people of New Orleans abound. The Katrina catastrophe provides an important opportunity to share some of our expertise in the development of vital curricula and pedagogy, which we began in New Orleans with our teachers. “The Saddest Days: Katrina Experiences Through the Eyes of Children” offers an opportunity to expand on this work and to meet the urgent needs of Katrina’s youngest victims and their new teachers.

**THE UNIQUE HISTORY AND CULTURE OF NEW ORLEANS AS  
A RESOURCE FOR TEACHING, LEARNING, AND HEALING  
KATRINA’S WOUNDS**

A brief enumeration of some of the ways that the children are experiencing distance, displacement, and loss caused by Hurricane Katrina includes the following:

- Separation from traditions, family, community, and loss of their unique neighborhoods and place-based identity. This displacement is particularly difficult for African American New Orleans youth who identify strongly with their neighborhoods, inclusive of parks, schools, playgrounds, and centers.
- Loss of their connections with community-based activities. These include church programs; music activities, such as school and community-based brass bands, social aid and pleasure club-sponsored activities, and marching bands; school-based athletics, theatre, arts, and dance performing groups; and other types of social activities.
- Significant and inestimable material loss. This includes their homes and all of the contents therein, such as clothing, toys, and

other personal belongings, with the ongoing emotional trauma that follows.

- Misrepresentation of Black New Orleans. Even pre-Katrina New Orleans was misrepresented as a “third world” community, and the people were described as “refugees” in worldwide post-Katrina news coverage and images.
- Hostility that New Orleans evacuees are experiencing. In their host communities, New Orleans evacuees are encountering various kinds of hostility and resentment, which is one result of the aforementioned factors.

“The Saddest Days: Katrina Experiences Through the Eyes of Children” model curriculum building project will demonstrate how the unique history and cultural heritage of New Orleans can serve a resource for teaching, learning, and healing these wounds caused by this unprecedented disaster. Space does not permit a full explication of this history and heritage. However, it is worth noting the following information that will be incorporated in the summer institute:

- *Africans and economic foundations of Louisiana and the new world.* In 1719, the captains of two French ships that brought West Africans to Pensacola, the *Aurore*, and St. Louis had precise instructions to give top priority to selecting those “negroes” who knew how to cultivate rice, indigo, tobacco, and cotton and to bring barrels of rice suitable for planting right away. Some ethnic groups in West Africa today are still known to be expert in the cultivation of these crops that were critical in the development of the New World colonies (Maiga, 1998).
- *The Haiti-Louisiana connection.* Many of the wealthy White and mulatto slave owners fled to Louisiana after the Haitian Revolution (1792 to 1810) because the culture and climate were very similar to that of Haiti. In 1809 and 1810, at least 10,000 Haitian refugees appeared at the port of New Orleans. These were Whites and mulattos along with their enslaved Africans. Migrations of Haitians have had a significant impact on Louisiana culture in terms of language, cuisine, and an increase in the practice of Voudun. Maiga’s (1998) “Our Aficana Heritage Chart” notes the following:

The Haitian Revolution established the first independent Black republic in the New World in 1804. Toussaint L’Ouverture

was the military leader of the revolution. Toussaint's great-grandfather's name was Gao-Genu. Is it possible that he came for Gao (Mali), the capital of the Songhay Empire? His name means "Gao-devil" in the Songhay language. Gao-Genu is also a likely alteration of Gunu or Gounou, the Sognance branch of the Songhay people. . . . In 1797 Boukman, a Voodoo priest, summoned the enslaved Africans in Haiti to revolt using Voodoo drums. (p. 1)

- *The Mardi Gras Indian Tradition* dates back to the early alliances between enslaved Africans and indigenous peoples of Louisiana. At the turn of the last century, African Americans paid homage to Native Americans by imitating them. However, over the century, the Mardi Indian traditions and rituals have become less Native American and more culturally and aesthetically African. A deeper understanding of the roots of this warrior tradition may enable teachers and students to heal and prevent the types of violent conflicts that have occurred recently in host schools around the nation.
- *New Orleans cuisine and its African roots.* That enslaved Africans brought to colonial Louisiana were required to have sophisticated knowledge of rice culture and cultivation sowed the seeds for the African influence on New Orleans cuisine. African women were often required to serve as cooks and caterers and left their indelible imprint on the styles of food preparation and the types of foods that serve as the base for this now world-famous culinary tradition (Maiga, 1995; Hall, 1992).

A New Orleans student interviewed recently after the melee that took place at a Houston high school explained: "The were picking on me—calling me a refugee." Another student in Atlanta, who was interviewed after he was involved in a fight, reported: "They were disrespecting me because I am from New Orleans." Thus, another important component of the research preparation teachers will receive will include study of generative concepts in the Songhay language that indicate positive meanings of "Blackness" and the importance of "respect" that are embedded in everyday Songhay greetings. This language and culture study is fundamental to the GSM approach, which bridges community knowledge and perspectives and curriculum.



This project will use this demonstrably effective pedagogical approach to build a core of interdisciplinary content that will directly affect teaching, learning, and community healing. It will enable Georgia's teachers to better understand their most recent student arrivals. In addition, this project will give teachers more confidence in using research to improve instruction and to infuse students' cultural backgrounds and experiences in the curriculum in ways that enhance the teaching and learning process.

The creation of model lessons/curriculum materials will permit students who have not formally been asked to recall their experiences of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath to bring closure to this horrendous episode in their lives. In addition, other students and teachers who are not evacuees from New Orleans will gain greater understanding of and become more sensitive to this human tragedy. The project will build on and reveal strengths of New Orleanians, especially its children, as well as the unique cultural heritage of New Orleans, the city recognized by the Smithsonian as the nation's most African city. Illuminating the New Orleans community's indigenous ties to African cultural retentions will be another significant impact of this project that will help to expose students throughout Atlanta-area schools to the cultural survivals and achievements of African American people.

It is interesting that Joyce King (2005b) has identified similar educational developments among Native Americans "that offer alternatives to denigrating culture in education" (p. 3). According to King, Native American educators and other indigenous peoples are using their "heritages and languages as pedagogical resources to foster their culture and student achievement" (p. 3). King cites Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley, Upiak Elder and professor of education at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks, who observes the following:

The tide has turned and the future of indigenous education is clearly shifting toward an emphasis on providing education in and through the culture, rather than about the culture. From this we will all benefit. (as cited in Wilson, 2003)

King concludes that such benefits include "making indigenous culture, local knowledge and community perspectives visible and

available to teachers and researchers” (p. 4). Furthermore, language is often a critical element of these approaches.

Valuing community knowledge is also a theme pursued by environmental educator David Orr, whose work is consistent with Maiga’s GSM approach. Orr (1991) offers the following six principles of education that are also valuable for students in any social context:

1. All education is environmental education.
2. The goal of education is not mastery of subject matter but of one’s person.
3. Knowledge carries with it the responsibility to see that it is well used in the world.
4. We cannot say that we know something until we know the effects of this knowledge on real people and their communities.
5. Education should recognize the importance of “minute particulars” and the power of examples over words.
6. The way learning occurs is as important as the content of particular courses.

This project demonstrates the value of an Africana studies curriculum-building approach in response to this far-reaching disaster context.

#### **THE AFRICANA STUDIES PERSPECTIVE IN CURRICULUM BUILDING**

What is an Africana Studies perspective with regard to curriculum and pedagogy? Molefi K. Asante (1997/2005) suggests that the “Afrocentric enterprise is framed by cosmological, epistemological, axiological and aesthetic issues. In this regard the Afrocentric method pursues a world voice, distinctly African-centered in relation to external phenomena” (p. 73). “The Saddest Days: Katrina Experiences Through the Eyes of Children” curriculum-building process/project is intrinsically Afrocentric because it pursues the same four primary issues of the paradigm defined by Asante.

First, cosmological issues addressed by this teaching and learning methodology as described in this article include the pan-African world view that will enable New Orleans students and their peers to synthesize and gain a deeper understanding of the “myths, legends,

literatures and oratures” of their African/African American heritage. In so doing, they will discover that they are not just “from New Orleans” or “from Houston” but also that they share an African cultural heritage. According to Asante (1997/2005),

A useful way to view the cultural question Afrocentrically lies in the understanding of culture as shared perceptions, attitudes and predispositions that allow people to organize experiences in certain ways. . . . [Moreover] we must be prepared to deal with the complex issue of “bleeding cultures,” the fact that African Americans constitute the most heterogeneous group in the United States, biologically, but perhaps one of the most homogeneous socially. (p. 74)

Second, epistemologically, the teaching and learning method described herein values the knowledge and perspectives of the students who have been victimized by Hurricane Katrina. Their voices and experiences will serve as the foundation for a healing curriculum and pedagogy. Molefi Asante (1997/2005) notes that the quest for truth in the Afrocentric enterprise “embraces language, myth, ancestral memory and art-music-dance” (p. 75). Students will be invited to recall and to share with teachers their experiences and memories of these African-centered ways of knowing, which will then inform the curriculum development process.

Third, axiology concerns questions of value. New Orleans has been devalued as a part of the United States and as a community of African-descent people. This project will resurrect the invaluable contributions of New Orleans and its people to the country and the world. In addition, Asante (1997/2005) further observes that “ethical issues have always been connected to the advancement of African knowledge,” which is its “essential function” (p. 75). The contributions of New Orleans students to the teaching and learning methodology this project will develop will provide the teachers and their peers much-needed opportunities to address the ethical issues raised by the Katrina disaster and the treatment of the people of New Orleans.

Fourth, cultural aesthetics are a profoundly important element in the African American community and are particularly relevant to the

unique heritage of New Orleans. Students will be asked to recall and to share the ways in which they have experienced, remember, and miss the lived culture of their New Orleans heritage—from the brass bands, jazz, the food, and the Mardi Gras Indians to the New Orleans Social Aid and Pleasure Club “Second Lines” and their important social and family relationships. Kariamuwelsh-Asante (1985) comments on the significance of the cultural senses of the African aesthetic. As Welsh-Asante notes, the African aesthetic consists of seven “senses”: polyrhythm, polycentrism, dimensional, repetition, curvilinear, epic memory, and wholism. Understanding what is African about the cultural aesthetics of New Orleans will be an important focus of the summer institute that will be provided for the teachers, and we anticipate this to be a significant theme in the subsequent materials the teachers will develop. In this way, the students will learn more about their own African heritage and how it connects to their contemporary lives and the lives of their peers.

## CONCLUSION

Hurricane Katrina was an unprecedented tragedy. It adversely affected thousands of people throughout the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Specifically, this disaster displaced thousands of New Orleans African American students, who are now matriculating in schools across the country. The New Orleans students bring with them a unique cultural perspective that continues to influence them in their current host schools and communities. Many of the students have been traumatized and are now being ostracized in their current schools. There is certainly a need for *Boη Feerey*, or open minds that are sensitive and informed about the real New Orleans. New Orleans evacuees as well as their host teachers and the students in their host schools can mutually benefit from this inquiry-based collaborative approach to the development of curriculum materials for healing Katrina’s wounds. Using the GSM approach, “The Saddest Days: Katrina Experiences Through the Eyes of Children” project offers a proven methodology to heal the wounds of distance, displacement, and loss caused by this disaster.

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