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REMAIN. MIGRATE. RETURN.

What Hurricane Katrina Teaches Us About Climate Migration

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Peace,

TAPROOT EARTH

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OPENING: NATURE KNOWS, MIGRATION IS LIFE.

"Migration is, for this country...a bad word...but migration is much bigger than that, and much older than that...We need to get our head around how natural migration is and look at the ecology that says: **'Migration is a natural part of an ecosystem.**"

– Colette Pichon Battle, On Being with Krista Tippett

Living beings have always migrated to survive. Monarch butterflies travel up to 3,000 miles in a year from Mexico to the northern reaches of the United States and back. Whales swim thousands of miles each year to and from feeding and breeding areas. Millions of buffalo roamed Turtle Island (the name many Indigenous people use for the continent of North America) for more than 130,000 years ranging from Canada to the Appalachian Mountains. And, since our existence as a species, people too have migrated to survive. Many peoples share a history of movement to protect their survival, their freedom, and their cultures.

As nature knows, when conditions become unbearable, movement becomes survival. Over the last decade, nearly 218 million people have been displaced due to a climate disaster. By 2050, nearly 1 in 7 people will have migrated due to a climate-related impact.

Throughout evolutionary history, most species moved with respect to natural boundaries from rivers to mountains. These boundaries can be helpful to understand our relationship to place and to each other. But political borders ignore natural ways of movement, creating a cultural and political reality that favors those in power at the expense of those trying to survive.

Today's political borders are a consequence of colonialism and extraction. Our borders disregard ecology, natural boundaries, and generations of cultural context between people and the earth.

Just within the United States alone, borders have impacted and harmed people from the start. Borders were used to privatize commonly held lands and forcibly remove Indigenous peoples from their lands. Later, through different state laws on the enslavement of humaning beings, borders became a line to determine who was "legally free" and who could be "legally enslaved," tearing apart families and lives. Today, these borders are lines that determine who has full bodily autonomy under the law and who does not, who can get a good education and who cannot, and whose vote counts and whose vote does not.

Yet, we have learned that **climate disasters know no borders.** Presently, movement in response to climate disaster is seen as a problem because political borders severely limit the freedom and agency of people to live and move as they need.

Growing research shows that more tightly secured and stringent borders do not support safe or healthy migration—disproportionately harming those most vulnerable. Putting in place processes and systems that allow the movement of people and advance the rights of people to remain on their lands, migrate in dignified ways, or return through self-determination creates a more vibrant and stronger society. Every climate disaster wreaks havoc on our political borders and resets our relationship to each other and our natural boundaries. Now is the time we should rethink how we understand and address climate migration.

Taproot Earth asserts that migration is a climate solution and that all people have the right to remain, migrate, and return. Rooted in the global climate reparations working statement and vision and 20 years of Katrina, this report offers lessons that advance a more just and reparative climate migration reality.

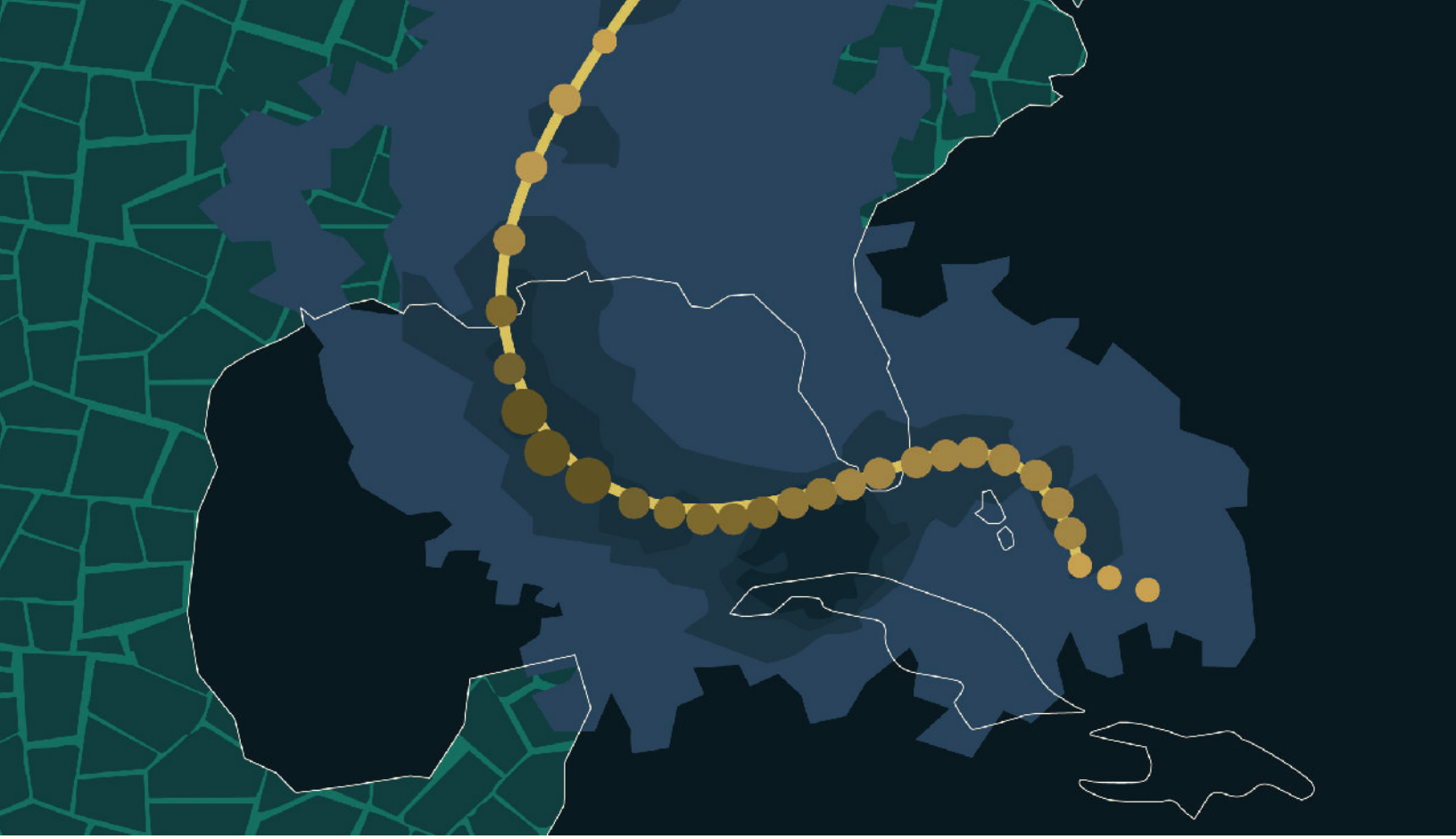

Image: The Hurricane Katrina storm area, storm path, categories along than path, and rainfall.

ROOTED IN KATRINA

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina caused record-breaking devastation across a 144 mile swath of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. A less often told story is that Hurricane Katrina sparked a mass migration of people. More than **1.5 million Hurricane Katrina survivors evacuated to all 50 states** representing one of the largest and most abrupt relocations of people in U.S. history. As of 2015, Center for American Progress reported that 40% of the 1.5 million evacuees, or 600,000 people, were not able to return home. While the idea of "climate migration" is often talked about as an issue that exists only outside of the United States, Hurricane Katrina teaches us that climate migration is also a domestic issue that is already underway.

ABOUT HURRICANE KATRINA: A PRIMER

The costs of Hurricane Katrina are many. Its impact on the fabric of families and communities is impossible to articulate in mere words. Officially, Hurricane Katrina took **1,833 human lives.** Many local residents who witnessed the storm and its aftermath believe that the actual number of lives lost is much higher. Hurricane Katrina also had staggering impacts on human health. As just one example, a study found a threefold increase in heart attacks among those who lived through the storm, *even a decade later*, highlighting the lasting effects of trauma.

In this way, Hurricane Katrina also impacted the next generation with significant trauma and displacement. Relatedly, the storm had great impacts on labor: it spurred the largest firing of Black teachers in America since *Brown v. Board of Education* and the dismantling of United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO). The storm also had huge impacts on the ecology of the Gulf South. Hurricane Katrina caused massive coastal erosion, habitat destruction, and soil contamination. It uprooted millions of trees. And climate disaster intersected

"After Hurricane Katrina, I saw a massive number of people both being brought in, and being pushed out. If we don't make that movement a natural flow, if we don't create the systems that allow for this to be a natural flow, then it turns into a very unnatural river of tension."

- Colette Pichon Battle in conversation with Unbound Philanthropy

with environmental disaster as Hurricane Katrina was responsible for between 7 and 8 million gallons of oil spilled throughout the impacted region. Finally, Hurricane Katrina remains the costliest hurricane in U.S. history at $125 billion ($205 billion in 2025 dollars, accounting for inflation).

Why was the storm so devastating? **Hurricane Katrina was both a climate disaster and a political disaster.** The storm itself intensified quickly because of the warm ocean waters. The climate crisis drives warming ocean temperatures, which globally drive rising sea levels and more extreme weather including stronger hurricanes. Katrina wasn't only a "natural" disaster. The many, intersecting crises Hurricane Katrina caused **were compounded by extractive economies in the Gulf South.** Katrina arrived in a region rampant with poverty-wage labor, anti-union policies, policing systems that target and incarcerate Black communities, and toxic industries that make people and workers sick, while eroding the natural wetlands and barriers that would normally slow down tidal surges, winds, and floods. **Generations of extraction and exploitation in the Gulf South created inequities that were *revealed and made worse* by the storm.**

But the story of Katrina cannot be one of inequity or loss alone. **Hurricane Katrina catalyzed a movement.** It is a story grounded in power. In its aftermath, Gulf South communities gathered to build on generations of Southern resistance struggle and charter their own climate solutions. Everyday people became community leaders working toward collective survival and thriving in the places they call home.

The world can continue to learn from Hurricane Katrina frontline solutions today. We ground in Hurricane Katrina's impact not only because it is the story at the heart of Taproot Earth's own journey, but because there are critical lessons that we can learn from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina on communities. **Out of Katrina, we know that the standards for climate migration are rooted in the Right to Remain, the Right to Migrate, and the Right to Return.** These have implications for all of us—no matter where we call home. The more we set these standard and practice systems that allow for these rights, the better prepared we will be for the next climate disaster.

Defining climate migration & a note on language:

Climate migration, also referred to as climate-induced migration, is not a term of art and may refer to a wide variety of circumstances in which climate change contributes to the movement of people. For example, climate change may displace people slowly:through sea level rise, desertification, or depletion of local resources. It may displace people suddenly:through moments of acute disaster like hurricanes, monsoons, or forest fires. Relocation from a climate disaster may be temporary or it may be permanent. Climate migration may be voluntary, where people choose to leave before a situation gets too difficult. However, more often it is involuntary or forced. Most climate migration is internal, meaning people stay within the borders of their own nation.[1] Sometimes climate migration is cross-border. And for some smallisland states, low-lying communities, and other vulnerable places, climate migration via planned relocation may become necessary. In this report, the term "climate migration" refers broadly to the movement of people because of climate change—whether gradual or sudden, voluntary or involuntary, temporary or permanent. The term "internally displaced person," in contrast, is a term of art that refers to someone who has been forced to move and has not crossed an international border.[2]

As an additional note on language, the term "climate refugee" is sometimes used to refer to a person who has migrated cross-border because of climate change. "Climate refugee" is not a term of art. Further, the term is often criticized as othering those who have been forced to migrate involuntarily for their own survival.[3] Additionally, it should be noted that migration is often multi-faceted and caused by intersecting causes of migration,including economic, political and climatological causes. This report therefore asserts that just as climate change must be understood more expansively than parts per million carbon dioxide, "climate migration" must be understood as expansively and with as much intersectionality as possible.

As a final note on language, this paper asserts that all advocates working on climate migration will benefit from a nuanced understanding and intentional approach to current dominant narratives about climate migration. While language that underscores the severity and urgency of climate migration may help communicate the need for immediate and large-scale action, we must resist anti-immigrant propaganda and instead be clear that migration is a climate solution. A climate justice framework must challenge this anti-immigrant, racist, and nationalist logic and make the case that movement is not a threat.

1. Madison Shaff, International Law and Climate Displacement: Why A Climate Justice Approach Is Needed, 52 Tex. Envtl. L.J. 59, 65–66 (2022)

2. The Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons developed "Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement" which defines an Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) as "persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized border." See ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-internally-displaced-persons/international-standards.

3. More to say about how the term "climate refugee" was used to displaced Black people after Katrina undermining the citizenship of and further marginalizing displaced people.

THE RIGHT TO REMAIN

In a just world, everyone would be able to stay rooted in the places where they live. No one should be forced to move due to the failure of elected leaders, negligence of extractive companies, or disinvestments in robust public programs. During and after Hurricane Katrina, poor and Black people living on high-ground in publicly supported housing were forced to leave in a number of ways, including through the wholesale demolition of still-viable public housing units and repressive regulation of public housing residents' behavior. In some instances during and immediately after the storm, police removed people from their homes by force even though they had adequate supplies to remain.

In this situation—and many others globally—people were forced to leave. Whether the cause is droughts, contamination of water and land due to extractive industries, violence and war over resources (water, energy, land), catastrophic flooding and storms, wildfires and other situations that make a place unlivable, people may not always be able to remain.

However, many of these situations are avoidable. If we created more climate-just policies; advanced collective governance rooted in liberation not oppression; and actually invested in the people, places, and in the frontline solutions to the climate crisis, the conditions to remain would be more possible.

The Right to Remain is grounded in the principle that people have self-determination, power, and resources to remain on their lands and in their communities. While these elements require a level of local context and political nuance that this report does not address, it is clear that without these elements, it is impossible to create the standards and conditions necessary to remain.

“People ask me: If you know your land is going to go, why are you still fighting?”

“We’re going down swinging if we’re going.””

- Colette Pichon Battle in conversation with Krista Tippett, On Being

Out of Hurricane Katrina, we have learned that the Right to Remain includes the principles of:

Self-Determination and Agency: People have a natural right of self-determination, including the Right to Remain. This requires agency, the practice and capacity to make decisions that allow one to survive and thrive. Communities have deep roots in the land and their culture and the act of leaving can be a scary proposition. Self-determination and agency is about having the ability to declare liberation and stand in one’s own power. Malik Rahim, founder of the Common Ground Collective, speaks about holding the high ground, taking responsibility for your community and defending against threats that seek to erase your presence. The choice to leave or remain should always come from the community and not an outside presence or force.

Accountability: When frontline communities practice self-determination and agency to protect their lands and culture, the conditions emerge to root in accountable systems grounded in Black and Indigenous Liberation. This practice takes many forms. As one example of where more accountability is needed, consider how financial resources are distributed during disasters. Money often flows to extractive industries that have caused the problems. After Hurricane Katrina, the Federal Government granted more than $100 billion of public money toward Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama via the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Department of Defense (DOD), Community Development Block Grants (CDBG), and other agencies. At the same time, billions of these dollars went tax-exempt to extractive industries including fossil fuel companies. Notably the Marathon Refinery and Lake Charles Petroleum Coke Gasification Project received $1 billion each. As a model of a possible alternative, during the 10th commemoration of Hurricane Katrina and 5th anniversary of the BP oil drilling disaster, a community initiative called Gulf South Rising built its own accountable and liberated community-governed approach for resources flowing to the region called a “Community Controlled Fund.” This set the pathway for the GS4GND Community Controlled Fund (CCF) that moved $15 million to the region. These types of models shed light on the type of resourcing that supports community power and agency.



Adaptation Requires Moving Beyond Borders and Divisions

Advancing the human Right to Remain requires adaptation beyond borders and political divisions. Hurricane Katrina, like many other storms after (such as Rita, Ida, and Helene) have obliterated borders. Hurricane Katrina impacted Black, white, wealthy and poor residents from Mobile Alabama to Houma, Louisiana.

However, solutions and responses are often limited based on state policy and power dynamics, or national agencies out of touch with the community, limiting the ability to think beyond the line on a map. Yet, communities do this all the time. In fact, after Katrina, early work by partners from the Moving Forward Gulf Coast (later Gulf Coast Center for Law & Policy), Deep South Leaders Network, and Project South and Southern Movement Assembly broke ground by working across state borders at a regional level to build the capacity to adapt and advance self-determination. To communities, this is knowing your neighbors. To nature, this is moving along natural boundaries.

Natural responses are one step. Systemic responses are another. Since Hurricane Katrina, we have seen who has the resources, systems, and structures to adapt and who remains abandoned or ignored. After Katrina, communities of people who had homeowners insurance were able to adapt and reinforce their housing for the next storm, while those without insurance lacked the resources to do the same, or lost their homes altogether. Some people are losing access to sacred sites and burial grounds at the expense of redevelopment or assumptions that the land is not worth saving. These realities tie more deeply to a history that whiter and wealthier communities had access to and control of title, loans, and property assessments, while many multi-generational Black, Indigenous, and poorer communities do not or have been shut out.

Lessons from Katrina remind us that asserting the Right to Remain: self-determination, accountability, and adaptability beyond borders is critical. Yet, this requires work, cooperation, and trust among people. Even if the conditions to support the Right to Remain are met, people still have a choice to migrate if that will better allow them to survive and thrive.

What is Adaptation?

Adaptation is the act of making adjustments to prepare for actual or expected impacts of the climate crisis. Adaptation can look like whole home repairs, sea walls, sponge parks, stormwater systems, restoring wetland ecosystems, or advancement of regenerative farming practices to better maintain soil for food. Adaptation also means building the capacity to advance governance in a changing political, economic, or climate context. Adaptation is critical for the Right to Remain because it specifically addresses the conditions that allow people to live on their land or not.

THE RIGHT TO MIGRATE

"Migration is a solution because it allows people to maintain and survive in their cultures for generations to come."
- Anthony Giancatarino, Strategy Partner, Taproot Earth

Both international and domestic climate migrants need more robust protections. Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) explicitly outlines the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state, and the right to leave and return to one's own country. Taproot Earth affirms the human Right to Migrate as a necessary step for survival and free movement beyond political borders.

While there has been a growing discussion on legal protections for cross-border climate migrants, Hurricane Katrina demonstrates the need to make sure internal climate migrants can access safety as well. Internal **migration often relies on strong social networks, access to resources, and supportive policies and systems. If these networks are weakened, resources unavailable, or current policies discriminatory, migration can be disastrous.**

More than 1.5 million people were displaced during Katrina, traveling to all 50 states. While finding relatives or friends can be grounding, migration often means leaving behind one culture or community for a new and possibly unfamiliar one. Going from Biloxi, Mississippi to Boston, Massachusetts can create both a shock and change that requires significant personal adjustment–a process often overlooked for those reeling after a climate disaster. In other situations, the lack of financial or material resources made traveling or finding places to settle difficult. Today the majority of the Katrina diaspora is settled in Atlanta, Houston, Dallas. They have had to recreate new communities or spaces all together, some needing to rebuild the years of social infrastructure and support that existed before Katrina.

The lack of strong policies or structures that embrace migration and displaced people contributed to deeper criminalization of Black climate migrants after the storm. Hurricane Katrina brought about the loss of life, increased prison population, and a deep loss of years in education and the psychological health and wellbeing of youth. It is easy to see how the lack of protections—nor legal definition of climate migrants—can create challenges for the health and wellbeing of whole communities.

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Out of Hurricane Katrina, we have learned that the Right to Migrate includes the principles of:

Cooperation and Solidarity: Chief Brenda Dardar Robichaux spoke about the work after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita to provide internally displaced people with care and dignity that required a level of cooperation among tribal leaders, local officials, and volunteers. Actions of solidarity included repurposing buildings to provide clothing and food, as well as opening up homes to provide shelter. These actions created a level of dignity for people who had lost everything and were forced to leave. These models of solidarity are common across the globe. For example, communities of Spinn Time and Sant'egidio in Rome provide critical services, visa support, and dignity for climate migrants who sacrificed everything to survive.

Moving with Abundance & Beyond Borders: The lack of legal protections and legal definitions for climate migrants threatens the wellbeing and safety of everyone who may one day be displaced by extreme weather. The lack of protections, combined with the loss of critical documents, can mean the loss of life. Hurricane Katrina destroyed IDs, paperwork, licenses, titles, and other documentation important for migration. The lack of access to these resources can make moving across a border impossible. Loss of an ID should not mean losing the ability to live. This reinforces a scarcity mindset, a false narrative that tells us without this resource you cannot be received, or that there is only enough for a few people, or that there is only one way forward. These mindsets limit our innate ability and creativity. Moving with abundance fosters innovation to allow for humane passage. For example, border officials in the Caribbean found other ways to check people's identities and allow them to travel when their documents were destroyed in the 2017 Atlantic Hurricane Season. Prioritizing access to safety makes for more humane disaster recovery. Proposals to create a legal definition of climate migration, advancing climate visas, and granting those displaced by climate change protected status are all important solutions in the short-term.

However, border stops cannot be a reason people cannot survive. The longer-term solution must reject current political borders in favor of more natural systems. Deeper research, work, and efforts are needed to abundantly reimagine and cultivate a practice that goes beyond borders while providing health, security, and overall wellbeing of the common good.

Scarcity and borders continue to wall off the natural and human Right to Migrate. Community solutions remind us how to move with abundance and cooperation to envision a better way to migrate. And after migration, we know that many people still desire to return home.

THE RIGHT TO RETURN

The Right to Return acknowledges that people have a deep and sacred connection to place. It is not just about returning to a house, it is returning to a home. It is not just about returning to a town, it is about returning to a community. It is not just about returning to a geography, it is about returning to and quite often reclaiming a culture. Too often, people are denied the Right to Return. Sometimes it is not possible to return due to loss of land due to sea level rise, or because a place is simply unsafe or unlivable. But in many other situations the opportunity to rebuild and return is possible after a climate disaster, so long as our policies and systems allow for it. In the years since Katrina, nearly 40% of people did not return to their communities.

Hurricane Katrina showed who had the Right to Return and who did not. The historic dismantling of public educational systems, the destruction of public housing, the closing of Charity Hospital, and the lack of equitable payouts to support rebuilding homes drew a stark line along race and class. Furthermore, the deep degradation and pollution of water and land before and after Katrina, compounded by the BP oil drilling disaster five years later, continued to impede the ability for people to return to safe and healthy homes or livable economies. Katrina laid bare that Black, Indigenous, and poor people often have extra burdens limiting their ability to return.

This systemic denial of the Right to Return can produce a collective loss in culture. Sometimes cultures and ideas can be protected through migration. Yet when people and communities are denied their ability to return home, cultures can dissipate. The Right to Return focuses on a community's self-determination and right to both return to their lands and reclaim their culture.

Lessons from Katrina show that the Right to Return includes principles of:

Reclaiming Power and Culture: Returning includes reclaiming cultural autonomy, including artifacts, stories, and languages. Whether people return or remain diasporic, cultural teachings, stories, languages, and artifacts must be governed by the peoples who created them. The storms, gentrification, and loss of whole institutions threatened generations of cultural knowledge and practice after Katrina. Yet, people continued to fight and resist this loss. For example, the Mardis Gras Indians have worked to ensure that culture not only can survive, but thrive in the aftermath of the storm.

Repairing and Restoring the Land: Repair means healing the land. In the recovery after Katrina, communities used sunflowers and natural resources to soak up heavy contaminants to both repair the land, while avoiding more poison with chemical remediation. For people of Appalachia to return to the hills and hollers of North Carolina, the devastating impacts of Hurricane Helene and the mining industry must be healed. For Palestinians to return to their ancestral lands under their international legal rights, the land must be remediated of contaminants. For people to return to a right relationship with their homeplaces, the land must be equally restored on an ecological level.

Restoring means rebalancing our relationships with the earth. In Katrina, and subsequent disasters, storm surges are more dangerous because wetlands have been lost to rising seas and extraction for oil and gas. We are replacing a balanced relationship with our natural boundaries and ecosystems for profit. When people return, it is an opportunity to restore these relationships to the land for a more sustainable present and future.

Re-awakening and Repairing the Spirit: Beyond the infrastructure, the Right to Return must also heal the spirit of those returning, which requires both restoration and transformation. Many communities have already led the way toward healing. For example, after Katrina, Black Catholics fought for years to save St. Augustine, the first free-Black Catholic church in the United States, from closure. Its efforts to hold a place of return and resistance can be viewed as part of spiritual reawakening. During the 10th commemoration of Katrina, communities returned to Congo Square—a historic and sacred space for Black people for more than 500 years—to learn, build community, and honor the sacrifices of loss and death integrating Indigenous healing practices to repair the spirit. Return is a deeply spiritual and sacred practice, no matter the faith tradition or community culture. The ability to remain, migrate, and return requires a level of faith and belief in the collective and common good.

For 20 years, the Katrina diaspora has continued to fight for the Right to Return and step into the generations of love and community that still remain present in the soil, water, and trees.

CONCLUSION

Taproot Earth moves with a growing number of people around the world who understand **self-determined migration, along with the Right to Remain, Migrate, and Return, is part of a global climate reparations framework.** We believe in the right of climate-displaced people to agency—that is, community control over decisions regarding if, when, and how to migrate. Taproot Earth is continuing this work in the coming months through several convenings and alternative community models of climate solutions.

Taproot Earth always looks to the Liberation Horizon: the time where all peoples can live, rest, and thrive in the places they know and love. We do not stop at incremental climate action, but imagine a world completely transformed for Black Liberation and Indigenous Sovereignty.


Follow the frontlines.
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