

KATRINA 20: REMEMBER AND RESIST

NOVEMBER 2026

TAPROOT EARTH



INTRODUCTION

Photo (above): Major Joe Womack speaking at a Monthly Katrina 20 (K20) Local Planning Committee meeting held in the historic neighborhood of Africatown in Mobile, Alabama on June 21 2025.

Memory as resistance. August 29, 2025 marked 20 years since Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf South region of the United States. This powerful storm—at the time, the largest hurricane to hit the U.S. mainland—claimed more than 2,000 lives and is still today ranked as the costliest hurricane in U.S. history. Hurricane Katrina confirmed a global crisis at the intersection of a rapidly shifting climate and the deep impacts of structural inequality. But, more than anything, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina revealed the spirit of resistance that lives in the bloodlines of communities in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama.

Climate change means extreme weather. Even with the eye of the storm hundreds of miles away, massive winds and flooding impacted fishing communities and historic neighborhoods in Alabama. During Hurricane Katrina, every county in Mississippi was declared a disaster area and whole neighborhoods were washed into the Gulf of Mexico by ocean tidal surge turned floodwater. Across Louisiana, the almost 30-foot tidal surge destroyed homes and flooded communities across several parishes. 53 levee breaches left 80 percent of the city of New Orleans underwater for weeks.

While the storm destroyed so much of the physical and social infrastructure of the region, it activated and strengthened the spirits of communities across the Gulf South, sparking a movement that continues to this day. The Gulf Coast Center for Law & Policy, Taproot Earth's predecessor organization, was born in the aftermath of Katrina with a mission to advance equitable climate disaster recovery and movement-building across the Gulf South. Connected to the justice movements that have come out of Gulf South organizing, Taproot Earth advances climate justice through Black Liberation and Indigenous Sovereignty with a vision for communities around the world to live, rest, and thrive in the places we love and call home.

Hurricane Katrina prompted the largest climate migration event in U.S. history. It is important to understand that many of the survivors of Hurricane Katrina are still not physically present in the Gulf South. Hurricane Katrina prompted one of the largest U.S. migrations of people since the Dust Bowl—some were forced to flee the immediate impact of the storm while others left in the prolonged aftermath and rebuilding phase.

Some estimate that up to 80 percent of New Orleans residents evacuated before the storm. Given the extreme damage to homes and infrastructure across the region, the pathway back home was difficult, or impossible, for many. Twenty years later, the New Orleans population has yet to recover to 2005 levels. More than 1.5 million Hurricane Katrina survivors evacuated to all 50 states. As of 2015, the Center for American Progress reported that 40 percent of the 1.5 million evacuees—600,000 people—had not returned home.

In 2025, twenty years later, Taproot Earth invited all people displaced by the 2005 storm to be part of more than a dozen community conversations, with a goal of advancing the human right to return home.

While climate migration is often framed in the United States as an issue about international borders, Taproot Earth connected the dots between the millions of people displaced by Hurricane Katrina and global migration based on extreme weather impacts. With the increase of extreme weather, the right to remain, the right to migrate, and the right to return must be better understood as climate solutions. As part of the Katrina 20 Commemoration, Taproot Earth hosted the 2025 Monarch Forum, a series of talks, panels, and cultural performances that looked at Hurricane Katrina in the context of the global climate crisis and human rights struggle. The intention was to join the Gulf South and Global South to reclaim traditions, repair broken systems, and renew our spirits.



Photo: (right) Big Chief Shaka Zulu and Brother Tyrone Henry join local drummers to share music at the Mississippi River Returning of the Waters Ritual, part of the official K20 Week of Action in New Orleans, Louisiana.



Photos: (above) Anthony Giancatarino with special guests, including Bette Billiot, Toi Carter, Dr. Angela Chalk, Scott Eustis, Chenier "Klie" Kliebert, Sharon Lavigne, Gregory N. Swafford, Darrilyn Turner, and Al Gore, at the Katrina 20: Faith, Climate & Justice organized by the Center for Earth Ethics

BUILDING COLLECTIVE POWER WITH THE CLIMATE FRONTLINES

While hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico are part of a seasonal reality, the unprecedented size and strength of Hurricane Katrina helped to affirm that climate change is the context wherein traditional weather patterns shift to more extreme weather. Extreme weather alone is not what makes a disaster. Disaster is when communities are built on discriminatory policies and structural inequity—and then have to survive a flood or extreme heat. The disaster occurs in the lack of accountability by the same industries advancing the climate crisis and poisoning a region's natural resources needed for survival in the aftermath of a storm or wildfire. When social and structural conditions make disaster more likely, communities—like those impacted by Hurricane Katrina—must cross political, racial and economic lines to align a vision for a better future.

The opportunity in organizing after a climate disaster is to root collective action in common interests and basic human rights. The most important element of community organizing with the climate frontlines and disaster survivors is culture rooted in repair and resistance.





Photos: (left) Taproot Earth facilitates the Just Transition Lawyering Network (JTLN+ Southern Power Fund) Fortify Clinic in Gulfport, Mississippi. (right) Anthony Giancatarino and Colette Pichon Battle speak at the 2025 Monarch Forum in New Orleans, Louisiana.

TAPROOT EARTH: FACILITATOR & CONVENOR

To commemorate 20 years since Hurricane Katrina, Taproot Earth facilitated 12 months of community meetings across three states. Convening more than 300 leaders from the region with a shared goal advancing collective power, Taproot Earth advanced a three-pronged approach to (1) anchor solidarity, (2) grow frontline power, and (3) shift the Katrina 20 narrative from victimhood towards solution-building.

- **Anchor** international solidarity by linking the Gulf South and Appalachia (the U.S. energy regions) to the Global South through shared stories and radical kinship.
- **Grow** power at the climate frontlines in the Gulf South by facilitating a collective process of remembrance and investing in community leadership.
- **Shift** the narrative toward repair, and reframe frontline climate solutions.

Members of the Taproot Earth krewe convened the Katrina 20 Local Planning Committee (K20 Local Planning Committee) at local, trusted, and accessible community spaces tied to a local history, Black Liberation and collective power. Monthly agendas were designed to celebrate cultural traditions of the region and engage collective decision-making. The regional facilitation team was made up of Katrina survivors with lived experience and a deep understanding of why this 20-year commemoration and continued power-building was important.

FACILITATING FOR POWER

Taproot Earth set out to facilitate a community process of narrative-building, using long-term relationships, community assets, and local expertise to develop a week-long celebration of the lives lost and the bloodlines that survived. Taproot Earth understood that the story of Hurricane Katrina and the recovery processes that

followed must be told by the people most impacted. The stories of surviving Hurricane Katrina belong to the survivors and communities of the region alone. As participants in the Katrina 20 Local Planning Committee, the people of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama defined their own narrative of the storm and the recovery process that followed.

Building durable power and meaningful community takes time and intention. The 12-month collective planning process was rooted in years of regional work and relationship-building. Nearly two decades of relationship-building and deep trust across the region was catalyzed to bring together community members from across the three most affected states (Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama) to participate in defining their own narrative and their own events for the 20th commemoration of Hurricane Katrina—one of the first climate disasters in U.S history.

The first community meeting was held during the commemoration of Katrina 19 (K19) on August 29, 2024. This catalyzed the first of monthly local community meetings, which built out the Katrina 20 Local Planning Committee (K20 Committee). The K19 Commemoration, held at the Ashe Cultural Arts Center's Powerhouse Theater in New Orleans, first honored the memory of leaders who began the journey but had transitioned (passed away) before commemorating 19 years of recovery. Posthumous honor went to leaders including: Chokwe Lamumba, John O'Neal, Elsie Burkhalter, Fr. Jerome LeDoux, Sharon Hanshaw, Bill Rousselle, Keith Medley, and Pam Dashiel. With the traditions of brass band and bounce music, participants thanked leaders like: Mary Joseph, Dr. Beverly Wright, Diem Nguyen, Malik Rahim, Norris Henderson, Monique Harden, Hiroko Kusuda, Dr. Kimberley Richards, Luz Molina, Carole Bebelle, Ron Chisom, Bill Quigley, Gina Womack, Reverend Tyronne Edwards, Lieutenant General Russel Honoré (Ret.).

DESIGNING FOR INCLUSION

In addition to meeting facilitation, Taproot Earth managed the logistics of the K20 Committee monthly meetings, which rotated across three states. While the community made the collective decision to offer virtual access to the monthly meetings, in-person meetings were held in spaces with strong cultural and communal ties to frontline communities, including the Ashe Cultural Arts Center (New Orleans, LA); the Main Branch of the Terrebonne Parish Library (Houma, LA); McKinley High School (Baton Rouge, LA); and the Robert Hope Community Center (Mobile, AL); Steps Coalition (Gulfport, Mississippi).

To support the participation of the Vietnamese and Spanish-speaking populations that were instrumental in the recovery of the region, language justice emerged as a main element of inclusive design and coordination each month. Hot southern breakfast was provided by local caterers as part of a meeting design rooted in care, cultural awareness, and sustainability. Over the 12 months of meetings, more than 40 hours of local childcare were provided to allow parents to attend and be fully present at Saturday morning meetings. Local transportation companies were contracted to provide accessible transportation to meetings located across the Gulf South.

Twelve monthly meetings, designed to be accessible and honorable, resulted in the investment of more than $1 million in local businesses, as well as more than 2,000 staff hours in organizing, logistics, and on-site support.

K20 Committee members made significant contributions by setting community agreements to advance shared governance and practiced democracy using a consensus-based decision-making process to manage shared resources, establish standards of safety, and design the elements of the Katrina 20 Week of Action.



Photo: (above) Taproot Earth facilitates the K20 Monthly Local Planning Committee Meeting at the Ashé Cultural Arts Center in New Orleans.

USING FRONTLINE PURPOSE BUILD REGIONAL POWER

The K20 Local Planning Committee developed a logo and slogan for the commemoration. #WeAreTheStorm was the slogan established and repeated at each meeting, firmly rejecting the victimization narratives placed on the region over the years and instead rooting in collective power.

Katrina 20 Solidarity Statement. Through their collective decision-making process, the K20 Local Planning Committee drafted and circulated the K20 Solidarity Statement, which garnered signatures from more than 150 organizations and formations from across the United States. The K20 Solidarity Statement was at the foundation of the K20 People's Movement Assembly, held during the Katrina 20 Week of Action (anchored by Project South, Alternate ROOTS, Highlander Research and Education Center, Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective, Blueprint NC, and the Jubilee Community Center) in alignment with the K20

COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS OR THE K20 LOCAL PLANNING COMMITTEE

- **Move with mutual respect.**
- **Be inclusive.**
- **Be truthful, transparent, and willing to engage with open discussions.**
- **Prioritize the voices of those who experienced Hurricane Katrina.**
- **Follow the frontlines and local organizations.**
- **Build trust through collaboration and shared decision-making.**
- **Decisions are made by consensus.**
- **Build long-term power.**

Local Planning Committee. The Assembly yielded a Synthesis Report and Organizing Handbook for movement work for the broader justice movement.

Katrina 20 Community Controlled Fund. Early on, the K20 Committee created a community-controlled fund to resource the K20 commemoration. Ultimately, with the support of Taproot Earth and the Finance & Fundraising Work Group, the Committee raised more than $1 million —through large and small donations— with $750,000 left to invest in the community after financing fees.

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY CONTROLLED FUND?

Community-Controlled Fund: A community-controlled fund is a method refined by Gulf Coast Center for Law & Policy through their work anchoring the 2015 Gulf South Rising organizing project. For more than 10 years, the design of this type of democratic distribution of funds to the frontlines has been refined and repeated in anticipation of support for disaster recovery or community organizing. The design pools resources into a collective fund where the community members hold the ultimate deciding power over how those funds are governed and dispersed. A community-controlled fund is a replicable model for movements of self-governance, collective stewardship, and democracy. In this model, communities most impacted by the climate crisis lead in directing resources and shaping solutions that safeguard their futures.



Photo: (right) the Monthly K20 Local Planning Committee meeting held in Africatown in Mobile, Alabama on June 21, 2025



Photos: (above) K20 Impact Ride on Bayou Bourg,

KATRINA 20 REGIONAL WEEK OF ACTION

The K20 Committee decided to hold the Katrina 20 Week of Action, which spanned from Sunday, August 24 to Sunday, August 31, 2025 with more than 100 events across the Gulf states of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. The Committee reviewed a number of community session and vendor proposals and came up with a robust offering of commemorative performances, healing circles, exhibits, and panels, with an emphasis on supporting Black- and Indigenous-owned businesses. The K20 Week of Action organized more than 65 organizations from across the country, and all events were free and open to the public, with many of them offering free food to the community. These events created space for the community to tell its own story of resistance and power. The nearly 300 members of the K20 Local Planning Committee offered their commitment to the region and to each other. Committee members shared their stories, leadership, and wisdom from the storm's aftermath.

They practiced self-determination and collective decision-making 20 years later. All of these contributions represent the indefatigable spirit of community leadership—when voices raise together to determine their own collective future.

Building Trust through Shared Work. Based on their interests and talents, community members chose between six work teams that made up the Katrina 20 Local Planning Committee each charged with completing shared tasks, namely: 1) Finance & Fundraising, 2) Communications & Media, 3) Advocacy & Electeds, 4) Creative & Culture, 5) Operations & Volunteers, and 6) Community Outreach.

These work groups met outside of monthly meetings and brought recommendations back to the full K20 Local Planning Committee. Recommendations were brought to the monthly meetings where participants decided whether to accept, modify, or reject. In the end, Taproot Earth co-facilitated more than 70 public planning meetings across the Gulf South leading up to the commemoration of Katrina 20.





Photos: (left) Councilman Freddie King, III reads the City's proclamation to Malik Rahim in front of an audience. (right) Malik Rahim at the Monarch Forum.

In September of 2025, after the K20 Week of Action had concluded, Taproot Earth held a meeting on the Mississippi Coast as a debrief and to honor the work of the Committee members and to formally pass the facilitation baton on to emerging local leadership. Relationships and shared work continue today.

Acknowledge & Repair. Additionally, the K20 Local Planning Committee facilitated the City of New Orleans' recognition of Baba Malik Rahim, Black Panther and co-founder of the Common Ground Collective. In the immediate aftermath of Katrina, Baba Malik led on-the-ground rescue and relief efforts, including the creation of a health clinic and a legal clinic to respond to urgent needs. His efforts were often met with conflict with authorities and resulted in the loss of life of an organizer who worked with Malik. The 2025 recognition of Baba Malik and the Common Ground Collective was an action of repair collectively demanded by the K20 Committee. Official proclamation for Baba Malik was presented on August 7, by New Orleans City Councilman, Freddie King, III.





Photos: (left) Taproot Earth's billboard campaign spread the message of climate migration solidarity across the Interstate-10 corridor from Florida to Texas. (right) Appalachian leader, Shortette Ammons delivers remarks at the 2025 Monarch Forum in New Orleans, Louisiana.

ROOTING IN POWER & PLACE: TAPROOT EARTH IN THE KATRINA 20 WEEK OF ACTION

To advance these conversations, Taproot Earth held four gatherings as part of K20 Week of Action: the 2025 Monarch Forum, the Mississippi River Sacred Waters Ceremony, Just Transition Lawyering Network Fortify Clinic, and the Mississippi Coast Katrina 20 Town Hall. Taproot Earth co-anchored a panel on labor in the climate movement, participated in a session with former Vice President Al Gore, and organized churches across the globe to participate in the interfaith sunrise service on the morning of K20.

In addition to facilitating the community's work to define its own K20 story or recovery, Taproot Earth also curated a conversation about Katrina as a story of climate migration, advancing migration as a nature-based climate solution instead of a source of fear-based reactions. During the 20-year commemoration, Taproot Earth's 2025 Monarch Forum uplifted perspectives and stories about communities' right to remain by investing in critical infrastructure to adapt to change; right to migrate to carry on culture and life in new places when your current home is not possible; and right to return after displacement and reclaim culture, land, and love.

Over two days at the Mahalia Jackson Theater in New Orleans, the **Monarch Forum** brought together thinkers and luminaries from across the globe to discuss the meaning of migration and diaspora and what movement means in the context of the climate crisis. Taking inspiration from the monarch butterfly, which travels across borders to survive and maintain its existence, the 2025 Monarch Forum celebrated the resistance of climate migrants and called for the abolition of political borders.

The K20 Sacred Waters Ceremony, held on the banks of the Mississippi River, celebrated the cultural and spiritual significance of the river water in relationship with frontline communities of the Gulf South. The Climate & Labor Panel—in partnership with the Labor Network for Sustainability, Just Transition Alliance, and Step Up Coalition—was a powerful and critical conversation with union members, workers, and allies on disaster capitalism and worker power. The JTLN Fortify Clinic gathered organizations across several formations to share strategies to protect and strengthen organizational infrastructure. Finally, on August 28, the eve of K20, Taproot Earth participated in Katrina 20: Faith, Climate and Justice, a forum put together by Green Faith USA and the Center for Earth Ethics. Taproot Earth's Strategy Partner Anthony Giancatarino, joined the forum featuring Al Gore, Sharon Lavigne, and others to discuss the moral and spiritual dimensions of the climate crisis through a Gulf South lens.

That evening, the Mississippi Coast Katrina Town Hall in Gulfport was moderated by Taproot Earth's Vision & Initiatives Partner, Colette Pichon Battle, Esq., who spoke with organizer and Turkey Creek native Derrick Evans; Gulf Coast icon, resident and radio host, Rip Daniels; and Mississippi native and President and CEO of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Derrick Johnson. The following morning, August 29, 2025, Colette spoke at the Steps Coalition Interfaith Sunrise service in Waveland, Mississippi, where the eye of the storm made landfall 20 years earlier.

Taproot also invited allies across the world to host the Katrina 20 Impact Ride in solidarity with those in the Gulf South. The Impact Ride was a national call to move—walk, bike, paddle or roll—in solidarity with impacted communities. These rides invited people from all over the country to ride, kayak, run, or walk seven miles.

This distance was calculated in recognition of the 144-square mile-wide impact zone of Katrina, divided by 20 years. Over the Week of Action, more than 100 communities took part by riding, walking, paddling, breathing, or more in their communities across the United States, Canada, and France.

Communicating Power & Repair

To reach the Katrina diaspora where they were, Taproot Earth sponsored billboards celebrating climate migration and the joy of survivors coming home along the Interstate-10 corridor in the Gulf South, along which more than 100,000 vehicles travel per day. Taproot Earth krewe members, Faye Matthews, Esq. and Andrei Greenwood wrote an op-ed in Resilience.org telling their personal stories of evacuation and the importance of migration in a world with increasing climate disasters.

Finally, Taproot Earth relaunched its Climate on Tap podcast, with a three-episode series that looked back at Hurricane Katrina as a climate migration event. The first episode focused on the right to remain with Baba Malik Rahim (Common Ground Collective); the second episode featured Chief Brenda Dardar Robichaux (former Principal Chief of the Houma Nation) to grapple with the right to migrate; and the final episode featured Colette Pichon Battle, Esq. to discuss the right to return.



Photo: (above) Community gathers at the Mississippi Waters Ritual, part of the official K20 Week of Action in New Orleans, Louisiana.

K20 AND BEYOND

The climate justice fight did not begin and certainly did not end in 2005. However, Hurricane Katrina (and every extreme weather event since) has strengthened the bonds between the Gulf South, Appalachia, and the Global South communities by showing that solidarity is survival, spirit is power, and community is our future, no matter where you are.

In the contexts of an accelerating climate crisis and rising authoritarianism globally, Taproot Earth continues to organize, facilitate, and invest in the shared liberation of the global climate frontlines. The design, facilitation and support of the Katrina 20 planning process yielded the K20 Week of Action, and proved that the frontlines are ready to lead and build collective power inside of a shifting global climate reality.

The Katrina 20 planning and implementation process shows how frontline communities, working from self-determination and collective decision-making, can help build a world where we can all live, rest, and thrive in the places we love.

At Taproot Earth, #WeChooseNow to plant the seeds and water the roots of community organizing to address the climate crisis. We choose now to practice self-determination and collective decision-making toward our shared liberation.

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