



Legacies: Racism and Resistance in New Orleans Before and After Katrina

ANTI-RACIST SOLIDARITY: SOME PERSPECTIVES AND TOOLS (primarily for white activists)

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Striving for Solidarity: Lessons in Anti-Racism Organizing

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Striving for Solidarity:

Lessons in Anti-Racism Organizing

from the Anti-Racist Working Group of Common Ground

Written by current and former members of the Anti-Racist Working Group, Summer 2007

We are only part way through this battle, so we cannot yet tell how Katrina will be remembered decades from now. But it currently holds fast in media images, memories, and popular imagination as a time of levee failures, a time of flooding. However, post-Katrina New Orleans saw many other floods, equally powerful and disruptive: the Diaspora of thousands of families and communities forcibly scattered to all areas of the country; the onrush of media, developers, military and police, and corporate contractors, all intent on pursuing further profit and increasing oppression; the influx of volunteers, manual laborers, relief organizations, and humanitarian aid workers, guided by the desire to help with the rebuilding of a city.

Most all of us in the Anti-Racist Working Group (hereinafter the ARWG) entered New Orleans as a part of this latter flood, specifically through the vehicle of Common Ground, one of many relief organizations that started up immediately after the levees broke. Katrina was the source of a lot of sudden tragedy, but it's important to note that structural racism had been slowly devastating Black New Orleans for a long time before. It's also important to contextualize Common Ground as an organization that came into being at a time when local organizations were fractured and flood-damaged, with community, staff and members scattered.

Since the hurricane struck on August 29, 2005, volunteers in the city have had both positive and negative impacts on the struggle for a just rebuilding in New Orleans. Immediately after the flood was a time of intense crisis— hundreds of thousands of residents were displaced, and federal, state and city governments provided little to no assistance in the rebuilding effort of working class and Black and Vietnamese neighborhoods. Volunteers from across the United States helped gut out thousands of homes, churches, and community centers, which was a vital step in the rebuilding process. Volunteers tarped roofs, rebuilt houses, staffed distribution centers, provided medical care, collected data, and provided all sorts of support work for local organizations struggling on the ground to rebuild their communities. This work has been incredibly important in the struggle for the right of return for all New Orleanians.

However, the influx of out-of-town volunteers, particularly white volunteers, has also created new problems for local organizers. Since we as white people bring with us the racism that society teaches us, the social justice work that we do will reflect that racism within us unless we are constantly learning to recognize and challenge it. Since shortly after the storm, local organizers in New Orleans, including many well-respected local organizers of color, recognized that unless white folks in particular, but also all volunteers from out of town, grappled with our privileges and came to an understanding of how the struggle in New Orleans impacts and relates to the struggles for justice where we come from, the work we do in New Orleans will only ever be an act of charity and not in true solidarity with the people of New Orleans.

Common Ground operates under the slogan “solidarity not charity,” which the ARWG understands to mean that our goal is to provide concrete support to an oppressed group so that they can more easily use their own power to change the conditions of their lives. We see charity as something that often ends up reinforcing existing relationships of power instead of transforming them, and we see solidarity as working with people who are struggling for their own liberation in a way that means our future gets bound up with theirs. The ARWG has tried to step up to this critique of charity both by challenging each other to work from anti-racist principles. We also try to work with other Common Ground volunteers to confront their own privileged and racist assumptions and to bring an anti-racist analysis, practice, and commitment to their current and future activism or organizing.

History of Common Ground and the ARWG

Common Ground Collective was formed by two Algiers community activists, and some local and regional allies in the

immediate days after the hurricane. Malik Rahim, a longtime organizer from Algiers, put out a national call for solidarity, in part to respond to the white vigilante violence they were experiencing as they self-organized hurricane relief in the community. They were soon joined by a group of medical first responders and activists from across the country. Initially, its members distributed food, clothing, water, and cleaning supplies, and began operating a first aid station in the local mosque. Within a few months, the Collective had evolved into two distinct organizations, each providing quite different, and equally essential services—the first aid station became a permanent free healthcare clinic, offering primary care, herbal medicine, massage therapy, vaccines, and medications; while the distribution site turned into an vast house-gutting project where residents could sign up to have their roof tarped, and the damaged and mold-infested interiors removed by an all-volunteer work crew. These two organizations—the Common Ground Health Clinic (hereinafter the Clinic), and the Common Ground Relief Organization (hereinafter Common Ground)—formally separated in November, 2005, although they remain allies in the struggle for a just reconstruction of New Orleans today.

Thousands of volunteers from all over the country would work with Common Ground and the Clinic in the 20 months that followed. Since the first days after the storm Common Ground has been making incredible and significant contributions to the movement for a just reconstruction of the Gulf Coast.

Many of the current and former top leaders of the organization are Black organizers. While Common Ground has consistently hosted a multiracial volunteer force, most of the main coordinators and the majority of short-term volunteers are white, many being middle class and college educated. Because of this large base of mostly white volunteers, Common Ground is known throughout New Orleans as a predominantly white organization, and it has led to complex racial dynamics within and around Common Ground's work.

While the demographic of volunteers may have made it particularly challenging for Common Ground to embody our vision of "solidarity, not charity," the race and class privilege of most Common Ground volunteers also provided particular opportunities. For example, many white and class-privileged folks have had the ability to travel down to the Gulf Coast much more easily than people of color and low-income or working class people, and therefore Common Ground has had many more volunteers than other social justice organizations in New Orleans. In large part because of our access to privileges, Common Ground volunteers have built an incredible network that has effectively brought resources from our own communities and universities throughout the country to the organization.

In addition, the ARWG believes that because Common Ground serves as a major gateway for white volunteers coming to New Orleans, at its best it could have the capacity to provide many young white activists with transformative experiences that will bring racial justice closer to the center of their work in the future. Because of this, local and national anti-racist organizers saw early on that the ARWG's role needed to be not just confronting racism within the organization but to try and mitigate the effects that the institutionalized racism of Common Ground was having on the larger movement for justice in the Gulf Coast. At its worst, the racism within Common Ground was causing the organization to stand in the way of local people-of-color-led organizing, duplicating projects that organizations of color were working on rather than using its resources and energy to support those projects, or putting resources toward white Common Ground volunteers rather than the people-of-color-led movements et cetera. The reason the racism of Common Ground volunteers was devastating to the movement is grounded in generations-long legacies of oppression of people of color in New Orleans.

The ARWG was founded in January 2006 to support work within Common Ground to internalize and institutionalize principles of anti-racist organizing. The New Orleans-based People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (hereafter "People's Institute") identifies racism as the primary barrier to social justice and has been working with Common Ground practically since its inception. In the late fall of 2005, organizers from People's Institute started providing pieces of their anti-racism workshops for Common Ground volunteers, and after an organization-wide "Undoing Racism" workshop in January 2006, the ARWG was founded. ARWG has a core of long-term Common Ground volunteers, many shorter-term volunteers who have come and gone, and a network of allies and mentors in New Orleans and elsewhere.

ARWG Principles

We believe that a failure to confront white supremacy within our organizations prevents us from building strong organizations and coalitions that build the possibility of stronger movements. We believe that in order to have healthy coalitions with other grassroots organizations in the city, Common Ground must understand its access to privilege through its volunteers relative to allies, and use that access to support the capacity of organizations beyond our own. We believe that this work begins with individual volunteers and organizers understanding their own positions of race and privilege in the context of post-Katrina New Orleans.

Since 2006 we have worked within Common Ground organizations to achieve our 5 mission points:

1. Build relationships and accountability with racial justice organizations in New Orleans.
2. Support and help institute more comprehensive anti-racist political education for Common Ground volunteers.
3. Support anti-racist leadership in Common Ground.
 - a. Support existing leadership to do anti-racism work.
 - b. Build leadership from within the ARWG.
4. Support more people at all levels in Common Ground becoming active in anti-racist work.
5. Support each other to approach this work with commitment, humility, and openness to learning.

ARWG Programs

Our work has been constantly evolving since our inception. Listed below are some of the strategies that we have used at different times to accomplish each of our mission points:

1. To develop the skills, capacity and leadership of members of the ARWG

We started by building personal relationships with organizers of color from People's Institute, with members of European Dissent (a white antiracist group accountable to and affiliated with the People's Institute), and with each other. These personal relationships supported us in building shared analysis around racism in Common Ground and in our own personal experiences. When political education programs within Common Ground started up, ARWG members took on roles of

organizing and facilitating workshops and caucuses; more experienced members worked with less experienced members in building facilitation skills. As the ARWG became a more defined part of Common Ground, ARWG member delegates began attending Common Ground leadership meetings and otherwise building relationships with Common Ground leadership. ARWG members, when appropriate for each person's growth, also began to work within other racial justice organizations and to individually build relationships of accountability through collaborative work.

ARWG has been a space to receive continual mentorship from our peers, elders, and more experienced anti-racist organizers. Catalyst Project, a San Francisco Bay area-based white anti-racist organization, helped us form the ARWG, further our understanding of the principles of the People's Institute, and helped us put those principles into action in our organizing. We have also been supported by many New Orleans based organizations outside of Common Ground, including: People's Institute, European Dissent, People's Hurricane Relief Fund, and others. Through these relationships we have been able to learn more about what accountability means and looks like, how to bring an anti-racist framework to relief work, and how to get support putting anti-racist principles into action.

2. To develop and support anti-racist leadership within Common Ground.

In order for the ARWG to become institutionalized as part of Common Ground, ARWG members prioritized building working relationships and friendships with site and project coordinators and other Common Ground leadership, and tried to be responsive to their feedback about our work and approach. We worked with leaders to address issues of sustainability, accountability, and privilege in their work within Common Ground and in their lives. In particular we tried to support leaders who were already working from an anti-racist framework to do that work even more strongly. We also supported volunteers with anti-racist analysis to move into leadership by putting energy into initiatives they put forth. To the ARWG, building anti-racist leadership is not the same thing as having people in power who think certain things about race. To us, it's ultimately about working towards building power in communities of color and taking steps to get there, like building accountable relationships with organizations led by people of color, et cetera. So we prioritized working with the people whom we felt could help move Common Ground solidly towards that vision.

3. To provide anti-racist political education for Common Ground volunteers

The political education piece of the ARWG's work has shifted over the past year and a half according to our relationship to Common Ground leadership, the size and demographics of the volunteer base, and the demographic and capacity of the ARWG. The first phase of ARWG's political education programs, which began in spring 2006 when thousands of volunteers were in town, involved day-long People's Institute trainings and race-based caucusing (space for volunteers to self-reflect on their experiences in relation to their own racial identity in post-Katrina New Orleans). The trainings were facilitated by members of European Dissent, People's Institute, and ARWG members. Also beginning that spring the ARWG organized the Community Voices program, which provides space for local leadership of color and local white anti-racist organizers to speak to Common Ground volunteers about their work. When the spring break influx of volunteers in New Orleans subsided, People's Institute stepped back from regular political education. At this time the ARWG stepped up to organize and facilitate the political education program. Over the summer ARWG members continued to facilitate weekly caucuses and invite in organizers for the Community Voices program.

During the fall and winter "Home for the Holidays," a collaborative resource-sharing project between Common Ground and People's Hurricane Relief Fund, the ARWG worked with People's Hurricane Relief Fund to create and implement a weekly political education schedule that included Community Voices speakers, orientations designed both to provide historical context and to initiate conversations about privilege, and structured workshops about systems of oppression and ways to support the movement for Black self-determination in the Gulf Coast. Throughout the winter the ARWG provided political education workshops three days a week. Recently, we have moved back to prioritizing Community Voices. There have been weekly reading groups on and off in which volunteers read writings by local and national racial justice activists and women of color feminists, and discuss how their ideas apply to our work in New Orleans. Our goal with political education is to offer volunteers a structured opportunity to think about how we can best support the self-determination of communities of color and of low-income people in New Orleans and back home, a space to learn about race in the US historically and currently, and ways to get inspired about how we might play accountable roles in revolutionary transformations of power in this country. At the Clinic, political education has been more informal. Most importantly, everyone who works at the clinic has attended an "Undoing Racism" workshop. In addition, we have organized caucuses, worked to bring anti-racist analysis into all Clinic discussions, and strategically worked with Clinic staff, volunteers, and our board of directors through one-on-one conversations.

4. To develop accountable relationships with local racial justice organizations and concretely support their work.

Through support from European Dissent and People's Institute, the ARWG came to see that our strategy and mission needed to come out of both personal and group relationships of accountability with local and national anti-racist organizations. We learned a lot from these two organizations about the meaning of accountability, and it's still a concept we struggle to understand more deeply. People's Institute and European Dissent helped us facilitate relationship-building between Common Ground white leadership and leadership of other organizations.

A main focus during the spring and summer of 2006 was on sharing resources (labor, volunteers, materials) with local racial justice organizations. Our work facilitating the development of a political education program with "Home for the Holidays" was part of this focus. Through this collaboration, we developed an advisory relationship with People's Hurricane Relief Fund around the ARWG's strategies and direction.

In the winter and spring of 2007, we focused on doing work within local racial justice organizations in order to support their struggles for a just rebuilding in New Orleans. We also see these working relationships with local organizers as an important piece of the ARWG's accountability to local racial justice movements. We have worked with groups such as: People's Hurricane Relief Fund, Critical Resistance New Orleans, Safe Streets—Strong Communities, Lower 9th Ward Neighborhood Empowerment Network Association (NENA), Survivor's Village, The Workers' Center for Racial Justice, People's Organizing Committee, the Craige Cultural Center, Stronghold, and the Ovah da Rivah Cultural Village. Most recently, we have started organizing anti-racism potlucks with other out-of-town volunteers from other organizations to discuss how we can best

contribute to the struggle for a just New Orleans and struggles to navigate how to do that in an accountable way.
5. To support each other to approach this work with commitment, humility, and an openness to learning.

We understand that in order for us as individuals to remain, long-term, working effectively in the struggle for racial justice, we must approach the work with humility and love. We try to model this in our relationships within the ARWG, by having weekly check-ins at meetings about how we are doing, and by building friendships with each other that embody love, humility, a sense of humor, and commitment to each others' growth and accountability to this work. We have also worked to confront dynamics of gender, race, and class within the ARWG as a collective.

Through the ARWG's own process of struggling with accountability to Common Ground and to other local organizations, ARWG's members are continually learning about what it means to be accountable in all of our personal and political relationships. We understand that our ideas of accountability and solidarity will continue to shift over time as we learn from our experiences.

Justice in the Gulf begins at Home

At a talk by women of color organizers from New Orleans put together by Catalyst Project, panel members were asked about the role of allies for the struggle for justice in the Gulf Coast. Local Critical Resistance organizer Mayaba Liebenthal responded, "when allies come to New Orleans, it's really important to do work in your own communities as well, especially to undo the racism that we've been taught and that's reinforced in every breath and step we take. What I want is for people to look into their own communities and organize around that kind of mentality." 1

The goal of the ARWG of Common Ground has been to step up to the challenges made by local organizers and communities of color to confront the racism in our organizations and personal work. Our work within our community of Common Ground has deepened our understanding of accountability and solidarity, and deepened our understanding of the urgent need to eradicate racism in order to build multiracial movements for social justice in New Orleans and everywhere.

We are deeply indebted to all of our mentors, the past and present members of the ARWG, and to the people of New Orleans.

Justice for the Gulf Coast!

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[1] <http://cwsworkshop.org/katrinareader/katrinareader/node/470>

Hearts on Fire: The Struggle for Justice in New Orleans

Author:

Ingrid Chapman

Organization:

[Catalyst Project](#) [1]

Link:

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Hearts On Fire: The Struggle for Justice in New Orleans

Reflections on anti-racist organizing, solidarity and collective liberation

by Ingrid Chapman, courtesy of the [Catalyst Project](#) [3]



From the forthcoming Catalyst Project book *Towards Collective Liberation*

"The people of New Orleans will not go quietly into the night, becoming the homeless of countless other cities while our own homes are razed to make way for mansions, condos, and casinos. We will join together to defend our claim and we will rebuild our home in the image of our own dreams!"
(People's Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition)

Introduction

I hope that this article speaks to people who have gone to the Gulf Coast to work in solidarity and those organizing in solidarity around the country. I hope that it clarifies for my allies and friends from and living in New Orleans why I was there and why this struggle and all of you have so deeply inspired me.

This reflection was written over the past year upon my return from New Orleans in the Fall of 2006. This article briefly contextualizes New Orleans before and after Katrina. It gives my reasons for going to New Orleans, the

organizations I worked with and some of their strategies for organizing the year following Katrina. It addresses some of the struggles residents and social justice organizations were and are up against. In particular I focus on how racism hinders the work of social justice organizers, activists and volunteers in the relief and reconstruction effort and how that racism creates barriers for movement building. I look more deeply at the racism internal to one of the organizations I worked with and our strategies and attempts at challenging it. I then get into more detail about the particular work I was involved with over the course of two 3-month periods in New Orleans in the spring and summer of 2006. In particular, I highlight anti-racist organizing with other white people and the Black led struggle for justice in the Lower Ninth Ward. I then share some of the key lessons I drew from this experience and why I am deeply committed to the struggle against racism and for collective liberation.

New Orleans Before and After Katrina

Before Katrina, New Orleans was a majority Black, culturally vibrant city with strong communities as well as intense racism and economic exploitation. The city of nearly 500,000 was two thirds African-American. Racism fueled deep structural neglect and abandonment of public institutions such as health care and education. This created a forty percent illiteracy rate among Black residents, and over half of African American ninth graders didn't graduate from high school. Ninety thousand people earned less than \$10,000 a year, and around the same number of people, nearly 20 percent of the population, had no health insurance.

One year after the storm the African-American population of New Orleans was just 37 percent of what it had been before the storm. Nearly half the Black population had been unable to return. Two years later the city is at a total of 66% of its pre-Katrina population, and a majority of the people still unable to return are African-Americans.

People can't come back because they can't afford to come back. There is little housing or employment for people to return to. Some people had gotten FEMA trailers, but at nowhere near the rate of the housing needed. There is no rent control, so landlords have doubled and tripled the rents.

National, state and local governments have not acted adequately to meet the housing needs of displaced New Orleanians. In the name of "environmentalism," parts of New Orleans that had a majority Black population with high home-ownership rates (like the Lower Ninth Ward and New Orleans East) were designated by city government immediately after Katrina as future "green space." Plans for "greening" New Orleans acted as a cover for what would have been a massive racist land grab. Fortunately this plan was defeated and is no longer on the table.

As of May of 2007, nearly two years later, about 75 percent of public housing ---most of which had no major structural damage from the storm--- is still closed and despite protest from residents of public housing and legislation in congress to halt these plans, most of the public housing in New Orleans is still slated for demolition. One year later, no federal funds had been disbursed to homeowners to rebuild their homes. Now two years later only 22% of applicants have received federal money for rebuilding. The most wide spread assistance the government has given homeowners is free (and in some neighborhoods unauthorized) bulldozing of their homes and debris removal.

Katrina Was No Natural Disaster

New Orleans was devastated not by the hurricane, but by the long-term consequences of racism and capitalism. The government did not value the lives of the Black residents of New Orleans enough to adequately build and maintain the levees or to have an evacuation plan that accounted for the thousands of low-income families without resources to evacuate on their own. One fifth of the population did not own cars. The lack of federal response for days, as well as the focus on protecting private property over human lives would never have happened in a majority white middle or upper class city.

Hurricane Katrina was less than a category 3 storm when it hit New Orleans, which would not have been completely uncommon for the city if not for the levee breaches. The breaches caused 80 percent of the city to flood, and the lack of government response caused further catastrophe.

The Army Corps of Engineers is responsible for the upkeep of the levees, and it is they, along with state and federal government who are responsible for the devastation that occurred in New Orleans. Money for repairing and rebuilding public infrastructure was cut and money for the levees was directly reallocated to wage war in Iraq. Many upper income, whiter neighborhoods received little damage, but 77 percent of homes in low-income areas were destroyed.

The Federal Government has allocated 110 billion dollars to Gulf Coast Reconstruction, a trillion dollar disaster. Of that \$110 billion, New Orleans --- which received 80 percent of the damage --- is being given just over \$300 million. This is the same amount of money the federal government spends in one single day in the war on Iraq.

Many people I have talked to from the Lower Ninth believe the government left them to die and does not want them to return and rebuild. Many people believe that the government bombed the levee to protect other areas of

the city. It is believed by many that the government bombed the canal levee back in 1965 during Hurricane Betsy, and it is a historical fact that the Mississippi River levee was bombed in 1927 when the river was swollen from a year of nearly incessant rains; a breach was created below the city of New Orleans, wiping out the neighboring parishes, and setting a precedent for refusing to reimburse people for what was lost due to governmental neglect, racism, and incompetence. Therefore, it is not out of the question that they would do it again. Regardless if there was a bomb, the gutting of social services, military spending, and the government's disregard for the value of Black and working class peoples' lives left the levees crumbling.

It is clear from the lack of government action and the tourist-focused reconstruction that there is no priority on rebuilding the Black neighborhoods. If there is to be any justice, compensation for loss, or the assistance people need to get home and repair their houses, there needs to be a conscious and explicit adjustment to the racist institutions that are in charge and supposed to be stepping in. And for this disaster of racism to not occur again, reform is not enough. Grassroots organizing is crucial to building movements that create new liberatory systems and ways of supporting each other.

The strongest response after Katrina has come from the grassroots. During the storm many of the first responders were residents helping each other get to safety and sharing food and water. Family members, friends and strangers took displaced people into their homes. Thousands and thousands of people went to the Gulf Coast and volunteered in community-based relief and rebuilding efforts. People all over the country have raised money and supplies and sent them to the Gulf Coast.

Why I Went to New Orleans

I originally went to New Orleans through a San Francisco Bay Area-based organization I was working with called the Builders' Solidarity Project. A couple of us in the building trades started this group to organize other people in the field to do solidarity work with folks in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. We organized a tool drive to send construction tools and money to the Gulf Coast to support grassroots rebuilding efforts.

A call came out of New Orleans from the People's Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition (PHRF) a local Black-led social justice coalition. It was calling for skilled workers to help with reconstruction. Before that call went out, I went back and forth on whether I should go to the Gulf Coast. I did not want to be more of a burden than a help in such an intense crisis. When that call went out, I thought more seriously about going to New Orleans, because I am a carpenter, and could see a way to be directly useful. I spoke to a New Orleanian friend of mine and she encouraged me to come, so I decided to go.

My first day there, one of the guys on the reconstruction work group of PHRF took me on a tour of New Orleans and the Lower Ninth Ward. For me it was unlike anything I had seen before. I had no idea of the real devastation of the city. In that first week, I met a lot of people from New Orleans, both organizers and residents, who had been meeting and strategizing since the levees broke about how they and their communities could come home and rebuild. In that first week, I had a new understanding of how hard it was to return to the city: people had lost their homes, jobs, family and friends, and rents had skyrocketed. Many people were emotionally devastated and depressed. But what also struck me was how many people were coming together. There was a recognition that everybody needed each other; that nobody was going to be able to make it alone, especially Black or poor, working class, or even middle class people.

I had planned to stay for two weeks but soon realized how vital the struggle in New Orleans is for all of us. I saw a great possibility for building a movement in New Orleans unlike anything I had personally seen before. The whole city shared a collective experience of such loss, and a majority of the city's Black population endured a total disregard for their lives on a blatant and massive scale. I saw that folks who have been most targeted by this government and this society—historically and currently—are coming together. They are strategizing, organizing and fighting. They have the possibility of leading a movement for self-determination and justice that could make visionary changes. They are creating new models of organizing that could inspire and teach us many lessons.

Nationally, so many of us felt the pain of what happened in New Orleans and needed to respond. Hundreds of thousands of people from all over this country and around the world went to New Orleans to volunteer in the relief and rebuilding effort. Many of the people who went to New Orleans (NOLA) were white. This response from white folks was complex. On the positive side, people came because they were connecting to their humanity and the real need for us to support each other in such an intense crisis. Unfortunately, at the same time, white people have been indoctrinated into a white supremacist belief system since birth through the media, education, our parents, etc. This belief system says that white people are smarter, better leaders, have the right answers, and have the ability to save the "poor people of color." Even if we believe this is messed up, it is so ingrained in those of us who are white that we have to be self-reflective, humble, and intentional in our actions and attitudes or we will replicate these behaviors.

As a result of this ingrained racism (which I use here interchangeably with white supremacy), I saw the actions and

attitudes of many white folks really hindering many of the efforts of local grassroots organizations that were already struggling under intense conditions.

Part of why I stayed was to work with other white folks to figure out how to best support the efforts of local Black-led grassroots organizations. I also stayed to support white volunteers in challenging our own racism, and recognizing how our own racism is counter to our motivations to come to New Orleans in the first place.

The Catalyst Project

In the San Francisco Bay Area, I work with an organization called Catalyst Project. Catalyst was formed from an understanding that as white people, racism will always significantly divide our movements until we dismantle white supremacy. We have also seen the power of white people challenging white supremacy and joining in genuine solidarity in multiracial struggle for collective liberation.

Ultimately Catalyst is attempting to help build a movement strong enough to make real, institutional, systemic change, and to move beyond the backward capitalist system we live under. We're not just interested in impacts, but also root causes. What is it about capitalism, white supremacy and patriarchy that caused the dehumanization and murder of thousands of Black and working class people during and in the aftermath of Katrina? Why were people displaced all over the country? Why were acts of survival criminalized? How do we challenge the institutions that caused the deadly impacts of Katrina, and those government officials who are still running this country?

We're trying to be a part of catalyzing a movement that makes institutional change. The only way I see that happening is when the people who are the most targeted by the institutions I just mentioned stand up and change it. When society values the humanity of the people who have been historically the most screwed over, the rest of us will be closer to having our own humanity valued and our own needs met.

At Catalyst Project, we see working with other white folks as an important strategy, especially white activists or organizers working toward social justice. We work with people to show how white supremacy and white privilege get in the way of the ultimate goal of social justice for all people. We also support people's development as skilled, confident, and humble organizers. White folks go down to New Orleans to do solidarity work, but we've been so brainwashed into white supremacy that in order to stay principled in our work with organizers of color, we need to constantly challenge our racist assumptions and behaviors. Whatever brought each of us into this struggle for social justice, the only way we are going to move toward that goal is by working together.

We are working for collective liberation, and white supremacy is a nail in our own coffin. It prevents us from building the movements we need to win actual change. So we work with other white people to challenge racism, to show that it's not in our self-interest—that fear and mistrusting our allies and neighbors is destroying our humanity.

For all of us at Catalyst, wherever we are, if we see an opportunity to build alliances, we want to work with people. When we see a situation where white supremacy and racism are getting in the way of white folks being able to be as principled in their work as they need to be, we especially want to work together to combat that. We see this as a strategic point of intervention into supporting people coming together and building bridges that can build stronger movements.

Soon after I arrived in New Orleans, I gave detailed reports to Catalyst members about what was happening on the ground and I encouraged us to make this work a major focus. As an organization we went through a planning process to evaluate the situation, set goals and map out the work we would take on. We determined that this was a moment of crisis that we needed to respond. We put a lot of work on the back burner and Catalyst made an organizational commitment to channel more energy and resources to support the work there. I became the lead organizer of our New Orleans Solidarity Program and got a lot of support from Catalyst, our advisor Sharon Martinas, and folks in New Orleans in thinking about how to engage in this work. We decided that I would stay for three months through the spring of 2006 and that another member of Catalyst would come for two weeks at the end of my time there to help me transition out, and help me transfer the work I was doing to other people.

At the beginning of summer, we agreed that I would be on the ground in New Orleans for another three months as an anchor of our program. I would work along side the newest member of Catalyst, Molly McClure during that time. Clare Bayard, Amie Fishman and Chris Crass of Catalyst would each come for two-week periods at the beginning, middle and end of summer to bring new energy, support and perspective to the work.

Catalyst recognized that New Orleans was both a key site of struggle for the future of this country and a primary site of radicalization for young people who could become life-long social justice activists. We knew that in the summer of '06 there'd be another push for a lot of volunteers. We anticipated a lot of volunteers coming to work with Common Ground (CG), a volunteer based relief organization, founded after Katrina to offer assistance, mutual aid and support to people in the gulf south region. A majority of the volunteers working with CG would be young white students. Many people would stay longer over the summer than most did during spring break of '06, and there would be more opportunity to work with folks over an extended period of time to build their skills, leadership and commitment to

anti-racist social justice work.

Our goals for the summer of '06 program were to support movement building work in New Orleans by doing what we could to strengthen grassroots organizing with a priority on left/racial/economic justice organizations. We wanted to support building political and practical unity between the local organizing efforts of PHRF coalition partners and CG. We also wanted to support the leadership development and work of our allies living in and coming to New Orleans.

Some of our other goals were to move and strengthen CG organizationally by shifting the culture and practices amongst white volunteers away from white supremacy, supporting CG's Anti-Racism Working Group to be effective, strategic and dynamic, and to work with others to develop and implement a kick-ass political education program to politicize and radicalize volunteers from around the country. Another priority for us was to build accountable relationships through which to receive feedback on our efforts from local Black and white anti-racist organizers in New Orleans, to help us stay grounded and ultimately strengthen the effectiveness of our work. Internally, our goals for the summer of '06 were for Catalyst Project members to gain organizing experience, skills, and deeper understanding of organizing in New Orleans, and confidence to think and act strategically.

People's Hurricane Relief Fund & Oversight Coalition (PHRF)

When I arrived in New Orleans in January 2006, PHRF was a majority Black coalition of around 75 local and national community organizations. The purpose of PHRF was to ensure that hurricane survivors from New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region would play a central role in all decisions made about relief and rebuilding in their area. PHRF emphasizes this mission by borrowing a South African slogan, "Nothing About Us Without Us is For Us," a slogan also used by the disability rights movement in the US.

I was really taken by the intention behind PHRF's work to support people to stand up and build their leadership. At that point in New Orleans, they were working with a lot of folks from the Lower Ninth Ward and also people staying locally and nationally in hotels on FEMA vouchers. They were bringing people together to figure out what they wanted for their communities and how to get their needs met. The organizers supported the survivors getting organized and making decisions for themselves.

To paraphrase Curtis Muhammad, one of the founders of PHRF: "If you're fighting a campaign and you don't include the people impacted, even if you win, it is charity work. Many victories can be overturned if you're not actually building the skills and capacity of those who are impacted by the struggle in that organizing effort to maintain that win; it will not bring about real lasting change."

This approach to organizing inspired me. I saw a lot of possibility and hope within the organizing that they were doing. I also saw how much more capacity was needed for the amount of work they were trying to take on. I learned a ton from it and I have taken many lessons and skills back with me to Oakland for working in communities facing police violence, economic exploitation and mass incarceration as a result of racism and capitalism.

Common Ground

Common Ground (CG) was started by Malik Rahim, a long time Black organizer from New Orleans, with Scott Crow, a white organizer from Texas who had come to New Orleans soon after the storm hit. They put a call out for volunteers to come to New Orleans and participate in the relief effort under the banner of "Solidarity not Charity." This approach was different than many other major relief organizations like the Red Cross that did not even attempt to promote the idea of a more equitable relationship between outside volunteers and residents. Malik, Scott and Sharon Johnson, along with countless others, provided the leadership and created the infrastructure to support thousands of people who came to New Orleans to volunteer in the relief effort.

CG provided tens of thousands of New Orleans residents with much needed services, with a goal of helping build a more just and equitable New Orleans. CG focused on gutting houses, providing free medical services, food and water distribution, tree cutting services, legal services, mold abatement, wet lands restoration, soil bioremediation, temporary housing and support for after school programs--all needs that people must have met in order to return home. In the summer of '06, CG worked to set up affordable alternative housing possibilities for returning residents, workers cooperatives and green building projects. They created a place for activists from out of town, predominately with social and or economic privilege, to contribute to the relief effort in New Orleans.

Racism within Relief Efforts

I became aware of how racism was taking place within the relief efforts in New Orleans mainly by working with Black organizers within PHRF. I witnessed the struggles they faced working with well-intentioned white people from many different relief organizations. I also learned a lot from white folks I knew previously through global justice organizing who were struggling against racism within some of these predominantly white relief organizations. It was

really intense working with PHRF and seeing the magnitude of work that the organizers were taking on. They faced huge personal obstacles as survivors themselves: loss of homes, loss of family and friends, constant struggles with FEMA, intense traumatization from living through the storm, evacuating and coming back to their city torn to shreds, not to mention the speed at which developers and government are working to gentrify their city and to permanently displace the majority of the Black working class people.

The organizers of color with whom I worked were facing so much and working so hard it was rough for me to then see white folks like myself causing even more work for them. It was intense to see the same mistakes that a majority of us white folks had made within the global justice movement happening again in the middle of a majority Black city hit by incredible crisis. It was really hard for me to not want to separate myself from the other white folks, like "it's not me it's them." But I saw and was told that one way to support organizers of color was to work with other white folks to recognize our privilege and racism, and work to change how they impact our assumptions and behaviors.

Because racism is at the center of the real catastrophe in New Orleans, many of us asked: is it possible that this moment can escalate the fight against white supremacy and for social justice? How do we respond? What are our opportunities, our openings? We have to build our capacity to respond to the situation. We do this by constantly struggling to lessen harm, but also by building our own capacities to do something larger, something beyond dealing with immediate crisis.

Part of the work to do with white people in our movements is to build people's capacity to work together. Catalyst works with white people to build consciousness of internalized white supremacy and commitment to work against it, so that it doesn't interfere in multi-racial organizing that includes white folks. We focus on anti-racism as a key component of an overall struggle for justice. For us, this work isn't solely about challenging racism, but developing a pro-active anti-racist approach to social justice movement building. What would it mean to have thousands of white folks from all over the country come to New Orleans, do relief work, and be challenged to become principled anti-racist activists and organizers? How does that build and strengthen the struggle in New Orleans, as well as our capacity nationally to build a movement for economic, political and social justice?

My first week in New Orleans, in the winter of 2006, I attended a three-day Undoing Racism Workshop for Common Ground, facilitated by the New Orleans-based People's Institute For Survival and Beyond (PISAB). PISAB is an international collective of anti-racist, multicultural community organizers and educators dedicated to building an effective movement for social transformation. They have been based in New Orleans for over 25 years. Many Common Ground volunteers in the Undoing Racism workshop were struggling with questions of racial and economic privilege and how that was hindering their work and who they want to be in the world. I also saw that this was the first time that many of the workshop participants were asking these questions and engaged in political activism. A lot of people in Common Ground and PISAB worked hard to make that workshop happen, to get people in the same room to discuss racism and white privilege and how it impacts Common Ground's efforts as a predominantly white organization doing relief work in predominately working class African American neighborhoods.

In New Orleans there are many different communities of color. There are large Black, Vietnamese and Latino populations who are struggling for their rights to return, rebuild and for dignity. There are also many white residents of different class backgrounds who experience the hardships of Katrina in varying ways. I speak primarily about Black working class residents and white middle class volunteers from outside New Orleans, because I was often working where these two came together.

Racism within Common Ground

CG has several Black organizers who have played important leadership roles in founding the organization, creating vision and direction for the organization as well as doing the day-to-day labor. For the last two years, CG has been a predominately white organization, in part because in the beginning the National Guard was only allowing white folks into the city. The initial calls from CG for solidarity went out nationally through the mostly white sector of the global justice, environmental and student movements. CG has not escaped the legacy of predominately white organizations playing a contradictory role of attempting to work for social justice while perpetuating racism and white privilege. It's the way the power system in this country is set up.

I don't want to make Black folks and other people of color's work within CG invisible. At the same time, it is important for me to talk about how white volunteers' racism was playing out and hindering the work, so we can learn from it and more effectively counter it in order to strengthen our overall organizing efforts.

I also want to be clear why I am talking about CG instead of many of the other predominantly white relief organizations and projects in New Orleans. CG was one of the very few predominantly white relief organizations committed to an anti-racist social justice politics and working internally to challenge its white volunteers' racist assumptions and behaviors. They were also doing some of the most strategic work of the primarily white relief organizations, and there were many allies to work with. CG's constituency is largely the same as that in which Catalyst is rooted and who we have been working with since 2000.

I saw racism playing out in several ways within CG. For example the fact that white folks neglected to educate ourselves about long-standing local Black organizations working in New Orleans led some people to assume that white folks are the vast majority of people doing relief work or organizing. When those same folks leave and tell their stories about New Orleans it can perpetuate this myth nationally, which can then lead to grassroots resources being funneled into predominantly white organizations with very little going to Black and other people of color-led grassroots organizations.

Another way I saw racism playing out was in white volunteers not respecting local organizations of color's work, even going so far as to publicly discredit Black-led organizing efforts in New Orleans with little understanding of what those groups are doing or the organizing obstacles local folks face after their whole lives had been turned upside down by flooding, displacement, and other disasters. I also saw racism playing out through a failure to share resources and or support other local organizations that didn't have access to the kind of resources CG did, largely due to its mostly white, middle-class volunteer base.

Another example of racism was found in the attitude that relief work is superior to long-term organizing. Many volunteers were dismissive of long-term organizing efforts, while some white people who saw the importance of organizing acted competitively toward Black organizers and attempted redundant organizing efforts in the same communities. Many white middle class folks started projects without establishing any system of accountability to the people the projects impacted and or sought to serve. They failed to build solid relationships in which feedback and direction comes from those who are most impacted and then incorporated into the work. Not prioritizing accountability leads to unspoken assumption that white people know what is best for the community, and cuts off processes for honest feedback. Also many of these project started by folks from out of town lasted for very short periods of time and when they left town, they often took with them the resources they had originally brought in and or gained while they were there.

When white people got feedback that they were acting in racist and disrespectful ways, they most often got defensive and dismissed those claims. Unfortunately for the Left, this is not an isolated incident. The same story happens almost every time organizations – large or small – comprised primarily of white folks, do not take the time to be self-reflective, build accountable relationships both internally and with people of color most impacted, and do not seriously prioritize anti-racism throughout all aspects of their work.

A big challenge for most everybody who was down there doing any type of organizing or volunteer work, was having to operate in a crisis mode – working 14 hours a day with total urgency. There are constant deadlines to react to. For example, everyone worked hard to prepare for evictions out of FEMA-vouchered hotels. Then at the last minute there were some extensions and then there would be a new deadline. Deadlines for joining class action lawsuits or deadlines for filing insurance claims followed by them saying you have to have your house gutted by a certain deadline or the city can put a lien against it and basically take it. Constantly working against deadlines means that it's hard for people to prioritize political education and reflection even if that would mean doing the work more strategically and better. Everything is an emergency, even 2 years later.

Another challenge is the way working in crisis impacts the way we treat each other within organizations in terms of respect and patience with each other. When people are working long hours, aren't eating enough, or having any time alone or personal space, things that may not set us off under other circumstances can be very intense, so organizing within that space is really difficult. We do not want to go to the extreme of not doing the work, and only being inwardly focused, but we want to be sure that how we do the work is not counterproductive to our ultimate goals.

Even beyond New Orleans, many white social justice activists constantly operate in a crisis mode in which there is no time to think about how we do the work—we think we just have to get it done. New Orleans truly has been and remains in crisis, so it is even harder for us white folks to take time to reflect on how we perpetuate racism. At the same time, it is much harder to ignore it because of the context.

This dynamic was easy for me to recognize, since I had acted from inside this crisis mentality within global justice organizing. I was part of the Direct Action Network and helped organize a mass direct action against the World Trade Organization in Seattle 1999, and then spent the next year traveling around the country supporting direct actions within the global justice movement. Everything was always urgent. I believed that our predominately white organizations and networks were "the movement."

When I came to a town, I didn't take time to build relationships with local organizations and communities of color most impacted by the institutions and policies we were fighting against. I didn't think about how we were organizing and with whom; instead I was trying to turn as many people out as possible in a short period of time. As a result of our organizing style, we relied on people with privilege to respond to our short term organizing efforts. Eventually, organizations using that approach dissolve because they have not been operating with a long term vision that values leadership development, relationship building, attention to process, and space for working class people, people with

families, and people with full-time or over-full time jobs to play leadership roles. Especially after my time in New Orleans, I see more clearly the value of prioritizing long-term vision, and how operating out of a crisis mentality can compromise long-term goals.

Anti-Racist Organizing Within Common Ground

My commitment was to support movement building in New Orleans, in part because I thought it would impact movement building all over this country. Working in New Orleans was a really good opportunity to support the development of newer activists, many of whom were going through intense moments of anti-racist transformation. Being in that city at that time was transformational for most of us, because we were witnessing intense institutional racism while learning deep lessons through our relationships with the people of New Orleans.

One of Catalyst's goals in New Orleans was to support Common Ground in becoming a more effective organization. That meant helping the white folks within Common Ground not to see themselves as "The Movement" but as one part of a movement. If we're going to make any significant gains in New Orleans, the only way is if people work together. To do that in a way that is principled, white people need to understand the historical legacy of racism and how white supremacy operates institutionally and interpersonally. We need to develop skills, confidence, and strategic thinking in the effort to fight for justice for all people. It was emotionally hard work. I saw so much of the harm and so much of the possibility of white folks, and I often wondered how we were going to move forward.

That PISAB and several other local Black organizers prioritized working with Common Ground was critical. Their example grounded me in figuring out how to do this work in a principled way. I would ask, "What would you like to see happen with Common Ground?" to figure out how to prioritize our work within Common Ground. This was important in helping me recognize Common Ground's positive contributions, and the things that needed to change for it to be a more principled and effective organization. I also had a lot of help from folks in Catalyst, European Dissent; a nearly 20-year-old collective of white anti-racist organizers based in New Orleans that is part of PISAB, and a number of other white anti-racist allies outside New Orleans.

My goal became to support white volunteers from out of town in recognizing how their white privilege and internalized white supremacy undermine their desire to help build a strong movement in New Orleans to support the right of return and equitable rebuilding for all survivors. One of Catalyst's key strategies is to support people coming together to form anti-racist cores within organizations. People use these cores to develop deeper understandings of how racism plays out and impacts their organization's work, strategize, get more people involved, build accountable relationships and build the skills and leadership of folks within the organization while working for these changes.

Common Ground's Anti-Racism Work Group (ARWG)

During my first month working with Common Ground a number of us focused on supporting the development of an Anti-Racism Work Group (ARWG). The group was made up of folks working within Common Ground who wanted to take what they had learned from the PISAB Undoing Racism Workshop, and the critiques of racism that CG volunteers as well as organizers from outside CG had been communicating. We placed priority on listening to and understanding these concerns and critiques, and strategizing about how to shift the culture and practice of the organization. Our ultimate goal was strengthening the work and effectiveness of CG and its contribution to the larger movement in New Orleans.

Many people put a lot of work into creating the context in which the Anti-Racism Work Group (ARWG) was able to develop. Organizers with PISAB met with CG volunteers who saw how racism within CG was playing out, and that wanted to figure out how to get others in the organization to prioritize reflecting on and challenging racism. Trainers with PISAB also facilitated pieces of their Undoing Racism Workshops with short-term volunteers working with CG. The CG Clinic took the lead in January 2006 organizing and raising resources for a PISAB full-length, two-and-a-half day Undoing Racism Workshop for CG volunteers and residents working with both CG Clinic and Relief. The workshop gave many leaders in CG a chance to stop for a couple days and really reflect on what racism is, where it came from, its legacy in the United States and New Orleans. The workshop gave people inspiration, common language, and a basis from which to continue struggling with how to integrate these lessons and questions into the organization.

ARWG was developed after the PISAB workshop to create a space for people to prioritize conversations about racism within CG, get support, reflect, and strategize about how to move anti-racist work forward in the organization. This work is complicated and hard and even white people who are working for social justice are often very resistant to it. Looking internally at how those of us who are white perpetuate racism can be painful; so many white folks resist it, ignore it, or seek quick fixes to it so that we can "move on."

The goals of the ARWG were: to build relationships and accountability with racial justice organizations in New Orleans, to support and help implement more comprehensive anti-racist political education for CG volunteers, to support existing white leadership to do anti-racist work and build leadership from within the ARWG. We also wanted to support more people, at all levels of CG involvement, in becoming more active in anti-racist work and to support

each other to approach this work with commitment, humility, and openness to learning and growth.

The ARWG had a lot of crucial support throughout its development from organizers with the PISAB as well as European Dissent. PISAB and European Dissent organizers gave us critical feedback, challenging questions, emotional support, and a more historical perspective on the work we were trying to do. Also, as residents of New Orleans, and Katrina survivors, they helped those of us from outside New Orleans better understand the culture and history of the area, giving us context and a larger perspective on what it meant to be doing this work where we were doing it. ARWG members also received support from organizers with PHRF, New Orleans chapter of INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, People's Organizing Committee and Critical Resistance New Orleans (a prison abolitionist organization that seeks alternatives to imprisonment and policing to deal with society's social problems), among others.

Common Ground's Spring Break 2006

During Spring Break 2006, tens of thousands of mostly white students and thousands of Black students came through New Orleans. Because of the opportunity this presented, the ARWG, along with vital support from PISAB and European Dissent, prioritized creating space for political education during Spring Break 2006 as our first main project.

A lot of these students were coming into this situation and having very intense experiences. Probably a lot of white people were recognizing racism for the first time – it was so blatant and in-your-face that you couldn't help but see it for what it was. At CG we wanted to set up political education that would help the volunteers contextualize their experience institutionally and historically and help them make the connections between what they were seeing in New Orleans and the struggles that folks of color and working class people are up against in their hometowns. We wanted to create spaces for volunteers to think more about what solidarity really is; to battle against paternalistic tendencies so that people treat the local residents with respect and see them not as victims but as survivors struggling and fighting for their right to return and rebuild.

We wanted to support students in realizing that those of us from the outside are there to do whatever we can in this moment of crisis to support the capacity of residents to come home and self-organize, whether that be by helping them gut out their homes or volunteering at the distribution centers offering food and water, or volunteering with a local organization that is working to support residents building their own organizing skills. We need to give whatever we have to offer to support what builds residents' own capacity to struggle.

With the support and leadership of PISAB organizers and trainers, we arranged for two 8-hour "Undoing Racism Workshops" a week; a two hour anti-racism orientation at the beginning of each week for all volunteers coming to work with Common Ground facilitated by PISAB, and anti-racism caucuses for people of color, bi-racial people and white folks that took place twice a week with facilitation from members of the ARWG, European Dissent and other allies. Also, we created a series of presentations called "Community Voices," in which local organizers of color talked about their experience of Katrina and their organizing work before and after the storm.

Spring 2006 with PHRF/OC Reconstruction Work Group

The first three months I was in New Orleans I worked primarily with PHRF's reconstruction work group. Initially we repaired and rebuilt the outside of a community leader's house as part of a demonstration project. The point was to demonstrate that the residents and volunteers could rebuild the neighborhoods if we came together and use that demonstration project to seek more funding for community-centered reconstruction projects.

After that project was done, we worked on fixing up the new PHRF office space and supporting the organizational side of the Survivors' Councils Reconstruction Work Group. This involved making follow-up calls for the work group meetings, building relationships with residents, and starting to prepare for the spring break house-gutting project with the students. The New Orleans Survivors' Council is made up of people from the poor and working black community of New Orleans and includes low-income homeowners (most of whom are from the Lower Ninth Ward), renters and public housing residents from wards and neighborhoods throughout New Orleans, and immigrants who have come post Katrina. In 2006 the majority of its active members were from the Lower Ninth Ward.

In my third month, the Reconstruction Work Group did logistics and supported the coordination of groups of 40 to 80 spring break students gutting houses the Lower Ninth Ward. In March, nearly 1,000 Black students came to work with PHRF through the organizing efforts of Katrina on the Ground, a national organization of Black university and college students. Lower Ninth Ward residents worked as crew leaders and van drivers. Many of the students also did outreach and organizing support work with a number of PHRF coalition members, such as INCITE! New Orleans Women of Color against Violence, Critical Resistance, Safe Streets Strong Communities, and PISAB, among others.

Many of the Lower Ninth Ward residents working on this project took on increasing amounts of leadership throughout the month and got more involved in the Reconstruction Work Group. The residents' fire and commitment to rebuilding their communities against tremendous odds continually inspired me. Working with people under such

intense situations deepened relationships with people that I am so grateful for.

The Lower Ninth Ward

When I first arrived in New Orleans January of 2006, PHRF was focusing much of its energy on supporting organizing efforts in the Lower Ninth Ward. The Lower Ninth is of historic importance as one of the first areas where African American people could buy property in New Orleans. It had the highest home ownership rate in the whole city, with many families passing down their homes from generation to generation. However, nearly 25% of families in the Lower Ninth Ward had an income of less than \$10,000 a year, and 36.4% of the residents lived below the poverty level compared to 27.9% overall in Orleans Parish. Most people did not have flood insurance and lack the money to rebuild without assistance from others. The Lower Ninth Ward was one of the areas hit the hardest by the levee breaches.

The first time I went through the Lower Ninth Ward was in January 2006, and it didn't look that different when I left nine months later. It looked like a bomb had gone off, with the houses just rubble, the cars turned upside down and underneath houses, all people's personal possessions, pictures and furniture on the streets. It was a ghost town. It's hard to be down there and see what happened, to know that a lot of people were there when the levee breached. The force of the levee breach and the flooding was the cause of most of the damage. I heard many people's stories of what happened during Katrina and that a lot of people didn't have a way out, didn't have cars or the money to leave, or didn't have relatives in the close by areas. It all could have been prevented....

After a year, only a handful of people were living in this area; those who returned were living in gutted-out homes and the few trailers that had started popping up. Now two years later the area is still only sparsely populated despite strong commitment of many residents to return. The majority of residents remain displaced all over the country, lacking the resources to return and rebuild without the support of others.

Organizing in the Lower Ninth Ward: Winter and Spring 2006

That winter and spring of 2006, PHRF was attempting to organize with survivors from all areas of the city to save the Lower Ninth, knowing that this was the first area the government wanted to take out of the hands of Black residents and put into the hands of wealthy developers. PHRF worked from the idea that all residents should be in solidarity with the Lower Ninth because if they take that land, they will continue grabbing land from African American people as long as they can get away with it, and that unity is needed to stop this.

For PHRF, it wasn't as much about immediate relief at that time, but about bringing working class Black residents together and developing their skills as organizers. Whether they create the institutions themselves, demand them from the government, or a combination of the two, PHRF did whatever it could to strengthen people's capacity to build the power of the local residents to get what they need, and ultimately to create a more just New Orleans than existed before the storm.

The Survivors' Council that PHRF worked with in the winter and spring of 2005/2006 was mostly made up of Lower Ninth Ward residents and had meetings every Saturday. 60-200 residents attended the meetings. Everyone attending the Survivors' Council meetings was encouraged to join work groups. There were work groups for Organizing, Basic Needs and Legislative, Finance, Media, and Reconstruction that met every week and brought proposals to the weekly Saturday meetings for approval from the larger body. Also, residents throughout the city were coming together and self-organizing in their neighborhoods and cultural communities.

Organizing in the Lower Ninth Ward Summer 2006

When I returned to New Orleans in June 2006, I connected with a number of the organizers I had worked with before. While I was gone, PHRF had dealt with a lot of internal struggle. Grassroots organizing in New Orleans post-Katrina is full of contradictions, difficult decisions, intense conditions, and priority setting with scarce resources and overworked organizers. Internal struggles are bound to arise among dedicated organizers and this happened in PHRF. Some members left and formed another organization called People's Organizing Committee (POC).

I struggled with how to avoid contributing to the divisions between organizers and organizations. I heard clearly from some of the residents of the Lower Ninth Ward that I had worked with that the last thing anyone on the ground needed was people from the outside taking sides.

With the support and feedback from Lower Ninth Ward residents, organizers in New Orleans and Catalyst members, I decided to work with the Reconstruction Work Group of PHRF and POC as well as with Common Ground's Lower Ninth Ward project. I wanted to continue to support the efforts of Lower Ninth Ward organizations and residents who were trying to rebuild their communities. One of my main goals was to support any attempts at alliance building between different organizations, so that those groups could collectively support the leadership and struggles of folks in the Lower Ninth.

In the summer of '06 POC continued to work with the Survivor's Council in the Lower Ninth. I wanted to continue supporting the Reconstruction Work Group, which was made up of many of the same people I'd worked with when I first came to New Orleans in January '06. The Survivors' Council Reconstruction Work Group had decided to organize house gutting block parties in the Lower Ninth Ward. I worked to support the first house gutting block party, building connections between activists and organizers within the city and pulling in resources.

We were able to bring in 30 volunteers from Common Ground to gut houses with the residents, as well as tools, safety equipment, and food. Also volunteers from PHRF and a few other organizations came out and helped gut. A DJ contributed his time and sound equipment, and we got space on a radio show to advertise the event. Organizers from PHRF, PISAB, and The Lower Ninth Ward Neighborhood Empowerment Network Association (NENA) came out to show their support. NENA is a resident-organized and resident-controlled community assembly. NENA exists to empower residents of the Lower Ninth Ward to play a vital role in their neighborhood's redevelopment post Katrina. The Reconstruction Work Group decided to do a house gutting block party every other Saturday, so there were a total of three while I was there. I continued to help with outreach, getting volunteers and residents out.

In the late summer of '06 I had the opportunity to help pull together an initial meeting between PHRF, CG's Lower Ninth Ward project, and NENA. The meeting was called to build a collaborative effort to potentially start a Lower Ninth Ward workers' cooperative. PHRF and the Survivors' Council's Reconstruction Work Group had been talking about this since at least January of 2006, but there hadn't been the capacity to move forward on it. I was really excited by this collaboration because of its potential to build the capacity of Lower Ninth residents to have jobs that bring sustainable resources back into their neighborhoods. It also excited me because I had been building relationships and/or working with all of these organizations all summer and was hopeful that their efforts were going to be strengthened by working together. When I left in the fall of '06, the groups were all continuing to discuss a collaborative rebuilding and job creation project through NENA's weekly meetings that sought to bring all grassroots organizations working in the Lower Ninth Ward together.

ARWG Summer 2006 Strategy Shift

In the beginning of the summer of 2006, the ARWG held a strategy retreat. The retreat moved the ARWG from an approach of putting a lot of energy into critiquing the leadership, toward one of getting more involved in project areas. This change came about as members realized that critique only gets us so far. We needed to step up, take on leadership and help implement anti-racism strategies into the work of Common Ground.

From this shift, we changed how the ARWG engaged with CG. Everyone had to become involved in a different project area of CG, and invest in supporting people in that project area to move away from modes of working that reinforced racism. We supported project areas to build alliances and accountability with local organizations of color through the work they were doing, and part of that was sharing resources that were useful to those local organizations. We also focused more on anti-racist political education within project areas and with longer-term volunteers.

For us at Catalyst, anti-racism is strongly connected to community organizing and building grassroots power. We see the need for white people to throw down, to build power and bring their full abilities as organizers into the mix. It's much more than standing back, doing logistical support and critiquing other people. These things have their times and places, but we believe more people need to step up in a way that is principled and supports others to step up.

Another priority was supporting the leadership and involvement of local Black residents all ready involved within the project areas and build relationships and alliances with local Black organizations that were doing related work, and share resources with those organizations. We also prioritized supporting CG volunteers of color from out of town through political education, caucusing and one-on-one support work. The ARWG also continued to put a lot of energy into providing anti-racist political education with short-term volunteers.

In most communities that do not proactively prioritize and create structures for education and accountability around consent and patriarchy, sexual violence occurs. CG was no different. Many of the ARWG members were also playing leadership roles in anti-sexism work and work around sexual assault within CG. Many ARWG members took on facilitating gender caucuses and working to support sexual assault survivors. They worked with others to put pro-active measures in place for addressing sexual violence within CG while also challenging tendencies among white volunteers to re-write history and react in racist ways.

Catalyst focused a lot of energy on supporting the development of the folks in the ARWG through many "one-on-ones" and at meetings. In the one-on-ones we listened to where people are at, what they were struggling with, and helped them think through what they are attempting to do, including what steps they could take toward overcoming obstacles and meeting their goals. When getting into the smaller intra-organizational struggles we tried to situate it in the big picture of what we are struggling for and why. We also used those one-on-ones for people to think about our accountability to the residents, their organizations, others within the organizations we work with, and

ourselves. Additionally, a large part of doing one-on-ones was offering emotional support and building people's self-confidence as organizers.

By working with and supporting the work of New Orleans-based organizations, members of the ARWG were able to build stronger relationships and more trust with local organizers, which in turn allowed us to get critical feedback that strengthened our work. This was the basis for our accountability and it was also key to our strategy of building multiracial alliances. It was necessary, and also important to us, to give back to the organizations that were giving to us.

I really appreciate that I got to work with the folks in CG and the ARWG. Common Ground has been a big institution for the Left in New Orleans. I've witnessed and been part of that organization really grappling to make real changes, and I've seen how those of us in the ARWG changed, and how CG changed over nine months' time. We have worked toward creating models for how white folks can work in solidarity and not in charity with working class and poor Black folks. We aren't there yet, but are taking steps toward that goal. That will be a huge contribution to white people's ability to work for racial justice, social justice, and economic justice. I feel really grateful that Catalyst has gotten to participate in this process.

Common Ground's Lower Ninth Ward Project

During the summer of 2006 I worked with CG Lower Ninth Ward project. The Lower Ninth project area had a distribution center that had food, clothing, water, and a tool lending library. There was also a computer lab, temporary housing for around 10 to 20 people, a community kitchen, and a sign-up for house gutting and other services. I worked at the distribution center. This gave me the opportunity to build much more solid relationships with out-of-town and resident volunteers involved with this project area.

The relationships I built with resident volunteers helped ground me in my understanding of the work CG was doing in the Lower Ninth, as well as get a sense of what was most useful and what needed to change in order for the work to be more effective. I would not have been able to build those important relationships without putting in hours at the distribution center. It helped humble me in my approach to the work there, reinforcing that it is much easier to critique than to actually work with people toward the solutions. I learned very concretely that everything is much more complicated than it originally looks.

We put energy into supporting volunteers within the distribution project area who were trying to figure out how to do this work more effectively. With the support of other ARWG and Catalyst members, we had meetings over the summer of '06 dedicated to strengthening the efforts to practice anti-racist principles in the Lower Ninth. We encouraged each other to think about how decisions were made and to always seek feedback from Lower Ninth residents on the direction and priorities of the project. We supported the leadership of resident volunteers and always encouraged their feedback and participation. We promoted dialogue about movement building beyond just CG, and supporting local organizations like NENA and the Survivors' Council. We worked to build intentional relationships with resident volunteers in this project area, to inform them specifically about meetings and share information we were receiving about deadlines, government grants, as well as internal CG decisions and possible directions the organization was headed. We got their feedback on what was working and what was not. When trust was built they told us how racism and classism were being perpetuated by mostly white/middle class out-of-town volunteers toward Black resident volunteers and Black residents staying in temporary housing. This feedback was really important in figuring out how to shift the culture and work of the project.

Transition Back Home

In New Orleans, you walk down the street and so many of the people you see are a part of the struggle; in many neighborhoods, I felt like everyone is in it. To some degree there is a common experience.

I feel like New Orleans gave me so much. So many wonderful people really supported me while I was there, supported my development as an organizer, and invested in relationships with me. It was really hard and also a privilege to be in New Orleans at that moment in time, and to learn what I got to learn.

I struggled with burnout at times and became less useful to the people I worked with. I brought my stressed out energy into places I should not have. At times I lost patience with people I was struggling with and it impacted my ability to support them and work together, and also affected my ability to see what was going on clearly and keep the bigger picture in mind.

Each time I returned to Oakland I tried to give myself the time and space to reflect and figure out how to bring all these experiences into my work at home. It was really important for me to not just rush back and be so busy that I didn't have time to draw out the lessons. I tried to be self-loving, as I came back, reminding myself that it's okay to take some time for myself and do some healing and reflection. In the larger scheme of things it's much better that I'm taking care of myself so that I bring as little trauma into my work as possible.

One of our elders said as organizers we need to be like rubber bands. We can't just be stretched all the time or we will break. We need to be elastic, to release from the overstretched mode and take care of ourselves so we'll be solid when we really do need to stretch. I try to keep that in mind. So much of organizing is supporting people in finding the hope to struggle. If I am having a hard time finding hope myself, I will not be a good organizer. I am learning the importance of being healthy and taking care of myself so I don't become burned out, impatient, or disrespectful of other people.

The San Francisco Bay Area has an activist/organizer culture of being stretched thin a lot of the time. I'm doing better at it. As I heal myself, I am able to love and respect myself more, and am more able to operate out of a place that isn't self-indulgent but paced for the long haul, because I am committed to this struggle and it is a long one. I ask myself, how can I be my strongest and most useful self? I'm more solid about that now. In the past I didn't have as much respect for myself so it was easier to become too stretched. It is still hard, though. I have a fire inside that drives me, and I want to see things move. At the same time I need to be healthy and live my life as fully as possible within the constraints of this society to be the strongest I can be. I struggle because I love and I love because of the struggle.

Key Lessons

Organizing is all about building authentic relationships with people. Communication is everything. I learned the importance of intentionally building friendships and working relationships, because these are helpful in keeping people coming to meetings, social and political events or protests, and these things pull people together. I tried to always let people know what was going on by inviting them to meetings and events. When people are well informed, they can step up when they have time or feel ready. And more people stepping up is the goal. Good organizers know they need as many people as possible to be activated. We do not do this work for people but with people. We all need each other. So I learned to give people the opportunity to step up before I took something on myself. I learned to ask people to take on specific tasks that could build their confidence, sense of possibility and connection to organizations.

I also learned it is really important to not abandon people who are new to organizing, or leave them stranded. It is not enough to give most people a title or some money to work with; most people need personal support, mentorship, someone to answer questions, and an understanding the history of the organization and its struggles. This support shouldn't be given in a way that is controlling but, rather, supportive of their growth and confidence. Inviting people to step up and then leaving them on their own can set up most people to fail.

I learned to really make the time and space to listen to people. I learned a ton of patience. I learned about not getting impatient about wanting things to move forward quickly in meetings. I learned to talk to people outside of meetings and focused on doing what I could to support what folks were working on or working through. Most organizing happens outside the meeting. It happens at the bar, or the next day on the phone after you have hung out the evening before. It happens when you stop by and hang out at the house or the office, or even before or right after the meeting or event. It happens when you are working with people or helping out at their house, hanging out with their kids. It happens in the one-on-ones. That is where it is possible to build people's confidence, help people think strategically, and support people emotionally when times are rough. A truly important part of organizing is the building of relationships, and that happens by being real, believing in people and showing them love.

I worked my ass off. I made myself work my ass off. It was the culture I was in; all the organizers were working their asses off. But it is not just about working hard; it's also about the kind of work we are doing.

By the end of my first three months in New Orleans, a number of the residents were starting to warm up to me and when I came back for the summer of '06 I was able to continue building those relationships. I had the opportunity to be in a lot of different spaces and see people working together, and be inspired by all the people working against huge odds that have lost so much, yet keep fighting, without giving up.

I learned to connect people to each other and share the relationships I had built. It is always important to connect people who are organizing so we can build stronger alliances and, hopefully, stronger movements. To do that, I needed self-confidence, and to check my ego so it did not get in the way. If you have confidence in yourself, it is more likely that others will have confidence in you, if it is deserved. Trusting relationships are based on organizers being responsible, doing what we say we will, and doing the work that needs to be done. I've learned to work hard because I believe in the work. In time, people recognize commitment and ask you to step up in ways that make sense to them.

In New Orleans, and in Catalyst, I focus specifically on the problem of white supremacy. For those of us who are white, we can't ignore other white people. We are them. They are our responsibility, whether we think so or not. We have to work with each other, love each other and help build more committed, skilled anti-racist white organizers.

Yet when working with other white folks, we shouldn't ignore organizers of color. It is so important to have relationships with organizers of color to ground the anti-racist work with other white folks. We have to make sure that any work with white folks ultimately leads to increased resources going to support organizing efforts of organizations and communities of color, otherwise our work reinforces the concentration of wealth that is a result of white supremacy. I have learned to struggle because I believe in its potential, and because I love the people I struggle with. I've learned the importance of loving the people you work with. It is easy to write people off and that just is not useful. I have made a ton of mistakes and still do, and I appreciate when people have challenged me and worked with me to be a more principled person and effective organizer.

Collective Liberation

I don't work with white folks purely out of a sense of responsibility, but also to build movements for the liberation of my own family, too. Learning to minimize white supremacy is not just so white folks don't hinder movements, but so we can contribute to them in the strongest possible way. If we can support the people who are the most oppressed in healing and in gaining equity, then my family, which is less targeted but still oppressed, is going to be closer to having equity too.

Growing up with a white working class experience I recognize everything my family has gone through. Many of us have no sense of real community, We've been taught to fear our neighbors and people around the world, We have spent the majority of our lives working unhealthy or exploitative jobs to take care of our selves or our kids, We are locked in debt trying to live a lifestyle beyond our means, we struggle with depression, and we seek escape through hard drugs, alcohol and television. We struggle to hold on to a sense of self-worth, to the possibility for a better future and a vision for a different world.

Because of our white privilege, my family does have it better in terms of access than a lot of working class families of color. And at the end of the day, this work is about how we are going to build movements that can win concrete victories that will move us toward a more just and equitable society for all people. Most of us live at the intersections of privilege and oppression, and we have to deal with the reality of that. We have to struggle against the inequalities that shape our priorities and are present in every interaction within our organizations and movements.

When I first went to New Orleans, I saw what was happening there as a potential spark. Nationally, people are paying attention to New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. That's why so many organizers have gone through there, because it's a crisis that must be responded to, and it holds the possibility of building something all over the country. This struggle is about the Black, Latino, Vietnamese, Indigenous peoples and white working class of New Orleans and the Gulf South, and also it is about a bigger liberation of all people.

Get Involved and Support the Struggle for Justice and Self Determination in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast

Step up. Don't ignore this struggle. Don't hold back out of fear of making mistakes. We need to be conscious of our assumptions and behaviors, but don't let fear stop you from acting, because that is ultimately more detrimental. We need as many people as possible getting activated and involved in our struggle for a just world.

Check out the websites or letters put out by grassroots organizations in the Gulf Coast and organizations of Katrina Survivors in your own hometown. Many organizations have clearly put out their current needs. Keep the struggles in the Gulf Coast and of displaced Katrina Survivors in the broader consciousness of the people around you. Host political education events, write letters to the editors, and talk to your family and friends. Host grassroots fundraising events that raise resources for and consciousness about these organizations and their struggles. This is going to be a long struggle and support and solidarity from people around the country is and will be needed for a long time.

Writing this article has been important for me to really reflect, draw out lessons, and then put it out into the world in written format. I deeply appreciate all the encouragement and editing support that so many of my friends and allies provided. This article would not have been possible with out that support. I hope this article encourages more of you to go through a process of reflection and writing so more of us can learn from your lessons.

Thank you to all the amazing people I have met and worked with in and from New Orleans over the last couple years. Thank you for welcoming me into your homes, lives and organizations. Thank you for your commitment and fire, you continually inspire me and have taught me so much that I am so grateful for. Thank you to my friends, family and political community here in Oakland for continuously giving me emotional and political support over these last couple years.

Thank you to Molly McClure, Sharon Martinas, Chris Crass, Rachel Herzing, Rachel Luft, Curtis Muhammad, Andrea Del Moral, Scott Crow, Lisa Fithian, Nisha Anand, Julia Allen, Sasha Vodnik, Jenifer Whitney, Jordan Flaherty, Chela Delgado, Catherin Jones, Drew Christopher Joy, Linda John, Amie Fishman, Clare Bayard for reading drafts of this article and giving me strong political and editing support and to countless others for the encouragement along the

way.

Ingrid Chapman - ingrid [at] collectiveliberation [dot] org
Catalyst Project - www.collectiveliberation.org [4]

Gulf Coast Based Organizations:

PHRF - www.peopleshurricane.org [5]
INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence - <http://www.incite-national.org/> [6]
PISAB - <http://www.pisab.org/> [7]
NENA - <http://lower9thwardnena.com/> [8]
POC - www.peoplesorganizing.org [9]
Common Ground - www.commonground.org [10]
Critical Resistance - <http://www.criticalresistance.org/katrina/> [11]
Safe Streets Strong Communities - www.safestreetsnola.org [12]
Common Ground Health Clinic - www.cghc.org [13]
Survivors Village - www.survivorsvillage.com [14]
New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice Coalition - www.neworleansworkerjustice.org [15]
Mary Queen of Vietnam - www.maryqueenofvietnam.org [16]
United Houma Nation - www.unitedhoumanation.org [17]

Survivors for Survivors in SF Bay Area - survivorsforsurvivors [at] yahoo [dot] com or campbellrock1 [at] gmail [dot] com
Bay Area Katrina Solidarity Network - tthomas [at] habitateb [dot] org

For more reading check out:

A letter from New Orleans Organizers to their allies - <http://leftturn.mayfirst.org/?q=node/573> [18]

"You Can't Kill the Spirit: a Forum with Three Women Organizers from New Orleans" in the July/August issue #25 of [Left Turn](http://www.leftturn.org) [19]

'A Katrina Reader: Readings by & For Anti-Racist Educators and Organizers' www.csworkshop.org [20]

Katrina's Legacy: White Racism and Black Reconstruction in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast by Eric Mann - <http://www.frontlinespress.com/> [21]

Left Turn NOLA articles www.leftturn.org [22]

'White Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race and the State of the Nation' www.southendpress.org [23]

San Francisco Bay View www.sfbayview.com/ [24]

Source URL: <http://csworkshop.org/katrinareader/node/425>

Links:

- [1] <http://csworkshop.org/katrinareader/katrinareader/node/446>
- [2] <http://www.colours.mahost.org/articles/chapman2.html>
- [3] <http://collectiveliberation.org/>
- [4] <http://www.collectiveliberation.org/>
- [5] <http://www.peopleshurricane.org/>
- [6] <http://www.incite-national.org/>
- [7] <http://www.pisab.org/>
- [8] <http://lower9thwardnena.com/>
- [9] <http://www.peoplesorganizing.org/>
- [10] <http://www.commonground.org/>
- [11] <http://www.criticalresistance.org/katrina/>
- [12] <http://www.safestreetsnola.org/>
- [13] <http://www.cghc.org/>
- [14] <http://www.survivorsvillage.com/>
- [15] <http://www.neworleansworkerjustice.org/>
- [16] <http://www.maryqueenofvietnam.org/>
- [17] <http://www.unitedhoumanation.org/>
- [18] <http://leftturn.mayfirst.org/?q=node/573>
- [19] <http://www.leftturn.org/>

[20] <http://cwsworkshop.org/katrinareader/>

[21] <http://www.frontlinespress.com/>

[22] <http://www.leftturn.org/>

[23] <http://www.southendpress.org/>

[24] <http://www.sfbayview.com/>

Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans: Organizing from the Ground Up

Author:

Annual Report 2007

Organization:

Catalyst Project [1]

Reader Version:

Classroom Reader

Date Published:

10/27/2007

Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans:

Organizing from the Ground Up

The aftermath of Katrina revealed an ongoing storm of racism that has been hitting New Orleans, Louisiana (NOLA) since its founding. The movement to rebuild the Gulf Coast is one of the most important struggles for racial and economic justice in the country today. When one of our organizers went down for two weeks in January 2006 to help with reconstruction, we learned about the grassroots organizing led by the NOLA based coalition, the People's Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Committee (PHRF, see photo). PHRF was supporting residents to organize and build their collective power through the Survivors Councils. They were organizing with Black and Latino workers to forge Black and Brown unity. PHRF was fighting in the courts and in the streets to force the Federal government to renew vouchers for hotel rooms to displaced Katrina survivors around the country. With Black leadership at the center, PHRF grew out of Community Labor United, a long existing coalition of grassroots organizations in New Orleans. PHRF brought together the People's Institute, Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, Critical Resistance, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, and more than 20 other groups.

In addition to PHRF, a major force in the efforts to rebuild was Common Ground (CG). With PHRF building community power with residents, fighting for emergency housing and beginning a resident-led reconstruction planning process, CG built a free medical clinic, food distribution centers, free legal clinics, and began a massive program of gutting houses as a critical step towards rebuilding.

Because the federal government historically denies public support to working class people and people of color, and because rich developers are moving to profit off of the destruction, the effort to rebuild has been squarely on the shoulders of the Black and working class communities, their organizations and allies. NOLA has been a stronghold of the Black Liberation Movement and Black culture in the United States going back to resistance against slavery. The movement to rebuild the Gulf Coast is a movement to renew the Black Liberation Movement in our country.

When CG was initiated in the days after Katrina, only white people were allowed by the police and National Guard to come into NOLA. Returning Black residents (and many relief workers of color) were denied entrance to the city, and many targeted as "looters". CG put out the call for solidarity to the mostly white sectors of the global justice movement, and hundreds responded. CG became a primary way for people nationally to participate in relief work outside of the Red Cross and with a social justice agenda. Over time, thousands of volunteers, most of them white, came into a devastated Black city. Because white supremacy shapes white consciousness to assume superiority, entitlement and privilege over and against people of color, many of the white volunteers needed support to fully enact CG's motto of "Solidarity, not

Charity” and not reproduce racism in the work. To act in solidarity requires addressing both the devastation on the ground, the racism that created it, and the white privilege of white volunteers. Racism and white privilege divide social movements, and with so many white volunteers from out of town, the dynamics of white privilege were disrupting and undermining the work.

Catalyst Project was encouraged by allies from NOLA and in the solidarity movement nationally to step up and get involved. With Catalyst organizer Ingrid Chapman on the ground in NOLA, it became clear that we needed to respond far beyond what we thought possible at first. It was clear that there was enormous power and opportunity to develop white anti-racist politics and multiracial unity on the Left and that we needed to make this a priority. While the devastation was heart wrenching, the tenacity, determination and fighting spirit of the people of NOLA pushed us to step up. Our NOLA Solidarity Program has brought us into relationship with a growing grassroots movement in the South that has taught, inspired and transformed us.

Source URL: <http://cswsworkshop.org/katrinareader/node/448>

Links:

[1] <http://cswsworkshop.org/katrinareader/katrinareader/node/446>

For a Multiracial Black-Led Reconstruction Movement: the New Orleans Solidarity Program

Author:

Annual Report 2007

Organization:

[Catalyst Project](#) [1]

Reader Version:

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Date Published:

10/27/2007

For a Multiracial Black-Led Reconstruction Movement: the New Orleans Solidarity Program

We went to New Orleans (NOLA) to join in the grassroots struggle for the soul and future of this country. With rage for the conditions of poverty and white supremacy and love for the people and organizations we worked with, the fight for New Orleans has brought us to tears, inspired us and pushed us to grow and learn.

The primary constituency of Catalyst is younger white social justice activists, who make up the majority of volunteers working in NOLA with Common Ground. NOLA based organizers, people of color and white, encouraged us to take on anti-racist organizing and political education with Common Ground volunteers. Our goal was to support these out of town activists in developing a deeper understanding of white supremacy and a practice of anti-racism for their work. We joined with allies in Common Ground (CG), People’s Hurricane Relief Fund (PHRF), People’s Institute For Survival and Beyond, and European Dissent, to develop and implement a strategy and program. In 2006, we led anti-racism trainings nationally for white activists preparing to go to NOLA. We held two “Study and Struggle” strategy discussions in the Bay Area on NOLA solidarity work. We sent full-time organizers to NOLA; one for six months, one for a month and two who each went for two weeks. We recruited experienced anti-racist comrades from around the country to come to NOLA, and mentored new activists and emerging anti-racist leaders we met there.

We focused on the following: 1. Support grassroots organizing with PHRF, Peoples Organizing Committee (POC), a Black-led group building working class resident power, and CG, 2. Support and develop anti-racist leadership and organizing in CG, 3. Support multiracial alliance building between PHRF and CG, and between POC and CG, 4. Support volunteers to have a radicalizing experience and make a long-term commitment to racial justice activism, 5. Help build the Left nationally with NOLA as a central struggle.

The strategy we worked from included several components. We worked with PHRF and POC to support their community organizing in the Lower 9th Ward. With allies in People's Institute and European Dissent, we worked to build an Anti-Racist Working Group in CG (see photo). The working group was a core of emerging leaders in CG who wanted to move CG to incorporate anti-racist political education for volunteers, and to build stronger, principled relationships with organizations based in Black communities. The work group served as a hub for anti-racist strategizing, leadership development and planning. We focused on one-on-one leadership development with long-term volunteers to build the group. We helped implement a political education program for spring break 2006, when several thousand students came to CG. This included biweekly People's Institute trainings, a political orientation for all volunteers, race-based caucusing for white people and people of color, and a weekly series called "Community Voices" where local organizers and leaders talked about their work, and NOLA's history. The work group ran the political education program through spring break, and continued through the summer rush of volunteers. We supported multiracial alliance building with the Lower 9th Ward resident led Neighborhood Empowerment Network Association. In the fall, PHRF and CG launched a joint national campaign called "Home for the Holidays" that focused on bringing volunteers to do house gutting and go through anti-racist political education.

Organizing in NOLA reconfirmed three core beliefs. 1. We must prioritize building democratic grassroots social movements rooted in working class communities and communities of color, 2. The Left needs to learn how to lead in creative ways that overcome our own divisions and move people to collective action, 3. White anti-racists need to develop their capacity as organizers and step up to help provide leadership in majority white sectors of the movement, rather than critiquing from the sidelines.

Catalyst organizers are returning to NOLA in 2007 and we will continue to find ways to support this grassroots movement that is key to rebuilding the Left in this country. With both our rage and love we fight for justice in the Gulf Coast!

The conditions in NOLA continue to be devastating, and the need for solidarity, financial support, and volunteers is on going. To learn more about the struggle in NOLA and how you can get involved check out: www.peopleshurricane.org [2] and www.commongroundrelief.org [3].

Source URL: <http://cwsworkshop.org/katrinareader/node/447>

Links:

[1] <http://cwsworkshop.org/katrinareader/katrinareader/node/446>

[2] <http://www.peopleshurricane.org>

[3] <http://www.commongroundrelief.org>

Tools For White Anti-Racist Organizing

Author:

Catalyst Project

Organization:

[Catalyst Project](#) [1]

Reader Version:

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Date Published:

09/25/2007

Tools for White Anti-Racist Organizing

A Catalyst Project Workshop

Developing Analysis

1. Study the historical development of white supremacy and how white supremacy connects with capitalism, patriarchy, heterosexism, the gender binary system and the state.

2. Develop analysis of how white supremacy impacts the issues you work on. Prioritize analysis by left/radical people of color in your study.

3. Study social movements led by people of color past and present.
4. Learn about the struggles of people of color where you live.
5. Study white anti-racist history, find other white anti-racists to talk with and get support.
6. Study Women of Color feminism and develop analysis of intersections of oppression and privilege.
7. Form study groups and do political education in your organization.

Building Organization and Developing your anti-racist practice

8. Join existing organizations working from an anti-racist politics and/or support the process of moving your existing organization towards anti-racist politics. Organizations are often difficult because in them we practice the real world application of our principles and we are accountable to other people. Organizations are key to transforming relationships of power towards equality in society. Challenging times should be expected.
9. Find other people to work and talk with to support one another in your development as an anti-racist and as a revolutionary. Develop a process of praxis: putting analysis into practice, reflecting on that practice to develop your theory and so on.
10. Find ways to support people of color led organizations that you share political affinity with. This could include you and your friends volunteering to do childcare, to getting your organization to participate in campaigns led by people of color, to developing longer term political alliances.
11. Challenge privileged/oppressive behavior in yourself and in others. Struggle to do this from a place of love. Remember that in doing this work, you will make mistakes and so will other people. The mistakes are inevitable; the process of learning from those mistakes requires humble and honest reflection. The more work you do, the more mistakes you will make.
12. Struggle against individualism and competition that distort the goals of this work to becoming "the perfect anti-racist". Remember that we are engaged in a struggle to make history not escape it.
13. Find a mentor, someone who has more experience than you who will not only share lessons from their history, but someone who helps you learn from your own experiences and who encourages you to think through the challenges you face.
14. Developing your skills, analysis and confidence to struggle for social justice. Become as effective, dynamic, strategic and healthy as you can be in our work for a free society.

Building Movement

15. Build relationships with the people you are working with and build relationships with people in the broader community you work in.
16. If you are in a multiracial organization find ways to openly and honestly talk with activists of color you work with about white supremacy and race with a focus on how to work together to build power for justice.
17. In mostly or all white organizations, work to build relationships of trust and accountability with organizations and communities in struggles for racial justice. See if there are ways to do solidarity work and eventually, if there are ways to collaborate. Develop your organization's work with goals of challenging white supremacy in society and building anti-racist principles in white communities.
18. Commit to developing a practice of solidarity with oppressed peoples for collective liberation and a practice of accountability to the people you work with in your organization and in particular accountability to oppressed people you work with and have relationships with. Such a practice is nuanced, complex and develops over time through practice, be patient.
19. Know that your liberation is tied to the liberation of all. While people with privilege are often less affected, find your self-interest in a free society and work to build it.
20. Remember that we are in this together and you are not alone.

Catalyst Project is a center for political education and movement building.

We thank our mentors and allies for help developing this list. For more resources see Colours of Resistance www.colours.mahost.org [2]

Source URL: <http://cwsworkshop.org/katrinareader/node/451>

Links:

- [1] <http://cwsworkshop.org/katrinareader/katrinareader/node/446>
 [2] <http://www.colours.mahost.org>

You Can't Kill the Spirit: A Forum with Three Women Organizers from New Orleans

Organization:

[Catalyst Project](#) [1]

Reader Version:

Classroom Reader

Link:

<http://www.colours.mahost.org/articles/youcantkill.html> [2]

Date Published:

03/09/2007

MP3 Downloads:

- [17.5 minute radio feature by Andalusia from Rustbelt Radio](#) [3]
- Entire interview: [Part 1](#) [4](45min, 20mb), [Part 2](#) [5] (37min, 17mb)
- [Intros](#) [6] (4min, 3mb)
- [Question 1: "More thorough introductions, including the organizations you're working with and their strategies"](#) [7] (8min, 7mb)
- [Question 2: "What are some of the issues facing your communities?"](#) [8] (9min, 9mb)
- [Question 3: "How does gender play into the challenges facing your communities and the people you work with?"](#) [9](8min, 7mb)
- [Question 4: "What would justice in the Gulf Coast, and for displaced Katrina Survivors, look like?"](#) [10](7min, 6mb)
- [Question 5: "What do y'all feel inspired about?"](#) [11](2min, 2mb)
- [Question 6: "What do you see as the role of allies in the struggle for justice in the Gulf Coast and for displaced Survivors?"](#) [12] (5min, 5mb)
- [Question 7: "How is the struggle in New Orleans a part of the larger struggle for justice in this country?"](#) [13] (9min, 8mb)
- [Question 8: "Are there ways that people here can support your organizations?"](#) [14](5min, 5mb)
- [Poem from Maya Dempster](#) [15] (2min, 2mb)
- [Question and answer period](#) [16](19min, 9mb)

[Full Transcript](#) [17] (word document)

<!--by author--> moderated by Ingrid Chapman, courtesy of [Left Turn](#) [18]

<!--insert article-->[Catalyst Project](#) [19] organized a panel at this year's [National Conference on Organized Resistance](#) [20], featuring **Mayaba Liebenthal**, **Amber McZeal**, and **Maya Dempster**, who discussed their lives and political work post-Katrina, in New Orleans and as evacuees, from the challenges of survivor organizing to their visions for justice in the Gulf Coast. This is an excerpt from that forum, which was moderated by Ingrid Chapman, transcribed by Dee Ouellette & Jen Collins, and edited by Molly McClure.

Ingrid: Where are you living, and what work are you doing now?

Mayaba: I live in New Orleans and work with INCITE: Women of Color against Violence and Critical Resistance [CR]. INCITE seeks the liberation of women of color by challenging domestic violence and recognizing that the state is often the perpetrator of much of the violence against women, women of color especially. CR is a prison abolition group working against the prison industrial complex and modern-day slavery. We're trying to figure out what it actually looks like to have true community accountability.

Amber: I work with Survivors for Survivors in the Bay Area, which started in 2005 by an evacuee/journalist/historian from New Orleans, C.C. Campbell Rock. Survivors for Survivors assists with the unmet needs of the 2,000 families still displaced in the Bay Area, currently 16,000 displaced overall in California. We deal with requests anywhere from a food card to an electricity bill to a cell phone bill to rent. Survivors for Survivors started a work-for-hire catering company called "A Taste of New Orleans" intended to help provide self-sustenance for evacuees. I also work with a play of stories from the Katrina Diaspora called "Stardust and Empty Wagons" that was staged in San Francisco.

Maya: I'm living in New York City and working with the Solidarity Coalition of Katrina and Rita Survivors. We had about 5000 displaced individuals to the New York City area. We have weekly meetings and a monthly united front meeting, which is a platform for all of the other not-for-profits in New York City area to get together and focus on basic needs of survivors still not being met. We're focusing more on media now because it's a way for us to touch more individuals. I also work with Ghetto Dreams Movement, which is a music/movie/entertainment organization, originally based in New Orleans, that we use to bring awareness to survivors' issues in New York City Area. Ghetto Dreams Movement also creates jobs for displaced individuals.

Mayaba: CR is working on an amnesty campaign for prisoners of Katrina. When OPP [Orleans Parish Prison] got flooded all of the evidence got washed away, and thousands of people's cases never went to trial. We're trying to get amnesty for people still inside, and all charges dropped. INCITE initiated a project called the Women's Health and Justice Initiative [WHJI] which is opening a women's clinic, a multidimensional project that sees service as part of a larger reproductive justice model. In our approach, the clinic is part of a political process, so if you test positive for lead poisoning, there's also a space for you to

organize around the fact that the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] didn't clean up the lead. We want the healthcare at the clinic to be a space to take action, so you can create a sense of agency around your body and a holistic sense of self, for yourself and for your community.

Ingrid: What are some of the major issues facing the communities you organize?

Amber: One of the biggest issues is getting in touch with everyone to organize them. Within my community itself, the 2000 people in the Bay Area, we still don't have a list of those people. We put up posters and go to church events where survivors gather, but it's pretty much word of mouth and few people will come to those events because they're not looking for consolation from a priest right now. They're looking for the basic three: jobs, shelter, food. And they're looking for justice.

Mayaba: What happened with Katrina and what's going on with the land grab in New Orleans are like a microcosm of the overall state of the US today. You can go into every inner city community and they are suffering the same way. I go to Detroit and they are having the same problems that we are having in New Orleans, and they didn't have a natural disaster, right? We're losing affordable housing. We've lost affordable housing. Our communities are over-policed. We're policed up and it doesn't make us any safer. We can't get public education. We're being denied access to health care. Workers' rights are being stepped on all over the place and the breakdown of our communities is huge. So what are the issues facing us? We're being stomped. We're trying to rebuild at a time where no one really wants us to rebuild.

Amber: They brought police and enforcement to New Orleans before they started bringing other resources to actually sustain life. That doesn't promote safety --- that says to the people of New Orleans that you are a threat. After I evacuated, I wanted desperately to return to the city. A few of us were lucky enough to have a hotel room in the city [paid for by FEMA]. When that was taken away, there was nothing put in place of it. It was about a two-month period of "this is going to be the last day that FEMA will pay for your hotel." Not knowing where you're going to sleep at night leaves you in a very confused, clouded state of mind. I do believe that it was purposeful. There was no incentive to return home. There still isn't. Our hearts are home but there's no incentive there. And what we have to do is create incentives to return home and a way to return home.

Maya: In New York, similar to everywhere there are displaced people, the feeling towards evacuees at first was welcoming, but when the cameras stopped rolling that's when the help stopped. Keeping your head clear is very important just to be able to function, because there was never a time we had to actually cry over our city. We just kept running, kept going, kept going and all of a sudden it was a year had passed and we were still moving, still trying to find housing, still trying to just live. Those things were interrupted greatly. Life has not returned to normal, there is no sense of normalcy. We're still not OK.

Ingrid: How does gender play into the challenges facing your communities and the people that you work with?

Mayaba: Women of color bear the brunt of disasters: natural disasters, state-inflicted disasters, state-enforced disasters. Women of color are at the intersection of sexism and racism, and this perspective is often times ignored or separated, like you walk into one area and you're a woman and you go over here and you're black and somehow never the twain shall meet. The lack of gender analysis is particularly problematic in the organizing work in terms of trying to transform society into a way that we want to live our lives. We need that analysis of racism and sexism to develop community accountability strategies for a functional stateless society. We need to be able to ask: why are women of color affected like this? Why are we the highest rising HIV population, the fastest growing population in prisons? We know that domestic violence goes up after disasters. Yet few services have actually been put in place to help to change this or alleviate any of these conditions.

Black women are loved in theory but not in practice. There is a lack of visibility of us as women of color, outside of symbolic imagery. You saw Black women crying on TV during the flood, disempowered, the most disenfranchised person you could find. Organizations will work "on your behalf" but when you say what you need yourself it doesn't matter. At the INCITE clinic, nearly 90 percent of our funding has come from individual donors and people who support us. Foundations? Not into it. Non-profits? Not into it. Yet they have all been asking what we need and what we want to do, and when we finally say it we're ignored.

Ingrid: What would justice in the Gulf Coast, and justice for displaced Katrina survivors look like to you?

Maya: A good start would be some admittance to the neglect, to the government failing their citizens. It wouldn't change what happened but it's a good start. The treatment of people of African descent by the government, national guard, state police, and other states' police is dehumanizing and unacceptable. I had eight sheriffs hold shotguns to my head at about 9:30 at night. This was while the curfew was still in effect. The curfew was for midnight but nevertheless that still occurred. Imagine just leaving your house, getting in your car, and eight sheriffs jump out, put shotguns to your head, and tell you to get on the ground. Focusing on Mardi Gras parties is not important when there are numerous murders on a daily basis. The focus needs to change so the city can heal.

Amber: New Orleans is where my home was and my heart is. Maya hit on something when she said "New Orleanians are not new to neglect." That is a problem. The hundreds of thousands who are displaced are accustomed to being neglected. Which is why giving voice to survivors through "Stardust and Empty Wagons" is crucial. We're used to being told to shut up, or being killed in order to be silenced. The government moves like molasses, like we say in the south, and molasses moves very, very slow. And slow is not going to work right now. As fast as the hurricane hit and the levees blew and the people were out, that's as fast as we needed to move to be back in. Since it's all knocked down let's rebuild it the right way. We can start to curb our addiction to oil and electricity now by switching over to solar paneling on all the houses. Then New Orleans can be a model for the rest of the country.

Ingrid: What do you feel inspired about?

Maya: I find this forum to be extremely inspiring, and also very healing. Every time we get to speak and share these stories

with different people it helps the healing process, and helps to invoke change.

Amber: You can't kill the spirit and that's what New Orleans culture is about. That's what second lines are about. We don't die. It doesn't matter what you do to my body. I will still carry joy.

Ingrid: What is the role of allies in the struggle for justice in the Gulf Coast and for survivors?

Mayaba: When allies come to New Orleans, it's really important to do work in your own communities as well, especially to undo the racism that we've been taught and that's reinforced with every breath and step we take. We had a rally about ending the violence in New Orleans that felt like a Klan rally---it was the most pro-police white thing that I've ever seen in my life. A woman had a sign saying "Thugs are Terrorists." What I want is for people to look into your own communities and organize around that kind of mentality. You don't need to come to New Orleans to do that.

Amber: Allies can leverage the resources they have to the ends that we need, like connecting organizations to technical support. Allies can act as liaisons connecting us to opportunities like this to tell the truth as we see it. If you fight the same issues of housing and gentrification in your own town, make the connections to what's happening in New Orleans. We need tangible sustainability. Stop giving your money to the Red Cross, to these corporations who run commercials with Aaron Neville songs and sad pictures. That is not what we look like. Do I look like that to you? New Orleanians don't like pity. We're a very proud people. Demand that the U.S. adhere to the U.N. guidelines for internally displaced peoples. Police the U.S. on the grounds of crimes against humanity because that's what's going on. Demand that Blanco release the LRA [Louisiana Recovery Authority] funds that she's been sitting on and accruing interest for the past year. These funds are for the Road Home program, which has no incentive for renters, which all of us happen to have been. The majority of New Orleanians were renters, but these funds would only allocate a hundred and fifty thousand dollar grant to every homeowner whose property was damaged or lost to rebuild their home. Become knowledgeable of what's going on, like Big Easy money profiteering. The same companies in Iraq right now are the companies doing recovery efforts and getting the no-bid contracts in New Orleans.

Ingrid: How does the struggle in New Orleans impact the broader struggle for justice in this country?

Mayaba: We're at a very remarkable moment to be able to change the entire framework that we use to talk about injustice. We can talk about what happened in Katrina as human rights issues, which gives the US an international context and an international language. We're actually at a time where we can align our social movements in this country with the human rights and social movements of everywhere else.

Maya: Katrina was the largest migration of African-Americans since slavery. I can't help but think that had that not been the case we might have gotten a little bit more of a dignified response from the media, from the government. Aid wouldn't have taken so long, and not arrived. Most hurricane survivors didn't even receive the \$2000 that was supposed to aid in your immediate needs let alone monies for personal property loss or any kind of personal assistance. Most people got nothing but leaving their homes and never returning.

Amber: 9-11 was a disaster with a one-mile radius. Katrina hit a hundred and forty miles of coastline. 9-11 directly affected a few thousand people. Throughout the Gulf we're talking over a million people directly affected, between the two hurricanes from Lake Charles to the Mississippi and further north. Yet you see in the news a lot of attention placed on "oh he bought a car with his FEMA money" for those who did receive the personal property money, a lot of judgment about what they did with it. It's these little things that hurt after a while.

Ingrid: How can people support your particular organizations?

Amber: Bring "Stardust and Empty Wagons" out for a performance or for a reading--- all the proceeds go to the immediate needs of evacuees. If you know evacuees in your area, connect them to either resources or technology to be connected with other evacuees. It's huge, it's crucial. Community was a big factor for New Orleans and the pain that we feel right now is the unraveling of our culture. Culture is our life.

Mayaba: The New Orleans Women's Clinic is opening, any and all fundraising is appreciated. CR has a video called "I Won't Drown on that Levee and You Ain't Gonna Break my Back." We need to raise awareness about what happened in the prison, what's still happening. Get the word out about organizing on the ground, because the news is not getting out about how much grassroots activity is happening there. If people knew that, it would undermine every intention and plan that the government has for the city.

Maya: We have a collaboration of different musicians from New Orleans that make up the Ghetto Dreams Movement, ready to do shows and perform. We have media for sale, there are two albums. They are songs of inspiration, and days before hurricane Katrina. This music is very healing to us, so if you see that, support it.

Amber: We need reparations. You can even change the name, because the needs have changed. I don't need a mule. I don't know where I would put a mule.

Mayaba: Would the mule now be a Honda? I'd like a hybrid.

Mayaba Liebenthal is a Black feminist anarchist and human rights advocate committed to creating projects institutions that support self-determined and sustainable communities development. A New Orleans resident, she is a member of various community based organizations including INCITE: Women of Color Against Violence, and Critical Resistance. She is a contributor to the South End anthology, What Lies Beneath Katrina: Race and the State of the Nation.

Amber McZeal is a native New Orleanian by way of Lafayette, Louisiana. She currently resides in Berkeley, California where

she is a volunteer public and community relations director with the social justice activist group Survivors for Survivors, a survivor initiated non-profit organization assisting hurricane survivors with needs still unmet by the national recovery agencies. Prior to Katrina she was a student of jazz performance at Southern University in New Orleans. She is continuing her studies in sound therapy in California.

Maya Dempster is a writer artist and activist. She is a New Orleans resident via New York City right now. As a survivor of Katrina and Rita she now works closely with New York Solidarity Coalition of Katrina/Rita Survivors to aid evacuees in the struggle for social justice.

Catalyst Project [21] is a center for political education and movement building based in the San Francisco Bay Area, committed to anti-racist work in majority white sections of left social movements with the goal of building multiracial left movements for liberation. Since Katrina, Catalyst has made solidarity with the Gulf Coast a major part of our work.

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White Antiracist Organizing in New Orleans: European Dissent after Katrina

Author:

Rachel Luft

Organization:

[European Dissent \[1\]](#)

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European Dissent after Katrina:

Rachel E. Luft with European Dissent

New Orleans

June 2007

In February, 2006, in the uptown (unflooded) home of long-time European Dissent member Jyaphia Christos, participants in the white antiracist collective came together for our first official meeting since Hurricane Katrina made landfall in August, 2005. Many of us had only recently returned to New Orleans and hadn't seen each other since the storm. We spent hours going around the room and hearing each other's stories: who had evacuated and who had stayed, who had lost a home or worse, how our families were doing. The meeting had been called not only because of our great need to see each other's faces and to start to anchor ourselves again, but because we were all deeply alarmed by the new boldness with which racism was exposing itself in the city since the storm. It was happening at the level of interpersonal interaction as well as city, state, and national policy, as if the fact of new white majority status in New Orleans had given whites permission to say out loud and publicly what they had only whispered behind closed doors before Katrina. This new cultural norm was very disturbing, though we knew it was ultimately the rapid succession of policy decisions about housing, infrastructure, healthcare, criminal justice, and other institutions that would determine the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, as well as the future of the city. "You know," said Jyaphia, as we went around the room, "there are only two kinds of people living in New Orleans now: the devastated, and the comfortably devastated." Comfortable devastation meant we had witnessed the loss of our neighborhoods from television sets instead of from overpasses, and were able to purchase new items to replace ruined things. Comfortable devastation was

still devastating, but we knew she was talking about the kind of comfort that can make the difference between life and death, and also that the difference was usually drawn along racial lines. Late into the night we talked about how to turn this collective comfort, despite the disorienting levels of devastation, into collective resistance against the racist manifestations of hurricane recovery.

European Dissent (ED) is a New Orleans-based, white antiracist collective with strong ties to The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (PISAB). PISAB is a Black-led, multiracial, multicultural organization devoted to national and international antiracist training and organizing. Since its founding in 1980, PISAB has been committed to a model of antiracist activity that relies on movement building, grassroots organizing, cultural expression, and historical accountability. While convinced that multiracial efforts are key to "undoing racism," PISAB has also developed race-conscious strategies that prioritize leadership of color and that further SNCC's (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) injunction of 1966 that white people should work especially in white communities. PISAB co-founder Ron Chisom is known for asking groups if they've ever seen a hundred whites speak out about racism without people of color present. He whittles it down from fifty to twenty to ten as he challenges whites to decide what kind of responsibility they will take for racial justice. Most of the European Dissent co-founders were close members of the PISAB community in the early days, and, in 1987, unable to find already existing white groups that shared their interest in both organizing and the relationship building involved in transforming white culture and community, with PISAB's blessing they decided to form a white antiracist collective.

During the early years, ED members spent a great deal of time sharing their families' histories in a conscious effort to study and remake whiteness, as well as to build the trust and respect they knew were frequently lacking among white activists who were used to looking to people of color for validation. They also participated in several local antiracist campaigns, most notably the fight against former KKK leader and avowed white supremacist David Duke's run for U.S. Senate and then governor, as well as using the group for support and strategy as they organized against racism in their respective workplaces, religious organizations, families, etc. The core of ED's mission was to remain accountable to and to take leadership from antiracist communities of color, specifically from PISAB. This twenty year relationship and the clear lines of communication and political authorization it nurtured has helped European Dissent endure over a generation.

When we met in February, 2006 and shared our post-Katrina experiences, observations, and reflections, we were building a collective antiracist analysis of what was happening before our eyes. New policy was being announced daily in the city, and over the course of the next months we would yearn for a comprehensive strategy for resisting its racism, as well as for presenting an alternative vision for rebuilding. While we continued to talk about the need for an overarching antiracist response to storm recovery, we got back to work doing what we knew: local organizing close to home. This effort was greatly enhanced by an ongoing collaboration with Bay Area-based white antiracist organizers from The Catalyst Project and the Challenging White Supremacy workshop. Both groups sent organizers to New Orleans, who then became an intrinsic part of a post-Katrina ED. Our first significant collective effort was political education at Common Ground.

Common Ground

During the winter months of 2005-6 core trainers from PISAB had begun meeting with volunteers from Common Ground, a grassroots recovery network that had sprung up in the weeks after the storm. Malik Rahim, New Orleans native and former Black Panther, had put out the call that led to the national volunteer groundswell that became Common Ground, and by the winter hundreds of mostly white volunteers had come to the city. PISAB began to organize some of the long term volunteers in the Common Ground Health Clinic on the West Bank of the Mississippi River and Common Ground Relief on the East Bank, to foster accountability to the local communities of color in which they were embedding themselves. By February Common Ground was preparing for an alternative Spring break, expecting thousands of volunteers to spend a few days or weeks gutting houses, distributing supplies, participating in bioremediation, or doing intake at the Clinic.

PISAB, The Catalyst Project, Challenging White Supremacy, and ED together nurtured an Anti-Racist Working Group (ARWG) within Common Ground that survives to this day. As part of the big spring push, PISAB organized one day antiracism workshops throughout the month of March for clusters of incoming Common Ground volunteers. ED members participated heavily during this period, helping to train the workshops; running white caucuses for the mostly white volunteers and training ARWG members how to do it; helping ARWG volunteers set up a Community Speakers' forum for local organizers of color to speak to Common Ground and intermittently speaking at Common Ground ourselves; and providing overall mentorship to ARWG and Common Ground in an ongoing capacity. The goals of ED were fourfold: to help volunteers understand the storm and the recovery through an antiracist lens; to nurture volunteer ability to make connections between the disaster of Katrina and their own pre-Katrinans in their home communities so that they might stay involved in movement activity; to continue to support the local work of organizations of color that didn't have nearly the press, resources, or volunteer power of Common Ground; and to attempt some damage control against the unintended consequences of thousands of whites descending on a still reeling community of color. ED continues to mentor ARWG members, as well as to steer volunteers and resources to local organizations of color.

Acting On Our Principles

In the sixteen months since our first post-storm regathering, ED has undertaken a number of additional efforts to further the antiracist rebuilding of New Orleans. We continue to support the work of the People's Institute and other local organizations of color by helping to organize and do logistics for undoing racism workshops, making an effort to facilitate the involvement of both residents of color and white volunteers, and participating in other activities in conjunction with PISAB, such as the US Social Forum. We also attend the events and actions of other local organizations committed to racial justice and run by people of color, and direct resources that come our way to them, especially The People's Hurricane Relief Fund, INCITE and the Women's Health and Justice Initiative, The People's Organizing Committee, Survivors' Village, Safe Streets, Strong Communities, and Critical Resistance.

A second way in which ED has been involved is by taking a public stand against racist displays. This includes attendance at public demonstrations, other organizations' meetings, and letters to the editors of local papers (more on this below). A third aspect of our work is to cultivate antiracism and leadership development among long term volunteers who continue to come to

New Orleans in large numbers. Some participate in ED for the period they are in the city. In working together to develop accountability in whatever they have come to New Orleans to do, we are excited to be a part of their evolution as antiracist leaders. A fourth dimension of our work is to model antiracist white collectivity for the many individuals and organizations nationally who seek us out with questions about their Katrina-related activity or about their own antiracist efforts more broadly. Some of these have been referred to us by PISAB for follow up, and others know someone who knows someone. While ED has gone through many stages since its inception (a founding member marveled that “a number of times the light would almost flicker and go out, and then be revived”) what we offer is an example of a long term, stable relationship of accountability to a single organization of color, and perseverance, both of which we have come to believe are at the heart of white antiracist activity. Finally, ED serves as a clearinghouse of information, problem solving, and exploration of some of the many issues surging through the region. ED members share our antiracist struggles in our own respective shops, such as working in the public schools, undertaking coalition building among local radical organizations, or trying to reopen public housing. In so doing we troubleshoot, get feedback and support, are called to account, and remember why we do what we do. Frequently these things happen with good food and good humor. In this way we move constantly between the individual and the collective dimensions of this work.

During this current stage of ED, we realize we are finding our way as a group of recently - if comfortably - devastated people and our new dear allies, under conditions which lurch from unthinkable to heartbreaking. Often in the last twenty two months we have been overwhelmed by the challenges involved in putting our own lives back together, as well as in helping to create the conditions of a just recovery for all of us. We have struggled to find the best way to participate in light of our personal and collective strengths and weaknesses. One example from early spring 2007 helps to describe this process.

As New Orleans residents continue to return home to a city with almost no affordable housing and shuttered public housing developments, no public hospital and almost no mental health services, and reduced child care services and public transportation, the crime rate has inevitably risen. Despite the fact that a majority of victims of crime are Black, and that a majority of community leaders promoting “safe streets” long before the storm were also Black, white public outcry about crime and safety as represented by the media has spiked and often been racialized, especially after a white woman with strong community ties was murdered in her home. Concerned with the implicit racism of the public discourse, and with the explicit directives it produces about the city being better off if certain residents do not return, ED members began to attend “anti-crime” community meetings and demonstrations. Carrying a banner that reads “White People Against Racism and For Social Justice in New Orleans: European Dissent of The People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond,” and signs connecting a decrease in crime to just living conditions, ED sought to disrupt the appearance of white unanimity, as well as to engage other whites about the real causes of crime.

Despite these efforts, ED’s activity was clearly a drop in the bucket of a growing issue whites were quickly rallying behind. In March 2007, Gambit Weekly, a local magazine which presents itself as alternative, ran a deeply disturbing article on the self-arming of white men since the storm. The cover image was of a white man pointing a gun directly through a target to the reader, but the article included no commentary on the racial context and implications of such behavior. A local organizer of color sent out a public email asking, “Where is the movement of white people holding other white people accountable for their racism? ...[W]here are my white allies?” Immediately a Catalyst organizer and a friend of color whipped out a draft of a letter to the editor and sent it to the ED listserv. Over the next twenty six hours, in a rapid flurry of emails, no fewer than a dozen ED members offered suggestions, rewrote paragraphs, incorporated each other’s ideas, and voted on the most strategic way to sign the letter (highlighting locals over non-locals and people with organizational affiliations). It was pulled together at the end by a new, non-local ED member who had moved to the city for six months to support social justice activity, and who frequently stepped in to ease the load on locals. The letter made the Gambit deadline and the cut, and appeared in the magazine the following week.

This action, humble as it was, well reflects ED’s resources and limitations as an organization. While many members had made efforts to participate in anti-crime events and supported the work of local criminal justice reform organizations, ED itself had taken no leadership role in the growing racialization of crime discourse. Additionally, it was not until hailed by an organizer of color that ED responded to a specific affront. Once called to action, however, ED demonstrated a remarkably decentered and collective process, with well over a quorum doing what they could quickly and efficiently with no grandstanding or recognition seeking. Despite the many generational, ethnic, gender, religious, and subcultural differences among ED members, a strong allegiance to a set of shared antiracist principles made the actual production of a statement a strikingly streamlined effort with no disagreement or distraction along the way. Further, the action helped ED clarify for itself some working parameters regarding our capacity and our tactics during a time of great demand and disorientation about where to put our efforts. It was becoming clear that for the time being we were not going to be able to promise long term collective involvement with any organization aside from PISAB, despite the fact that most of us as individuals were closely aligned with other justice groups. We also were not going to become focused on a single issue, despite several attempts to do so, such as to create a unified strategy around neighborhood planning. We were all in agreement, however, that we wanted to respond to the needs of organizers of color, that making public, collective statements in the name of antiracist whiteness met our aim of disrupting the appearance of white racist unity, that we could rally with frequent bursts of short term energy, and that our flattened leadership and shared commitments made for a politically satisfying collective process.

As we enter the current hurricane season, and begin to prepare for the second Katrina anniversary, we recognize that despite our wounds we are tighter as a collective than we have been for years. We are closer and stronger because of the increased commitments the horrors of the storm developed in us, the inspiration that comes from seeing what our neighbors in New Orleans are doing under deeply challenging circumstances, and the infusion of energy, commitment, and solidarity of new friends and allies from around the country.

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From the Ground Up: Race and the Left Response to Katrina

Author:

Walidah Imarisha

Organization:

[Left Turn](#) [1]

Link:

<http://www.leftturn.org/?q=node/213> [2]

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From the Ground Up: Race and the Left Response to Katrina

By Walidah Imarisha

Published on: March 01, 2006

In the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, thousands of progressives, radicals, anarchists, activists, hippies and college students — the majority of them white — have gone down south to aid in relief and rebuilding efforts, and white organizations across the country have dedicated time and resources. But in their rush to help, are they recreating the racist dynamics we have seen from the government?

Is the white left racist? Sakura Koné would answer this question, for the most part with a "no." "I've been impressed with the response of the white left, liberals, progressive and radicals who have joined us out here." Kone' works as the media coordinator for Common Ground Collective, Common Ground Relief and Rebuild Green, three different arms of a New Orleans grassroots organization started after the hurricanes to provide relief and focus on alternative energy/sustainable rebuilding. "They are not just coming down here and telling us what to do, but they are listening to what we have to say. They do it our way. They are not coming like missionaries. We welcome the white left to our communities here."

"Our church is full of white volunteers right now," Victoria Cintra of Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance (MIRA) says. "We have hundreds of volunteers from the North Carolina Baptist Men Disaster Relief. They were here before FEMA, before Red Cross, when no one was helping out, and they've committed to being here for two years."

Others, however, have had serious problems with white volunteers' behavior and attitude throughout the south. Curtis Muhammad, of Community Labor United and the People's Hurricane Relief Fund, would answer the question of whether the white left is racist with a qualified "yes." "Every white person who shows up has the disease called white supremacy, and if they don't confront it and work on it, they are going to continue to have it. That's just the reality of racism."

Tamika Middleton, southern regional coordinator for Critical Resistance — a national prison abolitionist organization with an office in New Orleans — applauds people's willingness to come down and do work, but wants white people coming to acknowledge the privilege inherent in that. "For a lot of people, people of color from New Orleans and the south, we're all trying to put our lives together. If we had the means, if we had the same privilege, we would be here too, we would be organizing and fighting for our community. It's important for people to realize the privilege they have and others don't have."

Au Hyunh, who is working in Vietnamese communities throughout the south, says that there are different cultural standards people are not aware of. "When I was at Common Ground, the volunteers would be really disrespectful. They are serving a historically disadvantaged community, but they're not bathing or showering and they're serving people food, and they don't see that. A lot of white activists are appropriating poor culture when they have a lot of class privilege."

White supremacy

Muhammad says that PHRF is working to counter that disease of white supremacy. "We are talking about doing trainings, we are asking some groups down here who specialize in this to help train volunteers about their white supremacy. Some of them are taking it and some are not. Some are running around acting like slave masters."

Kone' says Common Ground provides that kind of orientation. "We tell them, 'Look, you're not from here, listen up, this is what's happening. This is what the community is about, this is the history of the community, this is what's been going on since Katrina. You've got a good heart, because you're here. You have to take the leadership from the community.'"

"White people are going to have to learn to obey and follow directions. They are not runaway slaves. They aren't now and they weren't during the Underground Railroad days. They can help us, feed us, house us, but they are not the slaves. They can't lead us," Muhammad finishes.

It's not just individuals who are having race issues. Organizations are also bringing their own assumptions and agenda to the table. "Some white organizations are trying. But white folks don't like to chastise themselves. The left does that too, it will not punish white people for their white supremacy, they won't hold white folks accountable and as long as they can do this stuff without punishment, they're going to keep doing it."

Tamika Middleton says the white left has wasted a lot of time and energy focusing on debating whether the issues in the gulf are the result of class or race. "It's impossible to separate race from class, especially in the south, because historically, culturally, it is one and the same."

Untold stories

Many populations are just being ignored both by the mainstream and the white left. John Zippert is the director of program operations for the Federation of Southern Cooperatives in Alabama, and works primarily with poor black farmers, a population he says has been greatly overlooked by government, media and nonprofits alike. "Our experience is that the Department of Agriculture takes care of the largest farmers first, rather than the smallest and poorest, which is generally where black farmers are... So the government isn't there for people. We have gotten some assistance from organizations, but it's been limited."

Big corporations are getting huge contracts to do construction, and many of them are using immigrant labor to do so. MIRA says many people they work with — the majority of whom are Latino — are either not being paid the wages they were promised or not being paid at all, are working under unsafe conditions, and are not given any accommodations and forced to sleep in tents in the cold.

Workers are being recruited to the south to do this rebuilding work. When the job is done, they are fired and then arrested by the INS, often by the prompting of their former employers, according to Cintra. "That's sad and sick. They are rebuilding our coast and we are treating them like animals," she says.

In New Orleans East, the Mary Queen of Vietnam Roman Catholic Church is seeing first hand that the city's rebuilding plan is quite literally built on top of people of color. The church, which is in the heart of a thriving Vietnamese community and has served as a distribution center and gathering place for people coming back to the community, is serving 1500 people a week. It is also right in the middle of an area that the city wants to build an airport and business industrial complex on. "They are going to take our community away; they are going to dismiss us," says Father Luke, one of the priests at the church. "We come back here as an action to say to them that we are here, we are back here to rebuild the community, to rebuild New Orleans."

History class

New Orleans and the south are what they are because of the input of people of color, and people have to be aware of the culture they are coming into. "Why do people aspire to come to New Orleans? The music, the culture, the food, and what is the origin of those? Black people!" Kone' intones.

All of the people interviewed for this article spoke of the history of slavery, immigration issues, labor rights, gentrification, police brutality, governmental misconduct, a history of neglect and racism, and the need for white organizations and individuals to understand that. It's vital that people understand the roots of the poverty and deprivation. "The problems that are happening now are not happening because of Katrina. They didn't just arrive; they didn't come out of smoke. These things are historical," says Middleton.

"You have the compounded issue of race and poverty together, a concentration of people who are poor and black and have been that way since slavery, even in the urban areas," Zippert explains.

"You can see the intersection of race, class and gender by who was left behind in New Orleans. Most of the images you saw of people who were left behind, who were stranded, are poor single black mothers. That's the fall out in a culture that is racist and patriarchal," Malcolm Woodland of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement says.

Salvation army

While this is the largest fundraising effort in the history of the US, with hundreds of millions of dollars pouring into groups like the Red Cross and Salvation Army, people on the ground are skeptical as to how effective those organizations are.

Cintra summed up the sentiment when she said, "I wouldn't give a penny to Red Cross, and I would encourage others not to."

The problem is the way major non-profits have operated in communities of color globally, says Woodland. "The fact that people continue to give to organizations that have historically not operated in the best issues of people of African descent suggests that people aren't fully aware of the history of these organizations, and what they are doing now, and not aware of alternative methods of being able to give directly to the people affected."

Several people interviewed for this article talked of the ways in which the Red Cross gives preferential treatment to areas that are predominately white and was much slower to react in communities of color. Middleton says her biggest problem is the criminal background checks that keep out people who were formerly incarcerated, and that this is a race issue as well.

Hyunh spoke of the language and access barriers that aren't being addressed. Hyunh, an activist who moved just outside of New Orleans after Katrina, offered her services as a professionally licensed Vietnamese translator to both Red Cross and FEMA. "They both turned me down, they said they didn't need any interpreters." Hyunh went down to the south to see for herself, and found a complete lack of translation.

"The police were trying to evict a single Vietnamese mother living in a housing project in Biloxi. The entire projects were flooded. The police tried to arrest her for remaining there, but there was nowhere for her to go, and she didn't speak English. She couldn't even find out where the Red Cross shelter was," Hyunh explains.

Cintra said it is even worse than ignorance or benign neglect on Red Cross' part. "Red Cross is evicting people from shelters because of the color of their skin. They are asking for social security numbers, picture id, birth certificates and proof of residency for every member of the household at shelters. That's alienating a large group of people."

Middleton says the issue is really about giving funds to organizations that can build for the future. "Red Cross and other big non-profits create a different kind of problem. It's like, 'I'm going to deliver all this food to you, but not create sustainable options for you to grow food.' There is no long term plan; there are no ways for people to be part of rebuilding their communities."

The People's Hurricane Relief Fund (PHRF) was started to provide an apparatus for survivors, local grassroots organizations and displaced people to have control over funds coming in. "We demand resources to rebuild our community under our control," Muhammad says.

Leadership position

That's why it's important, organizers say, for people of color to have a leadership position in the relief and rebuilding efforts.

James Rucker, who helped found Color of Change (colorofchange.org) after Katrina as an online mobilization tool to enhance black people's political voice, says black people have to mobilize to lobby politicians and hold them accountable. Color of Change grew to over 10,000 members in the first month and had thousands of people sign different petitions.

Rucker says it's so important for organizations of color to speak up because it can push white organizations. "Race is just not a focal point for liberal white America... When groups like ours are out there, we can embolden other white organizations to talk about race more. They will do better than if there weren't any organizations of folks of color speaking in terms of race."

While Color of Change is working to build up political pressure, others feel the way to change lies in grassroots organizing.

Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (mxgm.org), a national black human rights organization, put out a call on Sept. 13, 2005 that framed the issue again in terms of race and class. It was a framing of the issue around race that had historical memory and was not often being articulated. The demands included a right of return, the right to organize, the right to an income, the right to living wages, the right to access, the right to education and health care, and the right to self-determination.

Woodland, one of the coordinators for MXGM's Katrina Relief program, says it's really about the black community relying on itself. "My inclination is not to worry about what white folks are doing, because they're going to do what they have done historically. Every once in a while they will surprise you and I'll take it as a surprise, but my concern has been with how folks in our community have really stepped up, and I'm particularly proud of the response of black organizations."

Long term

It is not enough, though for organizations of color to lead the rebuilding efforts, but for those organizations to be made up of people most directly affected by the disaster. "Many of our black leadership, non-profits and all, are from the middle class. Our coalition said upfront, we are listening to the voices of the poor," Muhammad says.

MXGM says they are working to provide resources and training to displaced people. "Here in New York we're already seeing this develop so that people who have been displaced are beginning to say, 'Hold on, we don't need people to speak for us, we can speak for ourselves,'" Woodland explains.

Woodland hopes that other organizations will support those affected, as well to take the lead. "I think you will see MXGM move to the periphery in terms of being visible and really be a back up and provide support for those individuals as needed and requested," he finishes.

Most of the organizations interviewed are working on long term plans and goals that would empower the communities affected while furthering the rebuilding efforts.

Zippert says the Federation of Southern Cooperatives is encouraging people to use cooperatives and credit unions as tools poor people can use to rebuild. "We want to help people create worker owned cooperatives to do certain jobs created by the storm that went to Halliburton and these other companies. We can help poor people get the training and assistance to best deal with this post Katrina situation."

Common Ground wants to rehabilitate the 9th ward, which was the most heavily damaged section of New Orleans, "to show people and the powers that be that contrary to their observations, the 9th ward is salvageable," Koné asserts.

Everyone I spoke with agreed that if changes are going to happen, it will happen only by people on the ground pushing for those changes, and that as we move forward, race will continue to play an intricate part in the south, as it has since this country's inception.

"We all have to get on ground, roll up our sleeves and go to work. I do not believe FEMA or the American government...is capable of rebuilding our city; they have no intention of helping poor black people return. We are going to have to demand it," Muhammad declares.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Walidah Imarisha is a poet and an independent journalist who works with the Philly-based prisoner family organizing group The Human Rights Coalition, AWOL Magazine and is part of the poetry duo Good Sista/Bad Sista (www.poetryoffthepage.com [3]). She can be reached at [walidahi \(at\) hotmail.com](mailto:walidahi@hotmail.com). Walidah went down to New Orleans for a week in October as a volunteer and journalist, and is working on the documentary Finding Common Ground that she shot while down there.

Source URL: <http://cswsworkshop.org/katrinareader/node/406>

Links:

- [1] <http://cswsworkshop.org/katrinareader/katrinareader/node/123>
- [2] <http://www.leftturn.org/?q=node/213>
- [3] <http://www.poetryoffthepage.com>

Floodlines: Catherine Jones' Blog

Author:

Catherine Jones

Reader Version:

Classroom Reader

Link:

<http://www.floodlines.blogspot.com/> [1]

Date Published:

10/25/2005

A post-Katrina blog which I'm cautiously restarting, mostly as a testament to the increasing complexity of life in this city, as well as an homage to the thousands of unsung people who are pouring their hearts and souls into fighting for justice and equality as we rebuild.

Monday, November 28, 2005

Photos

here's a link to the first set of photos i took... pardon the awkwardness with my new digital camera :)
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/33985017@N00/sets/1469457/> [2]/

posted by catherine at 8:26 PM

Friday, November 25, 2005

Sometimes things do go right

Every day for the past few months, I've seen people's stuff out on the street. Every day. Sofas, photographs, laundry, musical instruments; I'm sure you're sick of me talking about it. Sometimes, the stuff is all soggy and moldy and turned inside-out and you know it got flooded out with everything else. Lots of times, though, everything is intact and there's a big "For Rent" sign in front of the house, and I wonder.

A few weeks after I got back, it was a beautiful Saturday and lots of people had started returning to my neighborhood to clean out their houses. In less than an hour, I'd talked to three different people who had all gotten evicted by their landlords. One landlord even told her tenant, an older Black gentleman who'd been living in the place for 15 years, and doing all the renovations for free (!), that she wanted him out so she could make more money.

"That's cold," he told me. "Where does she think I'm gonna go?" He ended up moving to Baton Rouge; he says there's nothing for him here anymore.

We keep hearing stories of people coming back to find all their stuff out on the street with no notice at all. The 73-year-old neighbor of some friends in Treme who went out of town one night and came back to find everything thrown, shattered, into the street. He ended up setting up a camp on the curb outside his house because he had nowhere else to go, and that night the temperatures started dropping. Cold, cold, cold.

Until very recently, there were hardly any tenant protections in New Orleans, and people were reluctant to fight evictions anyway, because they didn't know if it was worth the hassle. One of my neighbors said he wasn't going to fight his landlord in court even if he was in the right, because he couldn't afford a lawyer, and didn't know where to find one, and wasn't sure he'd win anyway, and it still didn't resolve the fact that he needed to find someplace new to live.

Sometimes, though, things do go right.

A few days ago, team of lawyers from the [People's Hurricane Fund](#) [3] and [New Orleans Legal Assistance](#) [4] (NOLAC), as well as other groups, won a major victory that now makes it impossible for Katrina survivors to get evicted without adequate due process. They will be mailed eviction notices and their trials can't even be scheduled until 45 days later. And FEMA is obligated to provide information to protect survivors.

Wow!

And then, the next day, FEMA, after tremendous public outcry from evacuees in hotels around the country, pushed back its deadline for evacuees to move out of FEMA-subsidized hotel rooms, giving people breathing room to look for a place until January 7.

These are 2 major victories! And they wouldn't have happened without people organizing together to improve their conditions: hurricane survivors and grassroots organizations creating a strong voice to demand real justice and accountability. What potential we have in this moment, I keep thinking.

Let's keep our voices up, y'all: right now it may be all we've got.

posted by catherine at 12:02 PM

Wednesday, November 23, 2005 **The camera, the love and the recipes**

Yesterday I got back from Washington, DC. It was the first time I'd left Louisiana since I'd returned here, about five days after the storm. I was strangely apprehensive about leaving. I know this storm has made us weird down here: I am used to people cooking huge pots of red beans for strangers on the neutral ground; I am not used to eight different kinds of toothpaste in Walgreens. What would it mean for me, I wondered, to go to a place where people take the subway to work, and don't talk to each other, and then go home, or maybe stop for groceries or a beer on the way? Could I function in a place that wasn't so marked, as we are here, by such deep collective grief?

And of course I had those moments of culture shock: looking at my friend's enormous pile of junk mail in her entryway; being amazed that I could recycle my Arizona tea can at a party; getting snapped at by a shopworker when I pocketed a tiny perfume bottle that I'd really assumed was free. (In New Orleans right now, you can find huge crates of bottled water, and dry food, and hot meals, and cleaning supplies, and toiletries, and blankets and coats and pants and baby clothes and diapers, almost anywhere. I kind of forgot that in the real world, if there's stuff in a big bin, you can't just walk up and take it.)

And of course there were all those reminders that DC is a functioning city: garbage, for example, does not consist of furniture and electrical wire and sheetrock and decaying animals. It can fit into cans that people organize neatly on their curbs. And it doesn't get picked up by tractors and bulldozers, but by garbage trucks. And every single billboard has an advertisement on it. And every single streetlight works, and the mail comes, and there are no 1-800-GOT-JUNK? signs on the telephone poles, and the power lines don't lean down over the sidewalks like nooses. But I knew about all that. I had been expecting it, and it was somehow less weird than I'd thought it would be to see so much intact-ness.

Here's what I wasn't expecting: the love, the camera, or the recipes.

I'd decided to take a train, partially because it was so much cheaper than flying, and partially because I wanted to look out a window for 24 hours and watch the land change. I had all these visions of myself sitting alone on a train gazing out of a window for hours and hours, not doing anything, not thinking anything. I knew it would be exactly what I needed.

Here's what really happened on the train: 20 minutes after pulling out of New Orleans, my whole car started talking. Everybody. About the storm, obviously: it's become a sort of dysfunctional security blanket for us. It gives us definition and purpose. We don't go anywhere without it, tucked, barely visible, into our back pockets.

But not only about the storm, not only about houses, jobs, relatives, schools. Not only about jail and being evicted and not being able to find the doctor. No, not only about those things. We talked about grandparents, holidays, the games we used to play as kids. We talked about cooking for about three hours. We got into arguments about how long it takes to learn how to make good red beans. A 23-year-old cook was going back to Pittsburgh, where his fiance' and three-week-old son were waiting for him. He'd found a job in Pittsburgh restaurant, where he'd convinced them to let him cook "real New Orleans" food. Now the restaurant is making all kinds of money.

"Yes, indeed," the 90-year-old great-aunt across the aisle kept saying. "Yes, indeed. But I bet it's cold up there."

"Baby, it's cold everywhere," the old man said in front of her, buried in his jacket.

Once people found out I was in medical school, that was it. "Congratulations!" people told me. The seat next to me was never empty again. "But I'm not a doctor yet," I kept saying over and over again. "I don't care, baby!" everybody said as they showed me their rashes, told me about allergies and headaches.

Then I started speaking in Spanish with a construction worker from Panama. He had gotten on the train with paint still drying on his clothes. He was going up to Atlanta to get his truck and his five roommates to come down here to work. After that all the Spanish speakers on the train made a little corner in the lounge car. Deep into the night we drank hot chocolate and talked about food and kids and immigration policy and how to fix cars.

No alone-time on that train. That was ok. Privacy might be nice sometime, but I guess now's the time for us to be together. "This is what's happening to me now," I thought, surrounded on that train by so many beautiful people. "I am so, so grateful."

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The reason I went to DC in the first place was to meet with other national leaders of the American Medical Student Association (AMSA), a joyously progressive and dynamic group of medical students from across the country. I was really apprehensive about the meeting, because I'm so aware, even back in New Orleans, of how much my own capacity for doing work has shrunk in the past few months. I was worried about being around people who can function at a really high level. (And if you think medical students in general are super-high-functioning, try spending some time with these brilliant, committed, activist medical students. Whoa.) Energy is dizzying to me these days. I was worried I wouldn't be able to keep up with folks, and that

people might think I was a slacker.

But then I got there, and spent the next few days being crushed in all these enormous hugs the AMSA people are sort of famous for. There is so much love among these folks. And so much commitment to social justice.

And here's what else: AMSA is serious. They are totally committed. We spent a huge part of the time there talking about how to be strategic about ending healthcare disparities based on race. This is an enormous national organization of medical students, taking on institutionalized racism in the healthcare system as a number-one priority! That's huge!

I spent so many moments, maybe while I should have been trying to catch up (!), looking at all these people who are doing so much amazing work, and thinking, "if this is the future of medicine, we might have a chance."

At the end, they gave me a digital camera.

A digital camera!!

I'd been talking to someone about how I usually hate cameras, how I feel like they interfere with memory and how they have the capacity to intrude upon the lives of the people you're filming; but how right now I feel like I really need one. I feel this huge sense of responsibility to communicate to people what's really happening here, and I think I need to be taking pictures. The next thing I knew, Wanda and Rachel had organized with all the other national leaders to collect money... and they got me a camera!!

Nothing like that kind of gift to keep you accountable. Expect pictures soon.

posted by catherine at 9:56 AM

Wednesday, November 16, 2005 **No Losing Us**

Today my mother called me to say that a family friend, a well-respected doctor, had killed himself last night. He had lost most of his patients after the storm and was struggling to rebuild his practice. Everyone knew he was depressed. I played with his kids when I was little: I remember rolling Hot Wheels through their kitchen, grabbing CapriSuns from their overflowing pantry. He hung himself in their house. All those closets we used to play hide-and-seek in.

He hung himself. After my mom told me that I couldn't breathe. I sat down on someone's pale blue steps in the middle of Dauphine Street and I couldn't even cry.

He was a good person and a good doctor. He will be missed.

Fittingly, perhaps, I went to the All-Saints' second-line this afternoon. Irvin Mayfield was playing trumpet and, as expected, lots of tourists and media showed up. At the beginning I had that "where are all the locals?" feeling that still marks so many of our cultural events. Where were we, in the midst of all those TV cameras? There are so many cameras marking our lives these days, it is hard to tell where we are sometimes. It was a little too much for me. I went into the St Louis No.1 and walked alone among the graves, the evening sun turning all those decaying tombstones silver.

Then the music started and I walked back out onto Basin Street and then I could see us. There we were! Suddenly I felt so silly: there is no losing us, even amongst all these strangers.

There is no losing us.

The sun hung low over the empty Iberville projects and the St Louis No.1, and the music started, and all the New Orleans people started dancing like we have for centuries. The way we move our feet, even the streets know it's us.

Here are my people: Mostly, we are not the ones with video cameras. We are not wearing Mardi Gras beads. We are not the ones not dancing. We do not say to each other, "Irvin Mayfield is a really good trumpeter." We do not say, "Such a shame, all the devastation," or "Martha will be so sorry she missed this."

Here are my people: the ones who did not have time to change after work. The ones who have come to the second-line in coveralls and scrubs, and chambermaids' dresses and hardhats, and Burger King T-shirts and security-guards' uniforms and cook's pants and even some people in all-white haz-mat suits. The ones who are back, the ones who never left, the ones who are here. The mothers carrying babies and groceries. The friends embracing wildly on corners saying, "how'd y'all make out?"

This is what we say to each other:

"I didn't get any water but my mama, she got about six feet of water."
"Girl, I never thought I'd see you here!! I thought y'all went to Dallas!"
"Everybody's over by my sister's house and she about to kill us all."
"I lost my house and my job but I'm ok. How you doing?"
"Baby, this is my first second line since the storm. I'm all right!"

Here are my people: the ones shivering on this first cold day; we are the ones who bundle up when it becomes 54 degrees out. We are the ones drinking '40's out of paper bags, the ones who know all the words to all the songs, the ones who know how to

dance and walk at the same time. The old people pushing walkers and still keeping time!

Did I say there is no losing us? Even amongst all those strangers, all those cameras, all that water? Even amid all that distance? Even though we have been scattered to the four corners of this huge planet, even though I have seen so many of you for the last time? Did I say there is no losing us? Even with everybody's baby pictures decaying on the neutral ground, and all our refrigerators standing out on the curb with the magnets still on them, and all the trophies and trumpets and graduation suits warped and stiff and moldy, piled on sidewalks for miles and miles and miles?

Did I say there is no losing us? Did I say it?

Look around you. Listen. Here we are. We are everywhere. We are even in the air we breathe.

posted by catherine at 5:47 PM

Monday, November 14, 2005

How we hold each other, and how we don't

I had another amnesia moment today, in the Walgreens on Decatur Street. I didn't realize until I got inside that it was the first time since the storm that I'd been inside a fully-stocked chain store, and I suddenly had no idea why I was there. For a long time all I could do was wander down the aisles, gazing at the neat rows of deodorants and Tylenol. Finally the manager came up to me and asked me if I was ok. I told him it was the first time I'd been a store so well organized; I was feeling mystified and trying to remember why I'd gone in.

His face softened. "Lotsa people are having that," he said, and put his hand on my shoulder. "You just let me know what you need, baby. I'm here for you." As soon as he said that I remembered: barrettes and a Sharpie marker. I started to feel a little normal again.

Right after Walgreens I went to the A&P on Royal, where some shelves are so bare you can see the rust that happened even before the hurricane. Yellow collard greens wilt onto the produce shelves; there isn't any lettuce. "This is more like it," I thought, before I even realized it.

It seems like everywhere I go, everyone's talking about the cops. Since the time I got pulled over a few days ago, I have been stopped by police two more times. Once they said they were checking the licenses of people who were driving around "in this neighborhood" and once a sheriff waved me over to the side of the road because he said I was speeding. Probably I was. Again, I didn't get a ticket. He even said something like, "I wouldn't give a ticket to a person like you."

Wow. A person like me? What on earth does this sheriff know about me, besides what I look like?

Two days before that, my friend Greg, who is Black, was arrested while he was watching the police arrest someone else, next door to the clinic in Algiers. They never told him what he was being charged with, and they took hold of his shirt collar and banged his head against the windshield of the car, again and again.

We have a patient named Mr Ross who comes to the Central City clinic every day we're there, so we can check his blood pressure, and so he can remind me to call FEMA, and so he can tell us stories of what Central City was like when he was growing up here, back in the '40s. His mother owned lots of apartment buildings in the neighborhood, and one day we were sitting on the corner and he pointed to a building a few blocks away that now has an entire wall missing, desks and bedroom sets still arranged for the whole world to see. "If my mama was alive," he said, "I would have found me some tools already, and fixed that whole place up for her. She liked to keep her places nice."

"Your pressure's amazing!" we say, every single time he comes. But he still comes every day. "Y'all are basically the only people I have to talk to anymore," he told me the other day.

Yesterday my friend Joanna was talking about how people just come up to her on the street and start talking. So many people's networks are completely disrupted, especially people who are poor. One of her neighbors said she was the first person he'd talked to in three days. He told her everything. I wonder if this is what it's like when you get older, when all your friends die and you don't have the desire or energy to build new relationships. Will we become a city of mourners, sitting alone on stoops watching other people's lives parade by? All these broken hearts we wear on our sleeves.

posted by catherine at 11:04 AM

Wednesday, November 09, 2005

This is real, and a step toward justice

I keep having conversations with people about how "surreal" everything is right now. On so many levels, it's true: we're running a free integrative medicine clinic out of a mosque; we set up other clinics in churches and parking lots and baseball diamonds; military police patrol the streets in Humvees; people have dinner in fancy restaurants like nothing ever happened. There are so many day spas open uptown! Huge parts of the 7th Ward still don't have power. My block is still lined with drowned cars and upside-down refrigerators. I spent a large part of this afternoon lugging huge vessels of water to my house so we could flush toilets; a house in my parents' neighborhood has a sign out front that says, "Cox! When can we get our cable back?" The animal rescue people are still out in full force. I really wonder what they do all day.

But I'm not sure about the word "surreal." On some level it seems like too much luxury for us to declare that ultimately this is anything but real.

Today I gave a ride to a man who had been walking all day. He walked from the Greyhound station all the way to his house in the Lower 9th ward; he looked at his house for 20 minutes, couldn't take it anymore, and walked back. Water had gotten up to the roof. The military had kicked in his front door and everything was all over the place. So many people talk about how it's one thing to come to the knowledge from far away that you've lost everything; to see it before your eyes is another thing entirely. He won't come back, he says. He will get a job in Baker, Louisiana (right outside Baton Rouge); his wife and 12-year-old daughter are in Texas, where they will stay so his daughter can finish out the school year. He only wishes he could be with them at the end of a long day. His daughter is growing up too fast.

Yesterday we went to the March on Gretna, which was organized in protest of the time during the hurricane when hundreds of weary African-American people tried to cross the Mississippi River Bridge to safety and were turned away by armed police with guard dogs. The police shot at the people and sent them back to New Orleans, which was flooding, and which had no food or water or electricity or medical care. People had to go back to the Convention Center, where they made orderly stacks of bodies in corners and on sidewalks as the people died.

Over 100 people crossed the bridge yesterday, but still I felt surrounded by ghosts. I have never been more conscious of the people who weren't there: all these families scattered to the winds, picking up new lives in Texas and Wyoming and Ohio. It seemed fitting to me that the most beautiful aspects of this march were the drivers in the opposing lanes of traffic: a driver of an 18-wheeler who couldn't stop honking, who kept yelling over and over, "I feel y'all, man! I just feel y'all!" The backs of pickup trucks full of work crews, shouting and cheering, their fists up in the air.

posted by catherine at 9:16 PM

Friday, November 04, 2005: Littering, and what we remember

Yesterday at the clinic I had a patient who couldn't remember the name of the street he used to live on. The Times-Picayune had a big story in the Living section today about short-term memory loss. I find myself gazing at people and wondering where I've met them before. The other day, a woman drove by the clinic and said, "I can't find the Winn-Dixie anymore! I've been living in this neighborhood my whole life, and I don't even know where the grocery store is."

I remember one of my first patients ever since the storm, a woman from Chalmette who spent twelve days tied to a steeple. She says the only way she could survive was by forgetting many, many of those days. "I lost nine days of my life," she told me. "That's why I'm here now."

What does it mean that so many of us have forgotten some of the things that used to define our world; things like numbers and names and addresses, places, people? What has taken up that space in our minds? How, and why, and what, must we remember now, in order to keep surviving?

I dressed up as fire for Halloween and it was all right. People danced on Frenchmen Street until about one-thirty in the morning, when the National Guard actually tried to enforce a Last Call in this 24-hour city. On the way home from the street party, our friend L. got stopped by the police because some paper fragments of her costume fell onto the sidewalk. They were wearing pig noses and she thought they were joking. They ended up arresting her for littering and she spent that night and most of the next day in jail.

Littering! On my block there are twelve refrigerators, with contents that have been rotting since August. There are bales of electrical wire; there are heaps of sofa cushions, moldy mattresses, soggy shirts and trousers. There are warped bookshelves, their contents spilling out into the street. There are entire trees, shattered and dusty. There are broken chairs rattling on the curb like kindling. There are the bones of animals. How can anyone be arrested for littering here, in this whole desert city full of garbage?

Our other friend, M., spent most of the night trying to figure out how to get L. out of jail, a disaster even when New Orleans is functioning normally, but in this case it involved even extra questions, like, Where is jail these days? She asked about 8 cops and no one knew, since a few days ago they'd closed down the Greyhound station they had been using as a makeshift jail. After over an hour of searching, she found what they're using as jail these days, a garage in the Orleans Parish Criminal Sheriff's building. Court is a cubicle in the garage, where thirty male prisoners, shackled at the ankles, sat on the floor awaiting their hearings. No one had seen a lawyer. Our friend L didn't have any water for almost 24 hours since she'd been in jail, even though in the court next to the judge there was a crate of Ozarka bottles. L asked the judge for one but the judge said, "Those aren't for you. Those are for the staff."

Our friend M says this experience brought home to her how the prison system doesn't only lock up its inmates, but all their loved ones too. She felt like she couldn't leave the jail at all, because maybe that would be the time they'd decide to let L out, or give out some tiny bit of information. She, too, felt captive. All that time she spent waiting for L to get out, she couldn't read or talk on the phone or do anything. She slept and looked around a lot. All she wanted was a hot shower and some food that wasn't peanuts.

Today the thing about this Halloween arrest story that sticks with me is its ordinariness. it is not abnormal in New Orleans, especially for people who are poor or people of color, to be picked up off the street at the drop of a hat. Parents are used to the idea that children may not come home one day. Even in privileged circles, jail is seen as a weird inevitability: Tulane Medical

School gives out the name and number of a lawyer to help out any students who may run awry of the law.

Even still, though, I don't know if I can imagine rich white people getting arrested in this city for littering. (L is Mexican). Another friend talks about how anytime she is in the car with her African-American boyfriend after dark, they get stopped by police. There has only been one night since the hurricane where they didn't get stopped.

Today I made an illegal left turn off Rampart onto Esplanade. I've been doing it every day since the storm. Today, a cop pulled me over and explained that I'd made an illegal left turn. When he was going through my license and registration, he found out that my license plate was also expired, my insurance card was out-of-date, my registration was expired, and I didn't have a brake tag. He said he'd only cite me for the brake tag, and if I got a new one before my court date (which is not until January!), the charge would probably be dropped. When he gave me the ticket he'd written, he said, "I made your court date a long while away. That way you'll have plenty of time to get your brake tag taken care of. I know things here hard right now, with the hurricane and everything."

posted by catherine at 6:46 PM

About Me

Name: catherine

I am a New Orleanian first and foremost. I am a medical student; I am madly in love with my family and friends and the young children and glorious elders in my life; I go on long runs and short road trips and glittery costumed escapades... but really, the love of my life is New Orleans. I am a daughter and granddaughter of this city; this land is the blood in my veins. I am dedicated to struggling inside and outside New Orleans for racial and economic justice, and high-quality accessible healthcare, and the weaving back together of fractured communities, and the right of all people to be home.

Monday, October 31, 2005: "Natural Disasters Don't Discriminate"?

Today is Halloween, which means that in addition to trucks full of National Guard and contractors, the streets are also teeming with superheroes on bikes and winged angels driving pickup trucks. Tonight I hope we are all out in force, costumed freaks dancing our demons away.

The other day I spent five hours at the FEMA station with Yogi, an 82-year-old African-American man who lives across the street from the clinic. We were both there to find out what happened to our checks, which were supposed to have been mailed out weeks ago. I know so many rich white folks who got their checks back in September. Some even got two. Neither Yogi nor his son have gotten anything yet; meanwhile they don't have a phone and depend on the Red Cross and neighbors for some of their meals. And they are better off than most in the neighborhood.

The FEMA office is a cryptic maze of desks and folding chairs, and depending on what you're there for, they assign you to a different row of folding chairs. Every time someone gets up to go see a caseworker, everyone else in the chairs behind them has to get up and move one spot closer to the top of the line. Every time we had to move, all the old folks had to heave up their tired bodies, gather possessions, maneuver walking sticks, readjust to the new seat. We are all used to moving too much these days. From three seats back I could hear Yogi's rusty bones creaking like old doors.

There's a big poster on the wall there that says, "Natural disasters don't discriminate." I spent a good part of my five hours wondering who put that poster there, and why. Do they want us to scrape our minds for any trace of logic to convince us that we are all equal here, that the people who waded through floodwaters, and lost relatives, and waited under a scorching sun for days with no food and water, and who are even now being prohibited from seeing their houses, and who are even now being stopped by police and arrested with a force and exuberance greater than I have ever seen before, even here, are not overwhelmingly poor and Black? And that so much of this, and the racism that allows it to exist, is not actually the result of disaster but the cause of it?

After being herded around the FEMA office for so long, Yogi felt like he needed to thank me for taking him on this errand. He and his son cooked an unfathomably huge meal for me at their house. They're worried that the hippie cooks at the clinic don't know how to cook mustard greens properly, so they made me bring my leftovers back to everyone else. They put an enormous amount of greens and cornbread and rice and potato salad into a plastic Betty Boop bowl, covered it in foil, and told me to make sure everyone got a taste of what "real greens" are like.

After work on Saturday I ran, in my work clothes, to a street parade with the Box Of Wine Krewe. It started in the Treme and ran to MiMi's in the Marigny. The Soul Rebels brass band played, improvising lyrics to traditional songs so the refrains now said, "Where's my FEMA check?" I was one of the only ones not in costume, among a horde of pirates, dominatrices, and various abstract renditions of hurricane loss. Along the route I picked up branches and streamers and scraps of yellow Caution tape so that by the end of the evening I was a tree/majorette. I felt more at home then than I ever would have if I'd stayed in my unadorned hoodie. Being in costume is really really important in New Orleans. By the end of the evening, the dominatrices were whipping the National Guard's humvees and all these individual Guard people kept coming over to us and saying things like, "Man, we really wish we could come party with y'all.. maybe after our shift? how long y'all gonna be out here for?"

Then I went to see the Rebirth Brass Band play at Tipitinas. I've been seeing Rebirth play since I was about thirteen and it's been a while since I was blown away by one of their shows. But that night it was beautiful. The majority of the crowd was local Black folks; it was the first time since I've been back in New Orleans where I've been around so many Black folks just hanging out. I mean, hundreds of people, singing along to all the songs. Leaning over the balconies, arms outstretched. Dancing on

chairs and tables, pushing over the stage and dancing on speakers, so many people dancing on the stage you couldn't tell who was the band and who wasn't. It was one of my most welcome-home moments yet, all these hundreds of sweaty people in this familiar space, each and every one of us making that music.

The next morning I took a long walk through the Bywater, where there are still streets that have things like, "Mom bad legs please help now" spray-painted on them. People walking dogs and watering flowers amidst all these piles of sticks that used to be someone's house. There's one silver warehouse there that I used to love, shiny in its decay. Now strips of the corrugated metal have been peeled away and you can see straight through it, all the way to the Mississippi River Bridge, silent and gleaming like church towers in the white morning.

posted by catherine at 10:09 AM

Thursday, October 27, 2005: Axes

At dinner tonight we talked about axes. What it means to grow up thinking you need to have an axe in the house in case you need to chop your way out the roof one day. I don't know if that ever happened in my childhood, even though in New Orleans we always lived inside the shadow of some looming storm. Growing up white and middle class, I think I always had an assumption that even if a major disaster hit, we'd somehow be safe. That if they sent out the lifeboats, we'd be first to get on. Crazy how that kind of reality can get ingrained in your brain, even at six; how it colors the world decades later, when you find out it's true.

Today we set up a little shot station and first aid center at the Israelite Baptist church and everyone we saw said they wouldn't have gone anywhere to get a shot if they hadn't been walking right by on the way home from work. I'm glad to be there, even if there's not a whole whole lot we can do for people yet.

I'm going to a potluck tonight. I'm bringing cereal and soy milk. Usually that wouldn't cut it at a potluck, but tonight I think it'll be ok. No grocery stores are open past six, and everyone's contributing whatever they've got in their measly fridges. So nice to have anything, even if it's Cheerios, to bring to a party.

Walked home tonight thru the French Quarter after it had gotten dark. It's full of men, now, different than usual. These guys are from places like Ohio and Jersey; they're cops and firefighters and Army Corps of Engineers people. Mainly white. They're making lots more money in our city than most folks from New Orleans ever thought of making. These men don't whistle and catcall from across the street, they walk over from the well-lit bars and try to start drunken conversations. I feel eerie on a whole 'nother level, like I'm a stranger in a new place, learning the codes of how to protect myself all over again.

And meanwhile there are all these other workers here, the ones who don't unwind on Bourbon Street after a long day. Most evenings some of us have been going to different hotels and work sites where large numbers of mainly Latino workers are staying, sometimes imprisoned by their bosses. Sometimes we have to set up our clinic a few blocks away, because the bosses won't allow medical workers into the areas where the workers are. People sneak off in the dark to get medical care; they return to the barely-lit hotels two by two with herbs and aspirin. They sleep four or five hours; the next day they've started working again long before sunrise.

posted by catherine at 8:57 PM

Wednesday, October 26, 2005: new ghosts

Every day there are new ghosts.

Yesterday i spent the afternoon walking around my old neighborhood, almost crying. Little things would make me almost cry: a violin in a yard, encased in mold. My neighbor's studio window, with "New Orleans, I love you so much!" spray-painted across it. I don't know if he's back, or if he's coming back, ever. I feel ok about crying on the street these days, but yesterday, every time i was about to give in and let myself do it, i'd run into an old neighbor and we'd have the How'd Y'all Make Out conversation. Did you leave, where'd you go, how's your family, how's your place, where are you staying now, listen to the crazy thing I did the other day. These days, I have that conversation so many times, it's almost mundane. Lost the house, job's in Lafayette but the kids are in school in Baton Rouge, so-and-so moved to Dallas, forever. I always brace myself for the news. No one ever says, "I'm great! How are you doing?" Weeks ago our reunions were joyous, screaming affairs in the middle of streets. We were so glad to see each other alive. The National Guard and the Animal Rescue workers would gaze at us in awe as we'd jump into each other's arms from all the way down the block. Now the quantity of stories has become overwhelming. Sometimes I want to just walk on by and not listen. But for some reason I always stop.

Today we went to the Israelite Baptist Church in Central City to talk about setting up a free clinic there a couple of days a week. Reverend Larry was amazing; he brightened my whole day. The church does a whole host of programs, everything from an exercise ministry to a drug program called "Sons of Blood and Thunder." For the past three Sundays they've had services without electricity, and every week over 100 people showed up. Rev. Larry explained to us that everything they do, they do it for the community, whether people are religious or not. No one has to be a part of the church to participate in the activities the church does. They've even set up a nonprofit to do things like distribute condoms and talk to teenagers about sex and drugs, since it's hard to do those kinds of things through the church itself. We said we'd be happy to do the clinic in whatever space they had available, that we were good at making do, having set up clinics in parking lots and baseball diamonds, and Rev. Larry said, "Y'all are my kinda people." I think I'm still smiling from when he said that.

After we left, Molly said. "I'd always heard organizing in New Orleans is about relationships, and I think I'm starting to see how

that works." It's been really amazing to see other people here willing and ready to learn about how organizing works here, people being conscious that there is a long and rich history of amazing work here. I feel like a big part of my job is to help translate that reality to people, help people slow down and listen and be respectful of the place they've come to. Every time I get in the car with folks from out of town, I hear myself saying things like, "this didn't always used to be a Wal-Mart. This was the St Thomas housing project until just a few years ago, and there was hella organizing going on back here." People need to know that if they are coming to rebuild my city.

Thinking a lot about what it means for me to be "rebuilding" this city as a healthcare worker and someone committed to racial and social justice. I think I'm coming to an understanding of how I need to balance actually being out there and doing work, because there's always more people needing healthcare than there are ways to fill that need-- even here! in this city where so many people still aren't around--and also being conscious and strategic about what kind of healthcare there needs to be. Feeling excited about building relationships with grassroots anti-racist healthcare providers in the city, like the St Thomas Health Clinic; feeling like this is a time where anything is possible and where healthcare itself can be an amazing force in the struggle for racial justice in this broken city.

Driving home tonight I felt like I was in the middle of a checkerboard. The Quarter lit up like Disneyworld; poor black neighborhoods a few blocks over so dark I couldn't even see the street in front of me. The whole city like that: housing projects so desolate you can hear the doors, loose from their hinges, creaking in the breeze like songs. Who's here, who's not. Who gets to come home, who doesn't. At night I feel us all here, lost together, wandering through that dark.

posted by catherine at 10:38 PM

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Love Letter to Common Ground Clinic

Author:

Catherine Jones

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Winter 2005

Hi Common Ground folks,

I hope all of you are doing really well. I would love to be at this discussion with all of you, but I can't. I decided to write y'all a note instead, so you could know what I'd say if I was around. (When I started this I thought it would be a paragraph or two, but I guess

I had a lot on my mind J. I know it's a lot to read, but I really do hope you find the time.)

First, I hope you know that I'm saying what I'm saying out of respect and love, and from a place of complete amazement at what all of you have accomplished in the past few months. Common Ground has done some

incredible work since the storm, and I think its potential is boundless. I continue to be awed by all the passion and energy and creativity and love I've seen from so many of you, and I can honestly say that my life is better from having had each one of you in it.

Some of you might not even know me, since I've been around so little in the past few weeks. I feel sad that I'm so disconnected to this space these days, and I feel like it's important for me to let y'all know why it's been happening. About a week before Thanksgiving I left Louisiana for the first time since the storm. I knew leaving would be a really intense experience for me, but I wasn't prepared for the major disability I would feel upon returning here. There were days when I got back where I could barely meet my minimum obligations, days when I would drive through so many neighborhoods I used to live in, or play in, or work in, and just cry. I had finally hit that wall of sadness so many of my friends and neighbors and family went through when the storm came, when I had been too busy working to let myself feel anything. I feel like this is still happening for me, and since so much of my usual support network has been scattered to the winds, I am dealing with this intense loss largely alone.

I'm not saying this so that people can feel sorry for me; I'm saying it because it's real, and not just for me but for most of us who are from New Orleans. We are still shell-shocked. I think sometimes people forget that we are still experiencing such deep sadness, that it cuts into our lives and that none of us is quite whole, yet.

The reason I'm saying this to y'all, though, is because some of the most severe culture shock I experienced upon returning to New Orleans was around coming back to this clinic. I feel like it's my responsibility to communicate this to you, not because how I think or feel really matters that much in the long run, but because if it's happening for me, and I share at least some aspects of culture and identity with many of you, I can only imagine what must be going on for people from this community who are trying to become more involved in the clinic. And, perhaps most importantly, because I believe in this work, and I believe in all of our ability to do it, and I want it to be as effective and as accountable as it can be.

When I came back to New Orleans, I was coming back from DC, where I'd been meeting with national leaders from the American Medical Student Association, and where the majority of my weekend was spent discussing how we can build a concrete strategy to end institutionalized racism in the health care system. Medical students, y'all! This is a group

of extremely educated, primarily white people not only willing to give up a lot of the power they have, but actually totally invested in that process because they know how damaging racism can be to any attempt at providing competent healthcare. To come from a meeting of medical students where so many folks were passionately talking about working against racism, to this clinic, another primarily white grouping of progressive healthcare providers, which barely has any significant collective consciousness of race or of its own privilege, was jarring. It compounded the sadness I already felt about returning to my destroyed city, and made it that much harder to come back.

I began working more with primarily local groups, like the People's Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Committee, which is consciously multiracial and African-American-led, and also spending more time working with the Latino Health Outreach Project, because I felt like a big part of our work in LHOP centered around building relationships with local Latino organizations in the city, which was really important to me. Working more with local folks helped me move toward balance in my own life, since everyone else was also dealing with how to grieve and work at the same time and I didn't feel like a slacker for not being able to put in 18-hour days like so many folks working at Common Ground. At the same time, I also became even more conscious than before of the disempowerment that can happen when a group of outsiders with power and resources enters into a community and begins implementing its vision without a whole lot of input from that community. In the end, it doesn't really matter if that group is "progressive;" disempowerment is still disempowerment.

I think this dynamic plays itself out in a number of ways at Common Ground. I want to focus on the ways we interact with the community, the ways we interact with local social justice organizers, and what we do with our resources. There are also some aspects to our internal structure that can have drastic effects on the larger New Orleans community and the effectiveness of our work. I could point to a whole lot of things and explain why I am concerned about them, but I think sometimes it's better to pose a series of questions and trust that a good conversation will come out of it. I hope that you take the following questions seriously and hold any answers you may find, even the uncomfortable ones. I hope that if any of these questions makes you feel uncomfortable, that you don't dismiss the question itself, but that you are able to sit with it, breathe, listen, pay attention.

How are community volunteers integrating into the clinic? Do community volunteers have a dedicated space where they can voice opinions and

concerns about how things are going? Do they know about this space, come regularly, and speak out? If not, why not? If there is such a space, how (concretely) does the rest of the clinic take its suggestions into account? Do most of the community volunteers come regularly? How many are “one-timers” who don’t come back? Do we follow up with people who don’t come back to find out why they aren’t coming back? What do we do with this information?

How many out-of-town volunteers interact regularly with the community volunteers, besides saying Hi or Thank You? If not many, why not? How many out-of-town volunteers actively support the participation of community volunteers, by giving people rides, taking care of kids, telling folks about when meetings happen, encouraging them to take leadership in the running of the clinic, and helping them figure out concrete ways to do so? Do we trust community volunteers with money? If not, what does that say to them about us? How many community volunteers are members of the steering committee, or any workgroup?

How many local social justice organizations do we have good working relationships with? How much about the history and context of local social justice organizing do we know? How do we learn about local organizing, and how much energy do we put into finding out about locally-led efforts? Who are the groups we do know about and why do we know about those groups in particular? Do we include local organizers in projects they express interest in, or on which they have done significant amounts of work already? Do we communicate with local organizers about our work? Do we share resources with local organizers, if we have resources and they need them? How might the following statements, uttered by Common Ground activists to or about local organizers, be interpreted by the local organizers?

“I’d love to work with New Orleans people, but they’re all so slow.”

“Nothing was going on in New Orleans before Common Ground.”

“They’re just jealous because we’re the only ones doing anything.”

(The following statement was said by a Common Ground person to a local African-American organizer who has a deep, strong history of organizing both locally and in national organizations) “If you join our project, you’ll be empowered.”

What does it mean that Common Ground activists can be assured of the truth of these statements, without a complete understanding of the pre- and post-hurricane political context in which their work is occurring?

How might a grieving community member interpret a sign in front of the clinic that says, “Less tears more action?” What assumptions have Common Ground people made about local organizers and the work they are, or are not, doing? Can we point to any projects where we’ve supported the leadership of local people, on their own terms? If not, why not? When we say things like, “nothing else is going on” or “the community isn’t ready,” what evidence are we using to backup those statements? What concrete ways do we have of making sure we listen to local leaders who are also fighting for justice here, in their home?

Do you know how we are spending our money? If so, why? If not, why not? How much of our money goes directly into the community itself (not to Common Ground projects or to Common Ground volunteers who didn’t live in the community before the storm)? What does it mean that the clinic is paying rent for out-of-town volunteers and not reimbursing people for the cost of gas if they drive from their residence to work at the clinic? How did we choose which of these things to prioritize? Which clinic volunteers benefit from this arrangement? Under this arrangement, who may face barriers to being able to work here? What does this say about who we invest in and why?

Remember when I said I felt like a slacker because I suddenly became less capable of working the insane hours so many folks at the clinic put in? What do you think about that? What does it mean that the people who spend the most time at the clinic are also the ones who hold the most power? And that almost all of those very same people do not have significant roots in New Orleans? Do we accept that things have to be this way? What does it mean that the culture of the clinic celebrates intense work, almost to the point of burnout? Who benefits from this culture? Can we ever expect that level of work from people who have roots, and lives, and family here; who are still grieving a vast tragedy, and who don’t have an intact home to go back to one day? What does this say about where power will eventually lie in the clinic, and what does that say about the eventual purpose of the clinic? Do all of us understand how decisions are made in the clinic, and where power lies within the clinic? If not, why not? How do we arrive at a collective sense of what we are accountable to, as a group of people working together?

Ok.

That was a lot of questions. I hope they start some kind of conversation, or at least some process of internal, or within-the-clinic, reflection. I also hope that if these questions have brought up uncomfortable feelings, or anger, or defensiveness, for people, that people are able to hold those feelings and

not dismiss the questions because of their reactions. I know for me sometimes that can be really hard to do, especially when I feel really invested in something. I guess that investment itself, more than anything else, is what I'm questioning. Because ultimately this work is not about you, or me, or any one of us. It's about building a world where all of the structures that keep people down don't exist anymore, and where any human being among us has the power to decide, for real, how they will live their own life. Right? And for that to even begin happen in a legitimate way, we need to own up to our role in that whole process. How we help it along, and how we stand in its way. And that really, until that happens, all the work and the time and the busy-ness and the bustle around and feeling burned-out and going to meetings and being important, all of that doesn't make a difference ultimately, because it isn't honest.

I want to stress again that I'm not saying all of this because I'm dying to point out a billion negative things about what I still think is a completely incredible spot of brightness in this sad, sad world. I'm not saying it because I really want to type four pages (!) in the middle of the night that I'm not sure anyone will ever even read. I'm saying it because even after everything I am not even close to writing off Common Ground. Even after everything, I am also learning that after two weeks of not being around, I miss you all. I miss your energy, and the five thousand projects all going on at one time, and the ways I've learned to think about health and healing from so many of you. I miss the food and the neighbors and the levee and everyone's random attempts to implement a system for us to start cleaning up after ourselves. More even than that, though, I'm saying this because I know not only that we have work to do, but that each one of us has the potential to do it. And to shine! From what I've seen of each of your hearts, and all of your passion, and all the incredible beauty every single one of you has put into the world, I know this. Above anything else, see, this is a love letter.

And so all I ask of you is this: Please, for the sake of this work, just take a deep breath and look around. Please just start there. I think our future might depend on this one small step.

With solidarity and my whole entire heart,

Catherine

PS—I'm not one to drop bombs without having some way to follow up.

Starting next week I'm planning on working at the clinic on Monday mornings, and being around for LHOP meetings on Tuesday afternoons,

and community workgroup meetings on Thursday mornings. I'd love to talk to any of you around those times, and you can also call me at 504-250-6655. xoxoxo

Solidarity not Charity: Racism in Katrina Relief Work

By Molly McClure

I recently spent three weeks working at the Common Ground Relief Clinic in New Orleans, an all-volunteer run free healthcare project that opened a week after the hurricane. The following are some thoughts I had about the difference between solidarity and charity, specifically reflecting on the role of folks like me--- white activists from out of town--- in Katrina relief work.

As many people have said, the mess of Katrina was caused by a storm of racism and poverty more than wind and water. Katrina was about the racism of war that took money away from fixing the levees and other much-needed disaster preparations and went instead to the killing of poor people of color in Iraq and around the world. Katrina was about the racism of US-led capitalism that accelerates global warming, bringing bigger hurricanes and tsunamis and other "natural disasters" which always disproportionately affect the poor. Katrina was about the legacy of slavery, which meant that many white New Orleanians had the economic resources to evacuate, such as a car or other means to escape the storm and subsequent flooding, while many Black New Orleanians did not. Katrina was about the racism of FEMA and the Bush administration in their murderously slow response (you know it would have looked different in Connecticut!). And Katrina was about the racism of the police chief of Gretna, who, with the support of his predominantly white town, turned Black survivors away at gunpoint as they tried to cross the Crescent City Bridge to safety because he "didn't want Gretna to turn into the Superdome."

Like most of you, I'm guessing, I was outraged and heartbroken by what I saw, and I wanted to go down and see if there was some way I could support the people of the Gulf Coast in their efforts to deal with this mess. When I got there I saw and heard devastating things, stories of loss my ears are still full of, images of destruction that cut into the meat of my heart. I also saw and heard many, many inspiring things--- stories of resistance and hope, of survival and vision. I met incredible people who fed me red beans and rice on Mondays and told me about their families and their lives, who shared with me some of what New Orleans meant to them, people who through

theirstories helped me understand the depth and breadth of this atrocity.

(By the way, I'd really encourage folks to seek out thesefirst-hand stories, and prioritize reading information and analysis aboutKatrina written by survivors and long-time residents of the Gulf Coast, forexample "New Orleans and Women of Color: Connecting the Personal and Political"by Janelle L. White, which is available online).

I was also inspired by how many folks from outside New Orleans hadgone down to volunteer, had seen what was happening and were appalled, andfound a way to go down and support in any way they could. I met incredibly committed activists,folks with skills and energy and immense creativity and huge hearts.

And while it was moving to see how many people came down tovolunteer, with that also came one of the unexpected heartbreaks for me ofbeing in the Gulf Coast post-Katrina: the racism that white activists likemyself brought along with us, even as we came intending to stand in solidaritywith the people of New Orleans. And although there are many many stories I wantto tell, this is what I feel a really deep need to write about, and I see thisas part of an ongoing conversation. (Note: for this article, I'll be using thePeople's Institute definition of racism, which is race prejudice plus power, andusing it interchangeably with "white supremacy," meaning the system of wealth,power, and privilege which keeps racism in place).

First, I want to say that I'm not approaching this conversation asif I've got it all figured out, because I have a ton of work to do and makeplenty of mistakes, including the ones I'm about to discuss. And I want to say that while I will bespeaking from my own perspective, there have been many people of color whoseanalysis and experiences have helped me develop the antiracist framework I'musing to think about this situation. I just want to put that out because I think it's important to recognizewhose labor and experiences have helped inform what I am saying, and how I'm sayingit.

So having said all that, I want to talk a little about the waysthat we white folks, no matter how well-intentioned, bring our white privilegeand our racism with us wherever we go, and how this really hijacks solidarityprojects and imperils our capacity to be true allies. Despite the fact that what happened in New Orleans wasunderstood by the majority of whites even slightly left of center to have itsroots in racism, it does not seem that this awareness has translated into uswrestling any more seriously with white supremacy, even as many of us mobilizeto support the communities of the Gulf Coast.

One example I want to give is about the looter/finder distinction made by mainstream media outlets in describing stranded New Orleanians carrying food. Do folks remember seeing that? The captions of pictures said white people “found” stuff, and Black people “looted” stuff, though the images were identical except for race. Lots of us forwarded an email around about this, and were justifiably outraged at the blatant criminalizing of Black survivors in the media. People I know wrote letters to the editors of newspapers, sent scathing emails, and called in to radio shows to protest that and other racist portrayals of Katrina survivors.

The question I want to ask is how many of us white folks make these kind of looter/finder assumptions about people’s behavior all the time, in our heads? How many of us make these kinds of racialized good guy/bad guy distinctions when we’re walking down the street in our hometowns, standing at a bus stop late at night, interacting with new people in our activist spaces, talking to co-workers at our jobs, seeing patients in the clinic?

While the media portrayals were egregious and telling, I think the insidious, often unconscious prejudice that we’ve learned by living in a racist culture is also incredibly dangerous. The People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond calls this “internalized racial superiority,” and that’s what I saw playing out so dramatically among many white solidarity workers who came to New Orleans, even though many of us were there because we felt a deep desire to take action against what was clearly a race-based hate crime.

So I have some questions for white folks thinking about going down, questions I am still asking myself: first of all, why you? Why are you going? Could our resources and energy be better used supporting survivor organizing at home or fundraising, rather than spent traveling to the South? Are we committed to doing support work that may not feel as “exciting” as going down ourselves? How did it come to be that we are able to travel to and around New Orleans, while many survivors still can’t go home? What are we bringing with us, what will we take back? What has been the role of white people and white institutions in the destruction and reshaping of communities of color in the US, in the history of New Orleans? When we go down, are we expecting to be thanked, to be welcomed, what is our real motivation for going? What will be the long-term impact of our work on the Gulf Coast communities with whom we’re supposedly standing in solidarity? How are we going to be accountable to what we saw and heard and did when we come back, and to whom do we feel accountable? How are we going to make meaningful connections to the same kind of injustices back home? Do

we know about the issues facing poor communities and communities of color in our hometown, and are we as motivated, as committed to dealing with those issues where we live, which could bear a striking resemblance to what's going on in New Orleans? Are we seeing survivors of Katrina as "worthy" poor, deserving of resources and relief work, without recognizing that the poverty back home is equally a result of systemic racism, and equally crucial to address?

In the three weeks I was working in New Orleans, I spent most of my time at the Common Ground Clinic, where most of the volunteers and healthcare providers are white. (Though the call to create Common Ground was put out by Malik Rahim, a Black activist and organizer who never evacuated New Orleans, the people with the resources and time to respond first to that call were overwhelmingly white, class-privileged folks, who continue to be numerically the majority). While I was there, I heard comments like "this is so cool that New Orleans is going to have a free clinic now!" or other statements suggesting that we, the white saviors, had come to bring capital a **ACTIVISM** to the region, which before we got there was presumably some kind of political wasteland. Now, I definitely didn't do my homework like I should have before I got there, but I was pretty sure that the city had had a vibrant history of resistance and organizing from the time of the slave revolts on, and I had recently learned about the Saint Thomas Clinic and other local healthcare justice projects. The fact that the town was so intensely depopulated may have made it possible for an inexperienced out-of-towner to mistake the absence of people with the absence of organizing. But I know there was more to it than that---racism fosters in white people an easy, unconscious arrogance, an inability to see past ourselves, the capacity to be "blinded by the white." Mixed up in this also, I think, is the classist assumption that poor folks aren't politically conscious or organized, or that they only "become" so when outside organizers arrive.

Another example of these racist assumptions could be seen when folks expressed the valid concern that the community wasn't involved enough in running the health center, even though flyers were put up around the surrounding Algiers neighborhood inviting residents to volunteer and become a part of the clinic. I've been a part of this dynamic in the past---wondering why "they" don't come to "our" meeting or event, without understanding how alienating the white culture of our projector organization might be to people of color, from the language, timing, and structure of our meetings to the way we dress (especially in places like Common Ground, which, when I was there, had a predominantly punk/hippie subcultural scene

going on). When there has been a lack of community involvement in other neighborhood projects of which I've been a part, it's usually because the project began or evolved without a concerted effort to connect in a respectful, non-tokenizing way with people in the neighborhood to see what they were working on already, what their priorities were, what strategies they'd tried before, how we might support their work before starting a brand spanking new project with us in leadership.

In the case of the clinic in particular, it was an immediate disaster relief project that needed to happen, and I see it as a fantastic example of the capacity of the left to effectively mobilize in an emergency when the state infrastructure failed. But now that the clinic is a more permanent fixture, there will be some real wrestling with power and privilege in the months ahead, if it is to reach the stated goal of transitioning to community control, and if it is to have a role that is less about service provision and more about rebuilding infrastructure and offering resources in a way that supports community self-determination.

Another example I want to offer is a hand-painted sign at the clinic that said, "Less Tears More Action!" I never found out who painted this, but I'm guessing it was a white person from out of town, like me. And no matter who created the sign, I wondered what the impact of that statement was (for the day it was up) on the people who came to the clinic, who were mourning immeasurable losses and experiencing worlds of grief that we as outsiders would never be able to fully comprehend. Yet we felt entitled to offer brightly-painted suggestions about it being time to quit whining and move on, and presumably we were to be the role models of what kind of "action" folks should take.

One day at the clinic, Kimberley Richards and Bridget Lehane, organizers from The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, came to meet with us about the possibility of doing an anti-racism training for volunteers at the clinic. Kimberley pointed out that like it or not, we--- mostly white healthcare providers and activists in a hurricane-ravaged poor Black town--- stood to profit off our time in New Orleans, either socially through gaining "activist points" or professionally by writing papers or books about our experience. She asked us how were we going to be accountable to that fact, how we were going to make sure that the people most affected by this tragedy would also stand to gain and not be profited off, as they so often were by the organizations and institutions that were supposedly serving them.

The difference between charity and solidarity felt huge that day and as we

discussed whether or not we could--- more truthful to say whether or not we would--- close the clinic in order to participate in their two and a half day training, called the “Undoing Racism Workshop.” I realized that solidarity felt easier when I thought about it in terms of us simply offering a crucial resource to the community --- providing free, accessible healthcare and free medications in a place and time when that was a dire, dire necessity. And that’s incredibly important.

But the challenge of real solidarity is that it requires us to take a critical look at the bigger picture of Katrina, the context, and to see how we fit in. Solidarity means looking at how power and privilege play out in our own lives, and obligates us to consider our role in relation to the state and system that helped engineer this disaster. To be in solidarity we would need to understand how our class and race privilege impact why we were the ones able to offer the healthcare resources in the first place, and be real about whether the clinic serves to challenge or reinforce that inequality. Solidarity requires us to seriously grapple with our racial prejudice, and recognize how it affects the work we do in the clinic and how we interact with the community. To really be in solidarity, we would need to more fully examine and drastically overhaul the assumptions and biases in how we deliver healthcare, we would have to acknowledge and deal with the white culture of the project and how that affected our patients and which providers felt welcome in the clinic, and we would need to see and wrestle with the fact that our presence in New Orleans was profoundly changing the class and race dynamics of the intensely depopulated neighborhood and town. We would have to be willing to look at and be accountable to the ways in which we might actually stand to gain more in the long term from our “solidarity work” in the clinic than the community who we were supposedly serving.

At this point I still have more questions than answers about what being in solidarity really means. But I know solidarity’s a hell of a lot less comfortable than charity, and involves me not just going to someone else’s decimated town and helping out for a little while or even a long while and then going home and doing a report back, or writing a reflection piece, though that could be part of it. Real solidarity means keeping up the conversation about race and class in the US with other white folks, and working diligently to break down the racism in mainstream white communities---where institutional power currently resides---as well as challenging racism in the white left. Real solidarity requires me to go on an ongoing, difficult journey to reckon with my own stuff, and my family’s stuff--- to recognize and challenge our collusion in the system of white supremacy. My experience in New Orleans makes me ask myself what I’m

doing right now, right here, to support the self-determination of communities of color and of low-income people, what I'm doing right now to support a revolutionary transformation of systems of power in this country. It makes me ask myself what I'm doing right now, right here, to help root out the racism in my own heart and the heart of communities I'm a part of, so that I can struggle in true solidarity with communities most affected by injustice as they lead the movement for radical social change.

Molly McClure does sexual health and racial justice work in Philadelphia, and is excited to hear your comments, questions and discussion: genderific@hotmail.com
This writing happened with a lot of support, feedback, and insightful conversation for which I'm incredibly grateful.

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The Work is Not The Workshop: Talking and Doing, Visibility and Accountability in the White Anti-Racist Community

Author:

Catherine Jones

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The Work Is Not The Workshop: Talking and Doing, Visibility and Accountability in the White Anti-Racist Community

by Catherine Jones



Ok, white folks. I think it's time for us to focus. We know a whole lot, y'all, but I don't see us putting our knowledge to real use out there. I mean there's a whole big movement going on in this world!! Where are all the white folks? Where are we?

This is what I mean. Here's what happened in my community last week. When I say "my community" I'm not talking about the city I live in but the people I know.

1) Two hundred Palestinian-American residents of New Orleans found out that the lands their families have owned and farmed for generations, the lands many of their family members still live on, are about to be destroyed by the Apartheid Wall that Israel is building to imprison the Palestinian people.

2) My friend teaches at an all-African-American high school that lost a soccer game two nights ago to an all-white school. The (white) referee falsely called fouls on the all-black team and never made any calls against the white team. After the game, some of the players on the white school's team, together with their friends and parents (!), taunted the African-American players with racist slurs. Some of the African-American students fought back and are now facing lawsuits, expulsion from school, and criminal charges. The white students are not being punished at all.

3) My friend's boyfriend got out of jail after having spent a year imprisoned under false charges of killing a cop. The only reason he got out of jail at all was because folks in the activist community were able to raise thousands of dollars so he could get a decent lawyer. Hundreds of thousands of low-income African Americans just like my friend are in jails across the country, imprisoned on outrageous or false charges, without basic rights to privacy, healthcare, or good counsel.

Last week, y'all! To folks I know! We gotta get our shit together!

I think it might be time for the white anti-racist community to take a critical look at ourselves. I think of myself as a part of this community and I'm saying what I'm saying out of a need I feel to hold myself accountable for the actions (and inaction) of my community. Everything I've written I've taken from my experience and direct observation of white anti-racist culture. I take responsibility for any incorrect representation of my community. I'm also writing out of love for the countless fierce and dedicated white anti-racists I know, and because I've been feeling this sense of urgency more and more lately. Maybe it's 'cause I moved back to the South, where the brutality of racism doesn't only stare you in the face every day; it picks you up while you're walking on the sidewalk, smashes your head against the concrete, and tosses you into oncoming traffic. Things are bad here. Maybe, though, it's also 'cause I know that we, white folks, have not only the obligation but the potential--we really do--to make a real-live, genuine, accountable contribution to the struggle for racial justice that is happening in our world, right now. But I don't see us out there. I want us to get started. White folks really are out there, fighting for justice. But sometimes I think that those of us who are fighting are not nearly as effective as we can be.

I'm beginning to think a large explanation for this situation lies in some fundamental aspects of white anti-racist culture. The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond says that any time white folks get together, we re-create the structures of racism whether we're conscious about it or not. Looking at white anti-racist culture, I believe it more and more. Even if we're getting together to strategize about fighting racism, I'm not sure that we're as aware as we need to be about how even our anti-racism can uphold the system of white supremacy. I'm speaking of three specific aspects of white anti-racist culture: our preoccupation with perfection, specifically as it relates to behavior; our focus on thinking about and analyzing, rather than actually doing, the work; and our skewed system of honor and recognition.

Before I used the term "white anti-racist activist" to describe myself, I spent a lot of time doing racial justice work without thinking about larger issues like imperialism, global economic injustice or even institutionalized racism. I knew racism was a bad thing, I did what I could to fight against it, and that was that. Once I began moving in more established (and, interestingly, more white) activist circles, I began drawing connections between, say, a seemingly isolated incident of racist violence and the global structures of oppression that allow such acts of violence to happen regularly in our society. And, because it was San Francisco and they were available, I went to a ton of workshops. I am boundlessly grateful for all I was able to gain from participating in so many anti-racist trainings. Interestingly, though, even though I had a more sophisticated analysis of racism and my role in the white supremacist system that we all live in, my work wasn't initially that much more effective because of all this knowledge I'd acquired. Ironically, because I was spending so much time first participating in and then giving workshops about racism, I had a lot less time to fight it.

Tema Okun says that perfectionism is one of the hallmarks of white supremacy culture. I think one of the unfortunate ways in which white anti-racist culture mimics white supremacy culture is our tireless dedication to "figuring out" how to be the perfect anti-racist. While we are congratulating ourselves 'cause we're getting closer to understanding what accountability really means; while we debate whether it's more effective to say X or Y thing at the people-of-color-led meeting, the world is broiling outside! People are dying out there, y'all! I guess if I have one overarching thing to say to white anti-racist activists it's this: Think less. Do more. How we do stuff is important. It really is. But it's not so important that we need to figure out all the intricacies of how to do the work before we dig in and start rolling up our sleeves.

And why is it, anyway, that we spend so much time talking about things like What To Say At The Meeting, or When To Go To The Meeting, or Taking Up Too Much Space? I do think it's useful and important for white anti-racists to be conscious of our behavior in multiracial settings so that people of color don't have to deal with our shit. But at the point when discussing behavior in an anti-racist setting stops being about useful political strategy and begins to be about how not to get embarrassed 'cause you said the wrong thing at the meeting, we got issues.

Like I said, I really do think it's supremely important to have consciousness about what we do as activists and organizers, especially when it comes to standing in solidarity with people of color. I just think it's more ok for us to make mistakes than we may have trained ourselves into thinking. And while I think that certain aspects of anti-racist etiquette are integral to establishing good relationships (e.g., Don't Talk Too Much At The Meeting), I think that if we spend too much time focusing on these things it can end up guiding the white anti-racist movement into the direction it's in danger of heading right now: equating anti-racism with interpersonal behavior instead of with true radical change, which takes on the entire system of white supremacy. And white supremacy will only go away if we organize, not 'cause some white guy finally held his tongue at a meeting.

But the organizing part- hopefully the real reason white folks are taking the time to learn so much about anti-racism in the first place-can often be a point of paralysis in white anti-racist culture. Because we spend so much time discussing why, for example, it's not always appropriate to go to meetings or join groups that are primarily for people of color (and this is true and important), it can often be hard for a white person to figure out exactly, then, where it is ok to go. Sometimes I think white folks can get really hung up on the What Is My Role question. This is a big question, and it's worth figuring out. But I wonder sometimes if our workshop-heavy culture has obscured it more than necessary. Look around, is what I finally realized. There are as many, if not more, ways for white anti-racists to plug into the struggle for racial justice as there are white anti-racists.

After I started going to lots of anti-racist workshops, I spent a lot of time pondering where exactly it was that I fit into the whole anti-racist picture. At the same time a whole bunch of low-income women of color weren't even able to get to their meeting a few blocks away 'cause no one was around to watch their kids. A few friends and I decided to start a group that provides childcare for meetings and events held by people-of-color-led organizations in our city. We showed up consistently and we took considerable direction from the moms around the tone, goals and rules of the childcare. At the same time, we also spent a lot of time as a group developing our own principles- around childcare, our group structure, strategies for leadership development, and standards around which groups we would support and why. I learned a lot from that experience about taking leadership from people of color, and developing my own anti-racist principles and sticking to them, and about the variety of ways in which white folks can be in legitimate solidarity with people of color who are fighting for liberation.

Interestingly, when I was working with the childcare collective, one of the biggest challenges we faced as an organization was around getting a group of high profile mostly male white anti-racists to take childcare seriously. Even though in larger anti-racist circles childcare had come to be recognized as legitimate political work, we ran into consistent issues with people who had committed to do childcare regularly but who were "too busy" when we actually called them. One person even told me he thought he had moved "beyond" doing childcare; that childcare was a good introductory activity for people getting to know more about anti-racism, but that he had surpassed that level. This opened up a whole lot of questions to me about where the priorities lie in the white anti-racist community.

Lots of white anti-racists talk about how doing anti-racist work means often taking on the tasks that are "not sexy." Yet our same community, which advises doing the unsexy work, continues to reward the work that is more high-profile and glamorous. We probably know at least a little bit about the work of folks who put on workshops and travel around the country speaking about racism. This is important work. But what do we hear about the tons of people who even now are driving the family members of a prisoner to visit their incarcerated relative, or making phone calls to housing project residents to let them know when the next community meeting is, or providing translation at an organizing meeting so that recent immigrants can participate in a cross-race struggle for workers' rights?

That white anti-racist culture places such strong rewards on high-visibility work, like conducting workshops or speaking and writing about racism, while it ignores other aspects of anti-racist work, is dangerous for a variety of reasons. Most obviously, this dynamic contributes to an overall sentiment that if we talk about or think about being anti-racist we are in fact being anti-racist. This idea, in turn, can help to create an anti-racist culture that puts more importance on talking and learning about the work than on actually doing it. An overwhelming critique from organizers of color who work alongside white folks in struggle is that white folks talk too much and do too little.

If we are to be truly accountable to revolutionaries of color we need to create a culture that prizes the doing, as much as we prize our abilities to educate each other. Both are crucial if we want to build an effective movement.

Even more disturbing to me, though, is that our workshop culture may have gotten to the point where it is more committed to supporting workshops than supporting the actual work. I can't count the number of times I've talked to anti-racist white folks with incredible energy and commitment who take an anti-racist workshop and then think the only way for them to do real-live anti-racist work is to become an anti-racist trainer. This is not to say that being an anti-racist trainer isn't an important way to do anti-racist work, but it is by no means the only one. It is, however, the most visible, and this is the part that's problematic. The What Is My Role question, already a source of at least temporary paralysis for a good number of emerging white anti-racists, becomes even more obscured if newer anti-racist white folks don't have any role models to look toward except the people putting on the workshops. The problem, of course, is not that these other role models don't exist but that we, as an anti-racist community, don't celebrate them as much as they deserve.

Finally, if the white anti-racist community is saying that white folks should do the less sexy, less visible work while at the same time we devote our energy to raising up the very work in our own community that is the most sexy, most visible work, we are sending mixed messages to everyone our community affects.

Perhaps most importantly, we're sending the message to organizers of color that white folks don't practice what we preach. Again, if our movement is to be truly accountable to communities of color and to our goals of racial justice, we need to actually act on our principles.

In addition, this dual message can have a confusing effect on other white folks. In essence the white anti-racist movement is saying "it's not ok for white folks in general to do this, but it is ok for this white person to do this." This dynamic can create distinctions among white folks that will not help our movement. If I've learned anything from my experiences doing anti-racist work in the Bay Area and now, struggling to be effective here in the South, it's that the white supremacist strategy of divide-and-conquer doesn't only succeed famously in keeping oppressed folks apart, it also works like a charm by creating these false distinctions in the white anti-racist movement.

If we're serious about creating an anti-racist praxis that legitimately challenges the visibility white folks have enjoyed at the expense of legacies of hard, uncelebrated work of people of color, we need to be able to look critically at where the visibility lies in our own community. What does it mean, in a movement whose very mantra is Don't Talk Too Much, that our own celebrities are folks who do a lot of talking? Does it mean that these folks are so special that they don't need to abide by the standards we as a movement have set for ourselves? Does it mean that maybe one day, if I'm special too, I can kinda bend our principles in the name of doing the work? I am not at all saying that anti-racist trainers are bending the principles of anti-racism by doing the incredible and necessary work they do. I am saying that this has the potential to be dangerous territory, and that all of us need to be aware and responsible with the positions we hold.

I should take the time to stress here that I am specifically not aiming my criticism toward white anti-racist trainers themselves. I, like many white anti-racists, owe a huge amount of my political development to incredible anti-racist trainers like Sharon Martinas, Clare Bayard, Chris Crass, and others. Instead, I am offering feedback to the larger white anti-racist community, of which I consider myself a part. More than the acts of any anti-racist trainers, who, again, are doing good work in our community, it's the culture of our community, which prizes things like perfectionism, talking instead of doing, and the creation of Famous Anti Racists, that is actually hindering our progress toward achieving true racial justice.

This being said, however, I would like to point out that white anti-racist trainers, because of the amount of visibility they do have, are in a unique position to guide our movement toward greater accountability and effectiveness. I think one of the useful ways for trainers to begin to do this is to challenge their own visibility by giving props to the many white anti-racists working behind the scenes in communities across the country. Take the time to find out who these folks are. Mention them by name in trainings, essays and speaking engagements. Talk about the work they're doing. Emerging white anti-racists need a variety of role models, and the white anti-racist spending most of her free time Xeroxing, phonebanking, or taking care of a revolutionary mother's kids can probably use the support of her fellow white anti-racists, in addition to the reassurance that her work really is important and necessary.

Additionally, I would like to ask white anti-racist trainers to be respectful and responsible with their position and with the language they use. These two examples may seem picky, but I think resolving them can contribute toward making our movement more accountable to our goals of true racial justice.

First of all, on more than a few occasions, I have heard white anti-racist trainers refer to the work they do as "organizing." While the work of white anti-racist trainers is valuable, it is not organizing in the historic sense of the word. Equating the two obscures the vibrant legacy of grassroots organizing in communities of color, which allowed oppressed people to come together, gain a sense of their collective power, and build strategies that allowed them to win important victories in struggles for liberation.

Secondly, because a significant amount of anti-racist training is devoted (necessarily) to anti-racist behavior, I would argue that it's crucial for anti-racist trainers to make the distinction between anti-racist work and anti-racist group dynamics. The white guy who's not dominating the meeting is definitely behaving nicely, but simply by holding his tongue he is not doing anti racist work. Thinking about doing the work, and behaving well within the scope of the work, are not the same thing as actually doing the work.

Maybe more than anything else, white anti-racist trainers can make a concerted effort to guide their training participants toward specific, accountable, and necessary anti-racist work in their own communities. San Francisco's challenging white supremacy workshop now requires its participants to spend 6-8 hours a week working with a racial justice organization during the 15 weeks of its training program. While such a requirement may be logistically impossible for many anti-racist training programs, especially those that don't have long-term relationships with their participants, there may be ways for training programs to work with participants on developing tools to identify and plug into specific racial justice struggles in their own communities. It's been my experience that short-term anti-racist workshops for white folks include a lot of material on how to act once you start doing the work, but not a whole lot on how to actually start doing the work. How do anti-racists find out about racial justice struggles occurring in their communities? How do they figure out appropriate roles for white folks once they know what's going on? What are some specific steps that primarily white social justice organizations can take once they decide to take on an anti-racist agenda and build relationships with organizations of color? These questions, and the many hopefully concrete answers that can come from them, may be a good starting place for white anti-racist trainers who want to guide their work toward supporting more pragmatic anti-racist practices.

Finally, I would like to suggest that white anti-racist trainers are not exempt from doing behind-the-scenes practical anti-racist work in their own communities. In fact, because these folks are in many ways the

mouthpieces of the white anti-racist movement, I would think that white anti-racist trainers have more of an obligation to be connected and accountable to the struggles that are happening in their local communities. What does it mean if an anti-racist trainer is "too busy" giving trainings to get involved in even a little bit of on-the-ground work in her own community? Again, training white folks around anti-racism is vital to our work. Many white anti-racists speak about their participation in anti-racism workshops as experiences that changed their lives and deepened their commitments to work for racial justice. This is amazing! But I do think that anti-racist training programs, especially now that we live in a time where there are so many of them, have a responsibility to be knowledgeable about and accountable to the liberation struggles happening among people of color in their own communities. This is vital if anti-racist workshops want to achieve their goal of supporting white folks on their way to becoming active fighters for racial justice.

Like I said, there's a whole big movement out there that needs us. And there are also a whole lot of dedicated anti-racist white folks trying to figure out legitimate ways to participate in the struggle. I would like to challenge all of us in the white anti-racist community to spend a bit of time looking outward, instead of inward. To find out about the specific places that really do exist in the struggle where we can put our fierce and beautiful energy to use, even if it means we're a little less sure of ourselves, even if it means we may make more mistakes, even if it means challenging our abilities to be comfortable in this work. To challenge fame and visibility in our community, whether it's our own or that which we help create. And, finally, to raise each other up for the really unsexy, unrewarded work so many among us take on, out of nothing less than their fierce commitment to build a better world.

I'm saying what I'm saying because I believe in us. And because, for me, the white anti-racist community has not only been a source of sharp political analysis, but also a source of strength, courage, and astounding inspiration.

And because I am in awe, not only of the work that we need to do, but of the incredible potential we have to do it. And because at this point I can't think of any greater act of love that I can give to this community, other than to hold us accountable to the principles we have an obligation to live by.

Revolutionary love is not only about standing together and supporting each other through even the darkest parts of our political process. It's also about challenging each other, compassionately, to be the most fierce, committed, kick-ass fighters for justice we can be. Because our movement requires nothing less.

Rants, comments, and boisterous criticism can be addressed to Catherine Jones at cjones14@tulane.edu
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">[cjones14 at tulane.edu](mailto:cjones14@tulane.edu)

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What I Wish I Knew: My Own Goals for Anti-Racist Practice

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Catherine Jones

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SEQ CHAPTER \h \r 1<![endif]--><!--[if supportFields]><![endif]-->**What I Wish I Knew:**

MyOwn Goals for Anti-Racist Practice <!--[if supportFields]>

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by Catherine Jones

These are some principles that I've developed formyself so that I can stay focusedon actually doing anti-racist work, rather than thinking and talking about it awhole lot. These all come straight from lessons I've learned from my experienceof doing the work. I'm not saying that any of these statements is The Answer;this whole list of stuff is

more a reflection of where I'm at right now in my ongoing struggle to figure it all out. Maybe it'll work for you, and maybe it really won't. My main point in all of this is, if you want to do anti-racist work, do it. Don't wait until you feel like you're the perfect anti-racist. There's a whole big movement out there that needs you!

Do your homework. There IS stuff going on in your community. Find out what it is and how you can support the work.

Don't expect people or organizations of color to tell you how to be in solidarity with them, but be willing to modify or toss out any of your ideas if they think there's a better way for you to support them. Have a very rough plan that you can be flexible with and that's based on an authentic and accountable understanding--not just your own thoughts--of where people and organizations of color can use your support.

Be conscious about how you prioritize your work--spend a significant chunk of your time doing the stuff that really is unsexy and be conscious about what you do and don't commit your time to. If going to 8 workshops a week has you feeling too exhausted to do childcare at a meeting for low-income women of color, you may want to re-evaluate.

Build accountable relationships with other white anti-racists who can both support you and call you on your shit when it's necessary.

Take care of yourself but be real about it. Figure out the things that rejuvenate you and do them; take breaks when you need them, but don't use the excuse of "self-care" to get out of doing the work. Set realistic boundaries for yourself and stick to them.

Give Practical Support!!!! What are your resources that you can share with organizations of color? Maybe you can provide food or childcare or translation at meetings, maybe you can help phonebank for specific events, maybe you can volunteer to work at the front desk, give people rides, find out where a group can get donated computer equipment, or throw a fundraising party at your house. There are tons of ways for white folks to give necessary behind-the-scenes support to organizations of color. Figure out--don't assume you know--what people need, and find a way to help out.

Don't abandon the work if it makes you feel "uncomfortable." This is a pretty common feeling when white folks are actually working with people of color. Acknowledge that you feel this way, try and figure out why, get support from other white anti-racists who you respect, and keep going. Most of us have been there.

Don't wait for people to come to you out of the blue 'cause they won't. Be proactive about letting organizations and allies know who you are and what you do. Figure out when it's appropriate to get involved, and do it.

If the majority of your anti-racist work consists of educating other white folks on anti-racism, make sure to spend a lot of time focusing on ways the participants in your training or workshop can plug into racial justice struggles that are going on in their community. Work on developing tools for identifying existing struggles and developing a group's capacity to support those struggles in a practical, not just an ideological, way.

Make sure not to confuse anti-racist group dynamics with anti-racist work. And don't give up on one just because you're practicing the other.

Do authentic and accountable leadership development with emerging white anti-racists, especially around doing the work. Talk to newer white anti-racists about their work, what they've learned, and what's been challenging. Help them to build the practical skills they need. Be there for them.

Give props to white folks who are doing practical, behind-the-scenes anti-racist work in your community.

Find role models of your own, white folks who are doing anti-racist work in a variety of capacities. Seek out these folks in your own community. They're there.

Be willing to do what's needed. Maybe you really want to be working with some amazing and popular organization of color that doesn't actually have a whole lot of opportunities for you to plug in, while another organization down the street is doing less high-profile work but really needs some folks to help them with fundraising. Take the opportunity to be of use.

Take criticism from people of color for what it is--a gift.

If you have political disagreements with a person or organization of color that you're doing political work with, think critically about what your issues are and where they're coming from. Don't abandon your principles simply because a person of color may have a different take on a certain idea, but don't be afraid to challenge some of your deeply-held beliefs if you find that they don't hold up when you look at them with an anti-racist framework. Be open to criticism, even criticism of your politics, if it comes from an anti-racist perspective.

You're gonna make mistakes. You're gonna feel embarrassed when you do. This is not a reason to stop doing the work! In my experience, if people know that you're a generally accountable person who shows up and kicks ass when you're needed, they won't take it nearly as hard if you say or do the wrong thing every now and then. But learn from your mistake, don't make it again, and do what you can to smooth things over in a principled way.

Build authentic and good personal, as well as political, relationships with people of color.

Don't be a shrinking violet. Sometimes white folks think they're being anti-racist if they go to a meeting and don't do or say anything at all. You can step up to the plate without dominating. Just make sure the stuff you're stepping up to do is appropriate. (If you're not sure what's appropriate or not, start out by volunteering to do behind-the-scenes support work that someone else won't have to take a whole lot of time to show you how to do. As your relationship with the organization progresses you'll get a feel for how much leadership or visibility they want you to take.)

This is my motto--say less, think less, do more. Remember that you're not a whole lot of use to the movement if you're sitting in a workshop. Put your knowledge to use. The struggle needs you!

(...and Don't Talk Too Much At The Meeting. Really.)

feedback, rants, insight, or arbitrary observations can be addressed to cjones14at.tulane.edu

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New Orleans Stories

Author:

Fernando Marti

Link:

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Fernando Marti, June 2007

In the first week of June, I had the opportunity to come to New Orleans for a joint conference of progressive community-based urban planners and architects, the Planners Network and the Association for Community Design. In late June, I met up with my friends from PODER-San Francisco in New Orleans, on their way to the US Social Forum in Atlanta. In the two and a half weeks in between these events, I was able to contribute a small amount to the work of some of the organizations doing work on the ground here in New Orleans. Thanks to my hosts, the People's Hurricane Relief Fund (PHRF), and especially to Claudia Montesinos, an architect and educator working with PHRF and with the MLK, Jr., school in the Lower Ninth Ward, for allowing me this inside look into New Orleans. These are a few observations.

1. Stories



So many stories here in New Orleans. After Katrina, everyone has a story, a whole collective process of therapy. Every store I step into, there's someone with a story: Going back to your house, everything turned upside down, furniture from the back room of your shotgun house improbably floating to the front room. Shoveling out a foot of mud from the floors. Finding one last picture of your mom, the only picture you've got left. Saving a lady's bird, carrying the bird cage for her all the way to the Superdome, only to have someone kick it, bird flying out, never looking back. "Like maybe we all should do," he says.



Bourbon Street, the main tourist attraction in the French Quarter still smells like stale beer, and it's hard to understand its appeal. On a weekend night, it appears to be doing a healthy business of drunken college students and business persons, if one can call that a healthy business, but, from the folks I talk to, that's about as

far as the post-Katrina tourist industry goes, except for occasional events like the Jazz Fest. The tourists are warned not to come down out of the "safe" area of the French Quarter. The white visitors come for the jazz and blues on Bourbon Street, but few venture to Tremé, the real birthplace of jazz, and the historic pre-Civil War quarter of free Blacks just outside the colonial Vieux Carré.

At a bookstore I meet a shopkeeper who can't take it anymore. She's packing her books and moving to Houston. New Orleans is now the number one murder capital of the U.S. With desperation comes senseless violence. Suicides are up again, too, she says. Some killed themselves right after Katrina, people who lost everything. But others carried on, came back, plugging away, day after day. Now, however, living in a block empty of people, vacant lots strewn with garbage, no help from the government: the stress is taking its toll. Anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress syndrome... She's gotta get out, she says, before she breaks down completely. And she shows me her building that she's put up for sale, bookstore downstairs and a loft above: a cool \$900,000. Another one of the contradictions of this city. But then she says, "Just make me an offer..."



You find devastated pockets throughout the city, right next to perfectly fine neighborhoods. There's boarded-up houses, spray-painted X's indicating when the house was inspected, by whom, and how many dead bodies were found. Seventeen hundred dead is the low estimate of deaths from Katrina in New Orleans. A second set of spray painted lettering seems to have been done by the SPCA. "Seven cats under house," says one sign, then, next to it, "many cats." They couldn't keep up with the count. This is old news. I remember seeing these images soon after the hurricane, but, incredibly, they are still there. Even many of the houses where people have returned have kept their spray painted X's, perhaps some badge of defiance: you tried to get us out, but we ain't going anywhere.

I'm staying in an apartment near Xavier University, rented by People's Hurricane Relief Fund to house volunteers. There's a row of buildings across the street, that look like they must have been quite nice once, with big porches, but all the siding and roofing is gone. I notice they've fixed up one of them, with a sign, "condo for sale." One day I wake up to see that half of the closest building is gone, exposing bathrooms and kitchens, the doors of the kitchen cabinets on the second floor swinging wildly, the cabinets still filled with someone's china. In a half hour the building's gone, and by the middle of the day the entire row is gone, all their contents bulldozed and lifted into

dumpsters. No recycling here...

2. The Lower Ninth Ward



You can often tell where the old Jim Crow segregation lines were by the state of the houses. Claiborne Street was one of those lines, and even after desegregation and all the white people moving to the suburbs, you can still see the difference between north of Claiborne and south of Claiborne. The flood just made it all the more visible. The Claiborne Street line is stark in the Lower Ninth Ward. Some say it was the better quality of the construction south of Claiborne, some say it was the force of the breach at the Industrial Canal levees on the north side, some say it was the city, systematically razing every house north of Claiborne for which they could find an excuse.



Conspiracies are never far from residents minds. Many remember that the levees were intentionally dynamited in 1927, and (many say) again in 1965 after Hurricane Betsy, flooding the Black neighborhoods in order to save upscale white neighborhoods. And then there's the giant concrete barge which came through the breach in the levee, floating back forth and in the flood, smashing any house in its way...



The Lower Ninth Ward was perceived as a "poor" neighborhood, but, in fact, it was rich with community organizations, and a high rate of homeownership for New Orleans, over 56%. Historically, workers in the Mississippi river shipping industry first bought houses near the River in the Holy Cross area. Slowly, other relatives came, built their houses across St. Claude Avenue, and later generations developed their homes in the last area, north of Claiborne, towards the wetlands. We meet Mr. Blake, who had the first house on his block in



1945. He's a leader in the Lower Ninth Ward Survivors Council. He walks his neighborhood every day, even though his house is still only an empty lot. He points to where his house was, where his brother lived, where the nightclubs were, the boarded-up school which his children attended. He knew every person on his entire street, knew their kids in the school, organized the Dad's Club in the school. He will rebuild, he says, he's not sure how, only that he will rebuild. Part of why so many are eager to return is this aspect of the neighborhood, knowing your neighbor, having all your brothers and sisters and cousins and grandparents within walking distance. But it was also part of the tragedy of the Lower Ninth: entire extended families lost everything they had, and after the flood, many had nowhere else to go to.



South of Claiborne, toward the Mississippi, people are slowly rebuilding, a couple of houses on this block, more in another. It's where Fats Domino's house is. It's where Global Green (with some money and publicity donated by Brad Pitt) is developing five new houses, an 18-unit apartment building, and a community center. They're supposed to be affordable houses, all green technologies. Everybody talks about the Brad Pitt houses. And everybody talks about the "Road Home" money they'll never get. Road Home is the Federal program, administered by a private contractor, to help residents rebuild their homes. But no one trusts it. Only 12% of applicants have received any money. And now, everyone's talking about the \$4.4 billion shortfall in the

program. If they do get some money, it will hardly be enough to rebuild with. I hear several people say, if Brad Pitt really wanted to help, his money could help supplement people's meager Road Home money, rather than building showy new green buildings.



Electricity and potable water were only recently restored, telephone service is still absent. One Saturday, I help to gut a house in Lower Ninth, pulling drywall and dryrotted wood to get down to the framing, where it can be treated for mold. There's only one other house on this block that's been fixed up, with a forlorn "For Rent" sign on it. The rest of the houses look empty, missing roofs and siding, boarded up windows, the spray painted X's reminding you that people died here, abandoned in the flood. But the owner of this house is tough. She grew up here, she points to where she went to school as we drive toward her ruined house. She wanted to come back to New Orleans, bought her first house here just one month before Katrina.



North of Claiborne is another story. Block after block is completely empty, maybe one or two houses still standing. For a long time, the area was patrolled by National Guard, and no residents were allowed to inspect their homes, with no clear reason given. Now there's just fields of hollow concrete foundations, and occasional vacant houses. Spray painted in big letters: "Do not bulldoze. I'm coming back." No one seems to understand the logic of the bulldozers. Someone's on the verge of getting their insurance money, they go to the city to pull up their papers on the house they own, still standing, empty, maybe gutted to remove the mold. The next day the bulldozers come to destroy their house. I hear this story numerous times. Many brick buildings, structurally sound, are mysteriously targeted by the bulldozers, while other buildings, obviously uninhabitable, remain untouched.



It's hard finding much hope after walking through the desolation of the Lower Ninth Ward, so it's a beautiful surprise to see the rededication of the Martin Luther King, Jr. charter school. As we walk in, the brass band is pumping, Mardi Gras Indians are dancing by, and then come all the preachers. Most public schools in New Orleans are still closed. The city told the parents and teachers of this school that it would have to be torn down. The residents knew it was part of a plan to keep them from returning to the Lower Ninth Ward, and that one of the things they needed to do first was to get a school up and running. The city refused to let them return to the Lower Ninth, placing the school instead in a temporary location on the other side of the city. So the teachers and parents organized, held rallies, and finally broke into their own school. They started gutting it themselves with help from the Common Ground volunteers, and brought in experts to assess the damage. The principal, Mrs. Doris Hicks, and charter school board and teachers were a tenacious lot, bullying their way till they got the money to rebuild their school. Now the



politicians occupy the stage, patting themselves on the back for the good job they've done, but everyone tells me, it was all due to the teachers and parents. And with tremendous sacrifice. "The homecoming is bittersweet," Principal Hicks says at the rededication, "because at least 30 students and family members died during the storm..." It's the biggest sign of life in this

desolate strip, but a sign that human perseverance will overcome, whether it's the ineptitude or conspiracy, of the city. As I write this, two weeks after the rededication, everything is ready to go for the start of the school year, but the school district still has not handed over the keys to the school to the staff.



The school is an integral part of the children's (and adults') process of healing after the devastation. One of Claudia's projects is working with the Mos Chukma Institute, the school's arts and technology program, led by Amelie Prescott, to design projects on the school's grounds. The 'Learning Landscape', a project of the University of Colorado, is one of several focusing on the renewal of the Lower 9th Ward's community and land. The road from the school leads through the neighborhood to where it dead ends at the Bayou Bienvenue, once the wetlands that were the life blood of the area. Past the last street in the neighborhood (where just before Katrina hit, planners had been talking of building a highway through the neighborhood), over the levee and the train tracks. It's another world here, just past the ruins of houses,

where people used to come to fish. Tree stumps emerge from the water, where the saltwater brought in by the canals has killed the cypresses. Here, on the levee wall, you can see how close the city is to the edge of nature. Along the industrial canal, they've built a new concrete levee wall, twice as thick as the old one. But it mysteriously ends at the bridge and before it reaches the end of the neighborhood. Over here, "Make Levees Not War" is a popular t-shirt slogan.



Common Ground is an organization in the Lower Ninth working with homeowners to gut their houses, to try to save them from the mold. They also run several community health clinics and several legal clinics in various parts of New Orleans and Algiers. The Common Ground house, close to the levee breach, has become an important landmark in a corner of the neighborhood where few houses survive. It has special significance in the neighborhood as the first location where Blacks were able to vote. Now that the city has begun using overgrown yards as one of their excuses to say a house has been abandoned, and to move in to destroy it, the Common Ground volunteers are having to spend a great deal of their time just cutting back weeds. Meanwhile, people who are ready to start rebuilding continue waiting for their insurance and Road Home money. Common Ground is bringing solar panels and windmills to the neighborhood, to try to maintain independence from the electrical grid which has been so unresponsive to the neighborhood. They also have a small tree farm, growing live oaks, tupelos, and cypresses. Around the houses occupied by Common Ground, volunteers have started planting sunflowers to treat the lead in the soil, and they rise from the ruined parcels like new hope. Malik Rahim, director of Common Ground, talks about the need to remediate the wetlands, to bring the cypress trees back. Areas with healthy wetlands suffered much less from the hurricanes. If we're going to rebuild, he says, we've got to do it right, without dependence on outside forces.



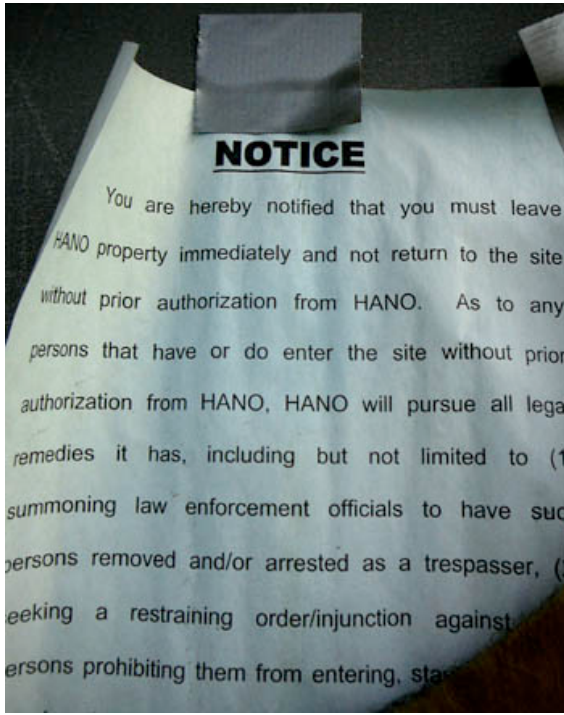
There are other little signs of hope. While most stores are still closed, a farmer's market is up and running on Saturdays, just across the Industrial Canal, still small, with just a few vendors. Claudia introduces me to Greta Gladney of the Renaissance Project, one of the founders of the market, who she's working with. Greta has high hopes for healing the neighborhood. She's a fourth generation resident of the Lower Ninth. The flood destroyed her grandfather's house in the area north of Claiborne, and she does not plan to rebuild. Instead, she hopes to turn her property into an ethno-botanical garden, a symbol of regeneration and re-engagement with the land, to serve her neighbors as they return to the neighborhood.

We pass by the first two new houses built in the Lower Ninth Ward, finished in February. These were long-term Lower Ninth residents, elders in the community,

who can finally return, hopefully creating a center for their extended families to begin returning. But it's a challenge. Most of the homeowners in the Lower Ninth had paid off their mortgages years ago, and now many are being asked to return to paying off their debt for their new houses. They hope

their insurance money and Road Home money, when it shows up, will pay off the loans for the \$125,000 houses. The houses were built by a collaboration of ACORN Housing, the "communityworks," program of the Louisiana State University architecture school, and several local job-training programs. Two houses in two years makes the task seem so enormous. But, Patricia Jones, of the Neighborhood Empowerment Network Association (NENA), tells us, that's how it's happening, one house at a time, that's how we'll have rebuild the whole neighborhood. House by house.

3. Tenants



It's a different story at the public housing. I visit the Survivor's Village community center located just outside the St. Bernard Development, a sprawling public housing project encompassing many blocks. Sharon Jasper, a (former) public housing resident, tells us about the projects: the public housing was where people went when the hurricanes came, the safest place around, made of strong wind-resistant concrete construction. The tenants and their friends would have parties inside while the hurricane whipped around outside. The morning after Katrina, she says, there was a strong sun, the sky was clear. People were coming out to celebrate. Then the water started rising around them. And that night, she remembers, the sky was so clear, no electricity, the city blacked out, the stars reflected on the black waters.

Now the projects are closed, here at St. Bernard and at Lafitte, and at two other developments. Over 4,500 units vacant, in this city with such an extreme housing shortage. Iberville was partially reopened recently. Used to be, Iberville, by the French Quarter south of Claiborne, was built for the Irish workers, and Lafitte, north of Claiborne, was built for the black workers. The local public housing agency, HANO, had been taken over by the Feds before Katrina. Like they're talking about doing in SF. HUD had no interest in keeping the projects open, and started systematically shutting them down. St. Thomas near the Garden District was turned into a Wal Mart. The flood was just the excuse they needed, and now HUD says that the projects are unsafe and unlivable. Even though everyone knows they were the safest place in a hurricane. The hotel and night club owners in the French Quarter complained about the need to rehouse their workers, and suddenly Iberville wasn't so unsafe, and they were able to reopen it. But Lafitte and St. Bernard remain closed.



The folks at the Survivors Village re-occupied St. Bernard in the spring, and the sheriffs came and tore out all the doors so people couldn't blockade themselves in. Then the tenants built a little row of shacks in front of the projects, "Resurrection City," to highlight their need for housing, and the bulldozers, which had left trash in the city streets for weeks, showed up the next day to sweep them away. It was a particularly violent day in New Orleans, seven murders within 48 hours, and all the police were out at St. Bernard to tear down Resurrection City. It's easy to see why people keep describing this as a "war zone." There's a golf course developer interested in developing St. Bernard. As one Survivor's Village organizer put it, the plan is simple, for all of New Orleans: "Smaller. Whiter. More affluent."

Our bus driver takes us past the Lafitte Development. Lafitte is made of even more beautiful brick two-story buildings with wrought iron balconies. Now they are boarded up with electronically alarmed panels to prevent anyone from trying to enter and reclaim his or her belongings, signs tacked on the doors advising tenants not to return, and that they will be prosecuted as trespassers. I grew up here, our bus driver says, I still live in the neighborhood. Sure, there was crime, craziness, but there was also community. This city is for everyone. Everyone knew each other.

Some days later, I meet some of the people with the nonprofit that's going to redevelop Lafitte, Providence Community Housing. Providence Housing was created by the Catholic Church, and they seem well connected in the city politics. They already have tens of millions of dollars in government contracts and tax credit commitments, though they were only formed after Katrina, and have only built five houses so far. John Turnbull, their head of housing development, takes a group of us to Lafitte. He recognizes that the buildings are probably sound, but, he also says, it's a done deal. HUD already made the decision. They want to get rid of the layout, which in places is

disconnected from the streets, and they want little wooden houses that look traditional. If it wasn't us doing it, it would be someone else, he says. Providence has been in close contact with many of the former residents, particularly in Houston, and promises to rebuild the same number of affordable units as existed before Katrina, to ensure that everyone who lived there before can return.

Sounds like "the same old story" familiar to those of who have worked around public housing issues in San Francisco, promise the tenants they can return, but what finally gets built has only a few affordable units. Providence seems sincere, but the experience of St. Thomas, another public housing redevelopment that was turned into a Wal Mart and high-end housing, makes most people I talk to highly skeptical. We leave with that, "it's a done deal," and they're doing the best they can. But if there's one thing I've learned working with MAC and other organizers in San Francisco, is that it's never a done deal until it's actually done. Right now a lawsuit by the Advancement Project, filed on behalf of the public housing tenants, is making it's way through the courts, disputing HUDs figures that it would cost more to refurbish the buildings than to destroy them and start new.

And then there's the rest of the city's tenants. Like a lot of big cities, New Orleans was majority renters, close to 56% before Katrina. There's the dream of Road Home money for homeowners, however tenuous that is, but absolutely no support for renters from the government. With the housing shortage created by Katrina, rents are sky-high, close to San Francisco levels. The People's Hurricane Relief Fund has set up a Tenant's Rights Working Group, but it's going to be a long struggle. Louisiana has a statewide law that keeps local cities from passing any rent control ordinances, and so the Tenant's Rights group is trying to develop an argument based on the price gouging that's going on.

The New Orleans city government at least seems to have a sense of humor about it's own ineptness and corruption. It's web site address is "City of NO dot com." That seems to sum it all up.

Part of my two weeks here are spent sharing my experience as a founding member of the San Francisco Community Land Trust with Claudia and PHRF and other folks here who are interested in starting something similar. The idea of the community owning their own land through democratic institutions, and leasing the land for homeowners, co-ops, etc., is particularly appealing in the Lower Ninth Ward, where the developers and the speculators have started circling like sharks. Land trusts seem to be on everyone's mind. To be successful, a community land trust must bring together a wide cross-section of the community, willing to put in their time and effort into creating something entirely new. And here, nerves are frayed, different community groups sometimes refuse to talk to each other, resources are scarce, and the community is scattered across the country.

Someone tells me about the live oaks. They are everywhere in New Orleans streets. Like the Vieux Carré, the shotgun houses, and the bayous, they are part of what defines the physical nature of this city. Only a few were lost in Katrina: their torqued limbs get their strength from the wind itself, and when the storms come, their leaves close up to allow the air through. Sometimes they lose some sacrificial limbs. But the important thing is, they grow in communities, their intertwined roots holding them together, holding them against the storm. In New Orleans, between the storm and government inaction, entire human communities have been scattered and destroyed. Rebuilding community remains as critical a task as rebuilding the houses.

4. Organizing on our own terms



After Katrina, a number of new organizations have developed out of the wreckage to begin filling in necessary services and organizing work. Many of these are not just about dropping in with support services from outside of the city, but attempts at creating new models of organizing in people's own terms, from the experience of the displaced residents of the Lower Ninth Ward, to the new set of issues around the immigrant labor force coming to do rebuilding, to the unique circumstances of women in devastated neighborhoods.

I hear various discussions about the necessity of women to organize on their own terms, especially with so many organizations led by men. One night, I get the opportunity to meet some of the powerful members of INCITE, Women of Color Against Violence. One of the projects INCITE is involved with is the Women's Health and Justice Initiative, a new free clinic in the Tremé neighborhood. The new clinic is led and run by

women, and has been mostly funded by individual donations. After Katrina the city's entire health network was destroyed, and out of 17 hospitals in the city, only 5 have reopened. Later, I meet another powerful woman, Alice Craft-Kerney, director for the Lower 9th Ward Health Clinic, another organization, like the Martin Luther King School, that had to be built despite the efforts of the government to keep it shut down. On the opening day of the clinic,

during the grand opening celebration, the building inspector showed up to tell them they could not operate because they did not have the proper permits. While there are people dying in the streets. Alcie was a clinical nurse, not an administrator, but after Katrina she realized that someone had to make this happen. "The buses never came," she says. "We had to do it all ourselves."

Creating Black-Brown unity is a big theme among organizers here, fighting not only against the perception of tensions between black workers who grew up in New Orleans and the Latino workers who have arrived after Katrina, but also trying to unify workers against racism from the same quarters. For the day laborers on the corners, conditions are extreme, constantly harassed by police, and often forced to turn over their wallets and money to corrupt officers. During the time I'm here, the next parish over from Orleans, Jefferson Parish (infamous as the home of David Duke) passes a law outlawing taco trucks.

Elly Kugler, who I know as a former staff person at the Day Labor Program of La Raza Centro Legal in the Mission, introduces me to Ruben Flores, a guest worker from Bolivia. Elly now works with the Workers Center for Racial Justice in New Orleans, fighting against the injustices being committed against immigrant workers. Ruben is part of the Alliance for Guest Workers for Dignity. He tells us about the conditions for workers brought in under a guest worker program that's been operating to bring people in from Latin America to work in New Orleans, a model for the "Immigration Reform" bills being discussed in Congress. The way he describes it, it is basically a form of indentured servitude. He was recruited by a contracting agency in Bolivia. He had to borrow \$3,500 to pay the recruiter for the visa and the ticket, and prove that he owned a home, was married, and a host of other requirements, before he could get an H-2B work visa. Once in New Orleans, he was placed in a crowded FEMA trailer park, and then traded from company to company, and from one type of work to another, with no control, from a service industry job he thought he was going to get, to back-breaking factory work. "We belong to one employer," he says. "Their name is inscribed in our passports. If you don't obey, they can deport you, and you can lose everything. Or they take away your passport. They sell you to another company for \$2,000 a head." If a company no longer has use for a person, they automatically lose their visa status and become undocumented. Another day laborer, Daniel Castellanos, talks about working in the hotels, where the staff had once been almost entirely African American. "They want us to fight," he says, "the old slaves and the new slaves."

One day I meet up with Ingrid Chapman, from the Bay Area's Catalyst Project, who is volunteering with the People's Organizing Committee and the New Orleans Survivor's Council. After a series of incidents of police harassment and arrests of day laborers, the Survivor's Council put up some support for the day laborers. In return, the Day Laborers Congress is donating labor to help fix up the house of one of their members, double shotgun house belonging to 80-year old Mrs. Green. Another hard-to-believe story, like so many stories I hear in New Orleans. The insurance company will pay only \$20,000 to repair one half of the double shotgun, but will pay nothing for the other half, because in their opinion, the other half of the house is over 54% destroyed, and will therefore not pay anything. So Mrs. Green will try to seal in one half as best she can, and try to fix the other half with her meager insurance money and the day laborers' donated work. I get to help draw up plans and translate instructions for the work to be done.



On my last day in New Orleans, on June 25, a People's Freedom Caravan arrives from the Southwest. Buses from Albuquerque, San Antonio, Houston, and other places, arrive, on their way to the first US Social Forum, beginning this week in Atlanta. San Francisco's own PODER arrives in two vans, with 3 staff members and about a dozen youth organizers from PODER's Common Roots program. We meet up at Congo Square in Tremé, where many local organizations have come together to greet the Caravan. We are on sacred ground, Kimberly Richards of the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, tells us, as we begin the ceremony at Congo Square. This place is where the rivers met outside of the first walled city of New Orleans, where the Native people and the Black people, and the Spanish people and the French people, all came together to trade. Historically, it was the one place where Black people were allowed to drum in public. Here we've all come together, from different parts of the United States, to celebrate our common struggles.

5. Third World (poem)

I've been here just two weeks, and
I keep hearing that this is the Third World.
See, I come from the Third World, (and
I say it proudly, Tercer Mundo, though
it would make my mama upset, she thinks
they made that up to make us all Tercera Clase,
and I don't want to get into with her about

Mao Tse-tung and his Three Worlds Theory)
 but, back to where I'm at:
 New Orleans, 2007, after the flood.

They say that this is the Third World.
 Maybe they mean how slow things move here,
 like molasses, they say, like you and me
 on a porch in the afternoon, the sky so still
 before it breaks in two, like how suddenly
 the thunderclouds appear like a revolution
 no one could have predicted, though
 you and I always knew it was coming.
 maybe it's how much you sweat here,
 how steam rises from the asphalt and
 cobblestones after the rain finally stops,
 how hot it is, June, midnight, and
 how hot you look, all of you, New Orleans.

Maybe it's the missing street signs,
 always getting lost, or the broken stop
 light, flashing to its own syncopation.
 Maybe it's the army hum-vees rolling by,
 MPs, National Guard, private contractors,
 remember Fallujah? or the cop sleeping
 in his squad car under an overpass.
 Maybe it's one more sordid story, you
 just can't believe, of wads of cash in freezers –
 Who keeps wads of cash in freezers anyway?
 This must be the Third World.

Maybe it's just getting by, or making do, or
 knowing your neighbor's story.
 Maybe it's the swamps and mosquitoes,
 maybe it's the alligator making its way out
 of the river and down a Bywater street.
 Maybe it's all the dark people.
 Maybe it's the Indian in feathers, scaring away
 the evil spirits with a sharpened antler.

Maybe it's the waiting for the hurricane
 with your family in the projects,
 maybe it's the party as the sky comes down.
 Maybe it's the waiting.
 Maybe it's knowing help ain't coming,
 and the only way out is with a little
 help from your friends.

Maybe it's that so many leave.
 Maybe it's that there's nothing to come back to,
 and you come back anyway.
 Maybe it's always coming back.
 So Third World of you.

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Solidarity Not Charity: Racism in Katrina Relief Work

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 Molly McClure
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Solidarity not Charity: Racism in Katrina Relief Work

By Molly McClure, December 2005

I recently spent three weeks working at the Common Ground Relief Clinic in New Orleans, an all-volunteer run free healthcare project that opened a week after the hurricane. The following are some thoughts I had about the difference between solidarity and charity, specifically reflecting on the role of folks like me--- white activists from out of town--- in Katrina relief work.

As many people have said, the mess of Katrina was caused by a storm of racism and poverty more than wind and water. Katrina was about the racism of war that took money away from fixing the levees and other much-needed disaster preparations and went instead to the killing of poor people of color in Iraq and around the world. Katrina was about the racism of US-led capitalism that accelerates global warming, bringing bigger hurricanes and tsunamis and other "natural disasters" which always disproportionately affect the poor. Katrina was about the legacy of slavery, which meant that many white New Orleanians had the economic resources to evacuate, such as a car or other means to escape the storm and subsequent flooding, while many Black New Orleanians did not. Katrina was about the racism of FEMA and the Bush administration in their murderously slow response (you know it would have looked different in Connecticut!). And Katrina was about the racism of the police chief of Gretna, who, with the support of his predominantly white town, turned Black survivors away at gunpoint as they tried to cross the Crescent City Bridge to safety because he "didn't want Gretna to turn into the Superdome."

Like most of you, I'm guessing, I was outraged and heartbroken by what I saw, and I wanted to go down and see if there was some way I could support the people of the Gulf Coast in their efforts to deal with this mess. When I got there I saw and heard devastating things, stories of loss my ears are still full of, images of destruction that cut into the meat of my heart. I also saw and heard many, many inspiring things--- stories of resistance and hope, of survival and vision. I met incredible people who fed me red beans and rice on Mondays and told me about their families and their lives, who shared with me some of what New Orleans meant to them, people who through their stories helped me understand the depth and breadth of this atrocity.

(By the way, I'd really encourage folks to seek out these first-hand stories, and prioritize reading information and analysis about Katrina written by survivors and long-time residents of the Gulf Coast, for example "New Orleans and Women of Color: Connecting the Personal and Political" by Janelle L. White, which is available online).

I was also inspired by how many folks from outside New Orleans had gone down to volunteer, had seen what was happening and were appalled, and found a way to go down and support in any way they could. I met incredibly committed activists, folks with skills and energy and immense creativity and huge hearts.

And while it was moving to see how many people came down to volunteer, with that also came one of the unexpected heartbreaks for me of being in the Gulf Coast post-Katrina: the racism that white activists like myself brought along with us, even as we came intending to stand in solidarity with the people of New Orleans. And although there are many many stories I want to tell, this is what I feel a really deep need to write about, and I see this as part of an ongoing conversation. (Note: for this article, I'll be using the People's Institute definition of racism, which is race prejudice plus power, and using it interchangeably with "white supremacy," meaning the system of wealth, power, and privilege which keeps racism in place).

First, I want to say that I'm not approaching this conversation as if I've got it all figured out, because I have a ton of work to do and make plenty of mistakes, including the ones I'm about to discuss. And I want to say that while I will be speaking from my own perspective, there have been many people of color whose analysis and experiences have helped me develop the antiracist framework I'm musing to think about this situation. I just want to put that out because I think it's important to recognize whose labor and experiences have helped inform what I am saying, and how I'm saying it.

So having said all that, I want to talk a little about the ways that we white folks, no matter how well-intentioned, bring our white privilege and our racism with us wherever we go, and how this really hijacks solidarity projects and imperils our capacity to be true allies. Despite the fact that what happened in New Orleans was understood by the majority of whites even slightly left of center to have its roots in racism, it does not seem that this awareness has translated into us wrestling any more seriously with white supremacy, even as many of us mobilize to support the communities of the Gulf Coast.

One example I want to give is about the looter/finder distinction made by mainstream media outlets in

describing stranded NewOrleanians carrying food. Do folksremember seeing that? The captionsof pictures said white people “found” stuff, and Black people “looted” stuff,though the images were identical except for race. Lots of us forwarded an emailaround about this, and were justifiably outraged at the blatant criminalizingof Black survivors in the media. People I know wrote letters to the editors of newspapers, sent scathingemails, and called in to radio shows to protest that and other racistportrayals of Katrina survivors.

The question I want to ask is how many of us white folksmake these kind of looter/finder assumptions about people’s behavior all thetime, in our heads? How many of us make these kinds of racialized good guy/badguy distinctions when we’re walking down the street in our hometowns, standingat a bus stop late at night, interacting with new people in our activistspaces, talking to co-workers at our jobs, seeing patients in the clinic?

While the media portrayals were egregious and telling, Ithink the insidious, often unconscious prejudice that we’ve learned by livingin a racist culture is also incredibly dangerous. The People’s Institute forSurvival and Beyond calls this “internalized racial superiority,” and that’swhat I saw playing out so dramatically among many white solidarity workers whocame to New Orleans, even though many of us were there because we felt a deepdesire to take action against what was clearly a race-based hate crime.

So I have some questions for white folks thinking aboutgoing down, questions I am still asking myself: first of all, why you? Why are you going? Could our resourcesand energy be better used supporting survivor organizing at home orfundraising, rather than spent traveling to the South? Are we committed to doing support workthat may not feel as “exciting” as going down ourselves? How did it come to bethat we are able to travel to and around New Orleans, while many survivorsstill can’t go home? What are webringing with us, what will we take back? What has been the role of white people and white institutions in thedestruction and reshaping of communities of color in the US, in the history ofNew Orleans? When we go down, arewe expecting to be thanked, to be welcomed, what is our real motivation forgoing? What will be the long-term impact of our work on the Gulf Coastcommunities with whom we’re supposedly standing in solidarity? How are we goingto be accountable to what we saw and heard and did when we come back, and towhom do we feel accountable? How are we going to make meaningful connections tothe same kind of injustices back home? Do we know about the issues facing poorcommunities and communities of color in our hometown, and are we as motivated,as committed to dealing with those issues where we live, which could bear astriking resemblance to what’s going on in New Orleans? Are we seeing survivors of Katrina as“worthy” poor, deserving of resources and relief work, without recognizing thatthe poverty back home is equally a result of systemic racism, and equallycrucial to address?

In the three weeks I was working in New Orleans, I spentmost of my time at the Common Ground Clinic, where most of the volunteers andhealthcare providers are white. (Though the call to create Common Ground was put out by Malik Rahim, aBlack activist and organizer who never evacuated New Orleans, the people withthe resources and time to respond first to that call were overwhelmingly white,class-privileged folks, who continue to be numerically the majority). While I was there, I heard commentslike “this is so cool that New Orleans is going to have a free clinic now!” orother statements suggesting that we, the white saviors, had come to bringcapital a ACTIVISM to the region, which before we got there was presumably somekind of political wasteland. Now,I definitely didn’t do my homework like I should have before I got there, but Iwas pretty sure that the city had had a vibrant history of resistance andorganizing from the time of the slave revolts on, and I had recently learnedabout the Saint Thomas Clinic and other local healthcare justice projects. The fact that the town was so intenselydepopulated may have made it possible for an inexperienced out-of-towner to mistake the absence of people with the absence of organizing. But I know there was more to it thanthat--- racism fosters in whitepeople an easy, unconscious arrogance, an inability to see past ourselves, thecapacity to be “blinded by the white.” Mixed up in this also, I think, is the classist assumption that poorfolks aren’t politically conscious or organized, or that they only “become” sowhen outside organizers arrive.

Another example of these racist assumptions could be seen when folks expressed the valid concern that the community wasn't involved enough in running the health center, even though flyers were put up around the surrounding Algiers neighborhood inviting residents to volunteer and become apart of the clinic. I've been part of this dynamic in the past--- wondering why "they" don't come to "our" meeting or event, without understanding how alienating the white culture of our projector organization might be to people of color, from the language, timing, and structure of our meetings to the way we dress (especially in places like Common Ground, which, when I was there, had a predominantly punk/hippie subcultural scene going on). When there has been a lack of community involvement in other neighborhood projects of which I've been a part, it's usually because the project began or evolved without a concerted effort to connect in a respectful, non-tokenizing way with people in the neighborhood to see what they were working on already, what their priorities were, what strategies they'd tried before, how we might support their work before starting a brand spanking new project with us in leadership.

In the case of the clinic in particular, it was an immediate disaster relief project that needed to happen, and I see it as a fantastic example of the capacity of the left to effectively mobilize in an emergency when the state infrastructure failed. But now that the clinic is a more permanent fixture, there will be some real wrestling with power and privilege in the months ahead, if it is to reach the stated goal of transitioning to community control, and if it is to have a role that is less about service provision and more about rebuilding infrastructure and offering resources in a way that supports community self-determination.

Another example I want to offer is a hand-painted sign at the clinic that said, "Less Tears More Action!" I never found out who painted this, but I'm guessing it was a white person from out of town, like me. And no matter who created the sign, I wondered what the impact of that statement was (for the day it was up) on the people who came to the clinic, who were mourning immeasurable losses and experiencing worlds of grief that we as outsiders would never be able to fully comprehend. Yet we felt entitled to offer brightly-painted suggestions about it being time to quit whining and move on, and presumably we were to be the role models of what kind of "action" folks should take.

A big slogan at the Common Ground Clinic was "Solidarity not Charity," which is easy to say, but what does it mean? And how do we know if what we're doing is charity or solidarity--- is it as simple as choosing to work with Common Ground instead of the Red Cross? This was one of the biggest lessons for me, and something I'm still thinking a lot about.

A definition of solidarity I've heard is that it's about providing concrete support to an oppressed group so that they can more easily use their own power to change the conditions of their lives. As I understand it, solidarity is about working with people who are struggling for their own liberation in a way that means my future gets bound up with theirs.

On the other hand, charity is about me feeling good, assuaging guilt, feeling like I'm doing something about injustice but without actually threatening the status quo. Charity doesn't really cost me anything, especially my self-image as being someone who's down with the struggle and on the side of the oppressed. With charity I don't have to acknowledge my privilege in a situation, and in the case of work in New Orleans, I don't have to take responsibility for the fact that my family and I have materially benefited, historically and presently, from the racism that bludgeoned the south long before the hurricane. With charity, I don't have to connect the dots between sudden catastrophes like Katrina, and the perhaps slower but very similar economic devastation happening in poor communities and communities of color every day, right here, in my city. And most importantly, with charity, I don't have risk that what I'm doing might truly transform society in such a way that white folks like me may not end up on top anymore, because charity actually reinforces existing relationships of power. And while the work we did at Common Ground may have been in solidarity with a liberation-oriented vision, I'm not sure that was enough. It scares and pains me to admit it, but despite the sign proclaiming proudly that the clinic was about "solidarity not charity," I think the majority of what I saw us white activists doing at Common Ground was essentially charity.

One day at the clinic, Kimberley Richards and Bridget Lehane, organizers from The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, came to meet with us about the possibility of doing an anti-racism training for volunteers at the clinic. Kimberley pointed out that like it or not, we--- mostly white healthcare providers and activists in a hurricane-ravaged poor Black town--- stood to profit off our time in New Orleans, either socially through gaining "activist points" or professionally by writing papers or books about our experience. She asked us how were we going to be accountable to that fact, how we were going to make sure that the people most affected by this tragedy would also stand to gain and not be profited off, as they so often were by the organizations and institutions that were supposedly serving them.

The difference between charity and solidarity felt huge that day and as we discussed whether or not we could--- more truthful to say whether or not we *would*---close the clinic in order to participate in their two and a half day training, called the “Undoing Racism Workshop.” I realized that solidarity felt easier when I thought about it in terms of us simply offering a crucial resource to the community ---providing free, accessible healthcare and free medications in a place and time when that was a dire, dire necessity. And that’s incredibly important.

But the challenge of real solidarity is that it requires us to take a critical look at the bigger picture of Katrina, the context, and to see how we fit in. Solidarity means looking at how power and privilege play out in our own lives, and obligates us to consider our role in relation to the state and system that helped engineer this disaster. To be in solidarity we would need to understand how our class and race privilege impact why we were the ones able to offer the healthcare resources in the first place, and be real about whether the clinic serves to challenge or reinforce that inequality. Solidarity requires us to seriously grapple with our racial prejudice, and recognize how it affects the work we do in the clinic and how we interact with the community. To really be in solidarity, we would need to more fully examine and drastically overhaul the assumptions and biases in how we deliver healthcare, we would have to acknowledge and deal with the white culture of the project and how that affected our patients and which providers felt welcome in the clinic, and we would need to see and wrestle with the fact that our presence in New Orleans was profoundly changing the class and race dynamics of the intensely depopulated neighborhood and town. We would have to be willing to look at and be accountable to the ways in which we might actually stand to gain more in the long term from our “solidarity work” in the clinic than the community who we were supposedly serving.

At this point I still have more questions than answers about what being in solidarity really means. But I know solidarity’s a hell of a lot less comfortable than charity, and involves me not just going to someone else’s decimated town and helping out for a little while or even a long while and then going home and doing a report back, or writing a reflection piece, though that could be part of it. Real solidarity means keeping up the conversation about race and class in the US with other white folks, and working diligently to break down the racism in mainstream white communities---where institutional power currently resides---as well as challenging racism in the white left. Real solidarity requires me to go on an ongoing, difficult journey to reckon with my own stuff, and my family’s stuff--- to recognize and challenge our collusion in the system of white supremacy. My experience in New Orleans makes me ask myself what I’m doing right now, right here, to support the self-determination of communities of color and of low-income people, what I’m doing right now to support a revolutionary transformation of systems of power in this country. It makes me ask myself what I’m doing right now, right here, to help root out the racism in my own heart and the heart of communities I’m a part of, so that I can struggle in true solidarity with communities most affected by injustice as they lead the movement for radical social change.

At the time of this writing, Molly McClure did sexual health and racial justice work in Philadelphia, and has since moved to San Francisco and organizes with Catalyst Project. Molly is excited to hear your comments, questions and discussion: molly@collectiveliberation.com [1] This writing happened with a lot of support, feedback, and insightful conversation for which I’m incredibly grateful.

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Links:

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Letter from the People of New Orleans to Our Friends and Allies

Author:

New Orleans Based Activists

Organization:

Left Turn [1]

Link:

<http://leftturn.mayfirst.org/?q=node/573> [2]

Date Published:

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By New Orleans-based Activists

Published on: April 01, 2007

We, the undersigned, represent a wide range of grassroots New Orleans organizers, activists, artists, educators, media makers, health care providers and other community members concerned about the fate of our city. This letter is directed to all those around the world concerned about the fate of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, but is especially intended for US-based nonprofit organizations, foundations, and other institutions with resources and finances that have been, or could be, directed towards the Gulf Coast.

In the days after the storm, there were many promises of support made to the people of New Orleans. Promises from not only the federal government, but also an array of nongovernmental organizations, such as progressive and liberal foundations and nonprofits. Small and large organizations have done fundraising on our behalf, promising to deliver resources and support to the people of New Orleans.

Many organizations and individuals have supported New Orleans-led efforts with time, resources, and advocacy on our behalf, and for this we are very grateful. These organizations followed through on their promises and offered support in a way that was respectful, responsible, and timely.

However, we are writing this letter to tell you that, aside from these very important exceptions, the support we need has not arrived, or has been seriously limited, or has been based upon conditions that become an enormous burden for us.

While we remain in crisis, understaffed, underfunded and in many cases in desperate need of help, we have seen promises go unfulfilled. From the perspective of the poorest and least powerful, it appears that the work of national allies on our behalf has either not happened or if it has happened it has been a failure.

In the days after August 29, 2005 the world watched as our city was devastated. This destruction was not caused by Hurricane Katrina, but by failures of local, state and national government, and institutional structures of racism and corruption. The disaster highlighted already-existing problems such as neglect, privatization and deindustrialization.

As New Orleanians, we have seen tragedy first hand. We have lost friends and family and seen our community devastated. More than 15 months later, we have seen few improvements. Our education, health care and criminal justice systems remain in crisis, and more than 60% of the former population of our city remains displaced. Among those that remain, depression and other mental health issues have skyrocketed.

While many nationwide speak of "Katrina Fatigue," we are still living the disaster. We remain committed to our homes and communities. And we still need support.

In 15 months we have hosted visits by countless representatives from an encyclopedic list of prominent organizations and foundations. We have given hundreds of tours of affected areas, and we have assisted in the writing of scores of reports and assessments. We have participated in or assisted in organizing panels and workshops and conferences. We have supplied housing and food and hospitality to hundreds of supporters promising to return with funding and resources, to donate staff and equipment and more. It seems hundreds of millions of dollars have been raised in our name, often using our words, or our stories.

However, just as the government's promises of assistance, such as the "Road Home" program, remain largely out of reach of most New Orleanians, we have also seen very little money and support from liberal and progressive sources.

Instead of prioritizing efforts led by people who are from the communities most affected, we have seen millions of dollars that was advertised as dedicated towards Gulf Coast residents either remain unspent, or shuttled to well-placed outsiders with at best a cursory knowledge of the realities faced by people here. Instead of reflecting local needs and priorities, many projects funded reflect outside perception of what our priorities should be. We have seen attempts to dictate to us what we should do, instead of a real desire to listen and struggle together. We have heard offers of strategic advice, but there have been very few resources offered to help us carry it out.

We are at an historic moment. The disaster on the Gulf Coast, and especially in New Orleans, has highlighted issues of national and international relevance. Questions of race, class, gender, education, health care, food access, policing, housing, privatization, mental health and much more are on vivid display.

The South has been traditionally underfunded and often exploited by institutions, including corporations, the labor movement, foundations, and the federal government. We have faced the legacy of centuries of institutional racism and oppression, with little outside support. And yet, against massive odds, grassroots movements in the South have organized and struggled and won historic, inspiring victories with international relevance.

In New Orleans, against incredible odds, despite personal loss and family tragedies, people are fighting for the future of the city they love. Many are working with little to no funding or support, and have achieved remarkable success.

We are writing this open letter to you to tell you that it's not too late. The struggle is still ongoing. Evacuees are organizing in trailer parks, health care providers are opening clinics, former public housing residents are fighting to keep their homes from being demolished, artists and media makers are documenting the struggle, educators and lawyers are joining with high school students to fight for better schools.

We ask you, as concerned friends and allies nationwide, as funders and organizations, to look critically at your practices. Has your organization raised money on New Orleans' behalf? Did that money go towards New Orleans-based projects, initiated and directed by those most affected? Have you paid New Orleans organizations that have acted as consultants? Have you listened directly to the needs of those in the Gulf and been responsive to them? Have you adjusted your practices and strategies to the organizing realities on the ground?

We ask you to seize this opportunity, and join and support the grassroots movements. If the people of New Orleans can succeed against incredible odds to save their city and their community, it is a victory for oppressed people everywhere. If the people of New Orleans lose, it is a loss for movements everywhere. Struggling together, we can win together.

Signed,

Cherice Harrison-Nelson
Director and Curator, Mardi Gras Indian Hall of Fame, New Orleans

Royce Osborn
writer/producer, New Orleans

Greta Gladney
4th generation Lower 9th Ward resident, New Orleans

Corlita Mahr, New Orleans

Judy Watts
President/CEO, Agenda for Children, New Orleans

Robert "Kool Black" Horton
Critical Resistance, New Orleans

Jennifer Turner
Community Book Center, New Orleans

Mayaba Liebenthal
INCITE Women of Color Against Violence, Critical Resistance, New Orleans

Norris Henderson
Co-Director Safe Streets - Strong Communities, New Orleans

Ursula Price
Outreach and Investigation Coordinator, Safe Streets - Strong Communities, New Orleans

Evelyn Lynn
Managing Director, Safe Streets - Strong Communities, New Orleans

Shana Griffin
INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence
New Orleans Women's Health & Justice Initiative

Min. J. Kojo Livingston
Founder Liberation Zone/Destiny One Ministries

Shana Sassoon
New Orleans Network Neighborhood Housing Services of New Orleans

Althea Francois, New Orleans

Malcolm Suber
People's Hurricane Relief Fund, New Orleans

Saket Soni
New Orleans Worker's Justice Project, New Orleans

Nick Slie, I-10
Witness Project, Co-Artistic Director Mondo Bizarro, New Orleans

Catherine Jones
Medical student, Tulane University, Organizer and co-founder, Latino Health Outreach Project, New Orleans

Jennifer Whitney
coordinator, Latino Health Outreach Project

S. Mandisa Moore

INCITE! New Orleans and the Women's Health and Justice Initiative, New Orleans

Aesha Rasheed
Project Manager, New Orleans Network, New Orleans

Jordan Flaherty
Left Turn Magazine, New Orleans

Dix deLaneuville
Educator, New Orleans

Courtney Egan
Filmmaker, New Orleans

Rebecca Snedeker
Filmmaker, New Orleans

Catherine A. Galpin, RN
FACES and Children's Hospital, New Orleans

Hamilton Simons-Jones, New Orleans

Al Alcazar
Educator, New Orleans

Grace Bauer
Families and Friends of Louisiana 's Incarcerated Children

Erin Bell, New Orleans resident

Xochitl Bervera
Families and Friends of Louisiana 's Incarcerated Children

Mario E. Carbajal
New Orleans resident living in Houston

Bess Carrick
Producer/Director, New Orleans

John Clark
Professor of Philosophy (Loyola University)

Brandon Darby
Director of Relief Operations Common Ground Relief

Diana Dunn
The People's Institut, European Dissent, New Orleans

Courtney Egan
Artist, New Orleans

Lou Furman
Turning Point Partners

Ariana Hall
Director, CubaNOLA Collective

Gwendolyn Midlo Hall Historian
writer and lecturer, New Orleans and Mississippi Pine Belt

Susan Hamovitch
Filmmaker/Teacher
NYC/New Orleans

Russell Henderson
Lecturer, Dillard University and
Organizer, Rebuilding Louisiana Coalition

Ms.Deon Haywood
Events Coordinator, Women With A Vision Inc.

Rachel Herzing
Critical Resistance

Rev. Doug Highfield
Universal Life Church
Cherokee, AL

Joyce Marie Jackson, Ph.D.
Cultural Researcher, LSU Dept. of Geography & Anthropology, and Co-founder of Cultural Crossroads, Inc., Baton Rouge

Elizabeth K Jeffers

Dana Kaplan
Safe Streets - Strong Communities / Center for Constitutional Rights, NYC/New Orleans

Vi Landry
freelance journalist, New Orleans/New York

Bridget Lehane
European Dissent and The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond

Karen-kaia Livers
Alliance for Community Theaters, Inc., New Orleans

Rachel E. Luft
Assistant Professor of Sociology, Department of Sociology, University of New Orleans

Melana Luke

M. Denise Miles
Student, Tulane University School of Public Health

Damekia Morgan
Families and Friends of Louisiana 's Incarcerated Children

Saladin Muhammad
Black Workers For Justice

Ukali Mwendu
(Hazardous Materials Specialist, NOFD), President, Provisional Government - Republic of New Afrika / New Orleans LA (former resident of the Lafitte Housing Development)

Kalonji T. Olusegun
2nd Vice President, Provisional Government- Republic of New Afrika, Founding lifetime member National Coalition Of Blacks for Reparations in America, NCOBRA: Trustee, Div. 330 UNIA/ACL

Donna Paluch
Loyola College of Law, New Orleans

Thea Patterson
Women's Health and Justice Initiative, New Orleans

J. Nash Porter
Documentary Photographer and Co-founder of Cultural Crossroads, Inc., Baton Rouge

Gloria Powers
Arts Project Manager NOLA

Valerie M. Prier

Bill Quigley
Loyola Professor of Law, New Orleans

Linda Santi, New Orleans

Roxanne Saucier
Student, New Orleans

Tony Sferlazza
Director of Plenty International NOLA

Heidi Lee Sinclair, MD, MPH
Baton Rouge Children's Health Project
Baton Rouge

Carole Smith
fine artiste (and i deserve to be kissed!)
Florence, AL

Justin Stein
Neighborhood Relations Coordinator and Community Mediator, Common Ground Health Clinic, New Orleans

Audrey Stewart

Paul Troyano
Carpenter
New Orleans

Tracie L. Washington, Esq.,
Director, NAACP Gulf Coast Advocacy Center, New Orleans

Scott Weinstein
former co-director of the Common Ground Health Clinic, New Orleans

Melissa Wells, New Orleans,

Jerald L. White
Bottletree Productions, New Orleans

Melissa Wells, New Orleans,

George "Loki" Williams
Founder, New Orleans Oral History Project / Humid City

Morgan Williams
Student Hurricane Network, Co-founder
New Orleans

Tyler Wilson, Rn,
Pediatric Registered Nurse

Gina Womack
Families and Friends of Louisiana 's Incarcerated Children

Signatures from Activists and Allies outside the Gulf region:

Jim Ace
UNtraining White Liberal Racism
San Francisco

Ujju Aggarwal
Center for Immigrant Families, New York City

Kirsten Angel-Lambert
Art Educator
Philadelphia

Denise Barnes
Prison Families Community Forum
NYC

Scott A. Barton
Board Member, Southern Foodways Alliance, Willie Mae's Scotch House Restoration Project

Beverly Bell
Coordinator, Other Worlds collaborative, Albuquerque/New Orleans

Charles Boylan
Producer/Co-Host Wake Up With Co-Op!CFRO 102.7 FM
Vancouver, BC

James M. Branum

GI Rights Lawyer / Texoma Regional Vice President, National Lawyers Guild, Oklahoma City, OK

Ingrid Chapman
Catalyst Project and Critical Resistance Oakland

Kym Clark
Founder, Prison Families Community Forum
NYC

Chris Crass
Coordinator, Catalyst Project San Francisco

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz
Writer and University Professor, San Francisco

Hannah Eller-Isaacs
Unitarian Universalist Association St.Paul, Minnesota.

Cathey Golden
native New Orleanian
residing in Boston, Massachusetts

Ramon Golden
Boston, Massachusetts

Priscilla Gonzalez
Center for Immigrant Families, New York City

Kevin Alexander Gray
organizer & writer, Harriet Tubman Freedom House Project
Columbia, South Carolina

Saib Isa
Software Quality Assurance Engineer
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

John Janovy, Jr.
Lincoln, Nebraska

William M. Johnson
New York Rep. Common Ground

Chris Kromm
Executive Director, Institute for Southern Studies

Prita Lal
Center for Immigrant Families, New York City

Jen Marlowe
filmmaker/author
Seattle

Sharon Martinas
Challenging White Supremacy workshop, San Francisco

Pilar Maschi
Critical Resistance, membership and leadership development director, nyc

Molly McClure
Catalyst Project, Oakland

Saiya Miller
student, Simon's Rock College of Bard
Great Barrington, MA

Meshá Mongé-Irizarry
Idriss Stelley Foundation , Law Enforcement Accountability

Christopher Monson
Architect and educator, Starkville, Mississippi

Claudia Montesinos

Architect, Atlanta

Jovita Natal
Prison Families Community Forum
NYC

Donna Nevel
Center for Immigrant Families, New York City

Cheri O'Donoghue
Prison Families Community Forum
NYC

Ricky O'Donoghue
Prison Families Community Forum
NYC

Beatrice Parwatikar
Pax Christi USA Ambassador of Peace / INCITE Women of Color Against Violence, Shoreham, VT

Ed Pearl
formerly of SNCC's Free Southern Theater, Los Angeles

Lydia Pelot-Hobbs
student Oberlin College, Ohio
former member of Common Ground Anti-Racist Working Group

Kyung Ji Kate Rhee
Executive Director | Prison Moratorium Project
Brooklyn

Marc Rodrigues
Student/Farmworker Alliance Immokalee, Florida

Marion Rodriguez
Organizer, NY Campaign for Telephone Justice/Prison Families Community Forum
NYC

Gabriel Sayegh
Project Director, Drug Policy Alliance, NY

Mikell Grafton Skinner
attorney
Louisville, KY

Susan Slohm
Organizer with SEIU
Albuquerque, NM

Matthew Smith
Architect, Seattle Right of Return Committee
(formerly representing Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility)

Rebecca Solnit
writer
San Francisco

Hon Andrew L. Somers Jr. (ret.)
retired Judge , Fitchburg, Wisconsin

Stephen Steinberg
Professor, Urban Studies Department, Queens College
New York City

Ken Stowar
Programme Director for CIUT 89.5FM the University of Toronto Community Radio station, Toronto, Canada

Uda Olabarria Walker
Left Turn Magazine
San Francisco, Ca.

Ivey Walton

Prison Families Community Forum
NYC

Sara Williams PAC
Carolina Peace Resource Center
Columbia, SC

Emily Winkelstein
Harm Reductionist and activist, Brooklyn, NY

Daniel Wolff
writer/producer
Nyack, N.Y.

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- [2] <http://leftturn.mayfirst.org/?q=node/573>