

Hearts on Fire

the struggle for justice in new orleans

**REFLECTIONS ON ANTI-RACIST ORGANIZING,
SOLIDARITY AND COLLECTIVE LIBERATION**

BY INGRID CHAPMAN

**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.¹

¹ Molly McClure, Clare Bayard and I of the Catalyst Project, continued to work in New Orleans in 2007 supporting the Anti-Racism Working Group of Common Ground and local grass roots organizing efforts. We also prioritized bringing the struggle for justice in New Orleans into our national political education program.

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.^a 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.^b 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.^c

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.^d 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.^e

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.^f

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."^g 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.^h 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.ⁱ 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.^j 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,^k 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.^l Many upper income, whiter neighborhoods received little damage, but 77 percent of homes in low-income areas were destroyed.^m

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.ⁿ

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 libratory 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.¹ 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.

¹ The Builders' Solidarity Group was a majority queer, working class, multiracial group of activists and organizers working within different building trades.

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, a long time Black organizer, 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.^o 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.^p 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.¹

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

¹ The Lower Ninth Ward workers cooperative through that specific collaborative as of August 2007 did not happen. Each of the organizations involved continued to develop and implement job creation project outside that specific collaborative.

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 already 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 without 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.

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GULF COAST BASED ORGANIZATIONS:

PHRF | www.peopleshurricane.org
INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence | www.incite-national.org
PISAB | www.pisab.org
NENA | www.lower9thwardnena.com
POC | www.peoplesorganizing.org
The Coalition to Stop the Demolitions |
www.defendneworleanspublichousing.org
Common Ground | www.commonground.org
Critical Resistance | www.criticalresistance.org/katrina/
Safe Streets Strong Communities | www.safestreetsnola.org
Common Ground Health Clinic | www.cghc.org
Latino Health Outreach Project | www.cghc.org/lhop.html
New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice Coalition |
www.neworleansworkerjustice.org
Mary Queen of Vietnam | www.maryqueenofvietnam.org
United Houma Nation | www.unitedhoumanation.org
Survivors for Survivors in SF Bay Area | [survivorsforsurvivors@](mailto:survivorsforsurvivors@yahoo.com)
[yahoo.com](mailto:survivorsforsurvivors@yahoo.com) or campbellrock1@gmail.com
Bay Area Katrina Solidarity Network | katrinasolidarity@gmail.com

FOR MORE READING CHECK OUT:

- » "A letter from New Orleans Organizers to their allies"
<http://leftturn.mayfirst.org/?q=node/573>
 - » "You Can't Kill the Spirit: a Forum with Three Women Organizers from New Orleans" in the July/August issue #25 of Left Turn
 - » 'A Katrina Reader: Readings by & For Anti-Racist Educators and Organizers' | www.cwsworkshop.org
 - » *Katrina's Legacy: White Racism and Black Reconstruction in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast* by Eric Mann | frontlinespress.com
 - » Left Turn NOLA articles www.leftturn.org
 - » *White Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race and the State of the Nation*
www.southendpress.org
- San Francisco Bay View | www.sfbayview.com

ENDNOTES

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- b Micheal Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water*, 2006.
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- d World Watch Institute, "Post-Katrina Population Loss Greater Than Previously Estimated," October 7, 2006; Christian Science Monitor, "Post-Katrina, New Orleans Coming Back More Hispanic," June 12, 2006.
- e The New Orleans Index: Second Anniversary Edition by Amy Liu and Allison Plyer Aug. 2007 <http://www.gnocdc.org/>
- f Gulf Coast Reconstruction Watch, "A New Agenda for the Gulf Coast," February 2007
- g See the "Bring New Orleans Back Commission Report."
- h *Public Housing sits empty and waiting May 22, 2007 nola.com* by Gwen Filosa also see HR-1227 <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d110:HR01227:@@@D&summ2=m&>
- i The New Orleans Index: Second Anniversary Edition Aug. 2007 by Amy Liu and Allison Plyer
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