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July 1, 2007

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Two weeks after Katrina hit, I went to Little Rock, Arkansas to assist Friends and Families of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children in organizing evacuees with people inside the correctional system in Louisiana.

I arrived in the middle of heavy, muggy summertime heat. Some days as I drove across the state, visiting shelters, I'd roll up the windows with the air off and pretend it was the sauna I love to visit back in Portland, Oregon. Some days I'd leave the windows down and pretend it was the sauna I love to visit back in Portland.

I spent just under a week running from shelter to shelter. For the better portion of the week I was there, no one appeared to have a comprehensive list where people were being housed, let alone of who was where. From the Red Cross to the Arkansas state disaster agency, no one could offer an accurate list of where evacuees could be found. A lot of my time was spent driving from empty camp to empty camp, following leads from social workers or word of mouth, until I finally found camps with people still in them.

It seems the state's strategy in Arkansas was to move people through Ft Chaffee in the west of the state and disperse

them into smaller camps of 100s of people within 24–48 hours of arrival in the state. Most locals remembered Ft Chaffee, a military base, as the site of riots by Muriel boatlift detainees in the 80s.

By the time I'd arrived, most of the big centers were dismantled, and many of the small camps were disappearing as evacuees disappeared into local residences, got aid checks and wandered off, or were shuffled around. BtR's research team was essential in getting me good information to run with once I was on the ground.

The Baptist church shelter leadership were not interested in speaking with the Catholic church shelters (who only housed Catholics), and the Pentecostals and Methodists each maintained the same sectarian stance. In Arkansas, our limited work was peculiar in that beyond FEMA and a few social workers, we were the only people communicating and reporting from one camp to the next.

This means that there was little or no interaction between the different camps, or between the isolated individuals or families who have begun to make it into the community in apartments and motel rooms. Neither the Red Cross, FEMA, nor the social service providers have a vision or interest for uniting the evacuees around the right of return or any broader political vision within the Diaspora.

The camps were typically summer camps owned and run for their members by the different denominations in the region. Different camps varied in their warmth to our project and their own apparent interest in the desires and needs of the evacuees. The church staff/volunteers in the camps were white, FEMA reps were white, the few social workers were white, and the sheriffs working the gates or patrolling the grounds were white. Being a white kid from up North, walking into the camps, where a solid majority of the evacuees where not white, it seemed important to be clear I was not representing the government, the social service agencies, or the church.

A couple of very different experiences are useful to demonstrate the real disparity in conditions and methods of managing the different shelters.

At a Presbyterian camp outside of Little Rock, it was rumored a couple of hundred evacuees were still sheltered. I pulled up to the camp, greeted at the gate by armed sheriffs asking my purpose and organization, who then directed me to the administrative office. At the administrative office, I signed three forms, gave my name, legal identification, and organization name, contact information, was given an ID tag, and was then freed to enter the cafeteria. Halfway through talking with and assisting two women in calling the Louisiana Department of Corrections to track down their loved ones, the camp administrator and another armed sheriff approach me in the cafeteria.

Interrupting my interview, they called me into the office. Again, photocopies of my identification, queries about the organization I'm assisting, and," how do they know our organization is for real, etc????" They had a hard time believing that the organization (headquartered in New Orleans) didn't have an address, letterhead, or simple contact information for its coordinators (beyond a cell phone) two weeks after half of the city was submerged by the broken levies.

In Sherwood, Arkansas, I rolled up to a small church building on the edge of town. I walked across the gravel parking lot, greeted at the back door by a group of evacuees sprawled, chatting in a circle of lawn chairs. Hoping to be directed to the more sympathetic camp administrators by the evacuees, I smiled, introduced my purpose, and myself and asked who I should talk to about setting up shop. A small, strong looking woman in her mid thirties addressed me from one end of the group, with a touch of laughter in her voice.

"People in the correctional system? I'm the Chief of our tribe, and I'm in charge of corrections. We don't have anybody in the state system, and we don't have anybody missing. All of our members are accounted for and safe. When we heard

the storm was coming, we got organized, got all of our people together, and got out."

I followed another evacuee inside, where she gave me the Chief's contact information and took a load of FFLIC's flyers in the event they came across other evacuee groups who could use the information. It was only then that I met a church administrator, a very sweet woman who was being ushered around by another evacuee, in the middle of something that appeared important. She introduced herself, and then was pulled away by other community members.

Typically, after the varied approval methods from the camp administration (ranging from multiple copies of identification and verification phone calls to just walking in a back door and getting comfortable), and I'd walk into the cafeteria during a mealtime, stand in the corner and shout out that I was here to assist people in tracking down family, children, or friends in the corrections system in Louisiana, and then wait in the corner as people streamed over.

Clear intersections of gender, race, and class in our society became vividly clear through conversations in the shelters. Whether looking for boyfriends, husbands, friends, their children or other family members, the overwhelming majority of the people seeking to track down prisoners were women. In the 60s, people began to expand the understanding of worker to include the entire nuclear family unit, recognizing how home workers were essential in maintaining the productive capacities of the worker in the factory.

Imprisonment takes in predominantly young males in the same way production work traditionally did, leaving the women in the community to care for the needs of not only the prisoner, but the economic and emotional needs of the children, parents, and families left behind on the outside.

The different perspectives, feelings, and experiences of people in the shelter were a good reminder of the complexity of consciousness. People's ideas about their experience in the

shelters, the Convention Center, in the city and the storm itself, varied widely. I sat down with a group of women, and after exchanging information on prisoners they were looking for, we chatted for a bit. I asked them a little about what they thought about the way things had gone down in New Orleans. The first told me how terrified she was, how she had heard crazy stories about crazed violence and desperation, how she was disappointed in hearing about," all the looting."

The second looked at her, looked at me, her eyes lit up and she exclaimed,"Shit, looting!? Hell yeah!! I was looting!" And they both burst into big smiles and laughter.

My last days in town, the shelters and aid agencies began to brace themselves for a new wave of evacuees, as Katrina's evacuees were shuffled north out of Texas in anticipation of Rita. The Sunday before I left, I sat on the porch of the Women's Project, one of the only independent, feminist resource centers in the region, chatting informally with one of their organizers. Just as she had arrived at the office, heavy rain began to fall from the thick wall of dark clouds that had passed over the city's clear skies that morning. As Hurricane Rita's remnants brought storms and flooding to Arkansas, we talked about the ways that Katrina had blown the lid off of submerged contradictions and realities in the United States, and of our hopes for a new social movement to be born out of it.

The struggle over New Orleans is a smaller reflection of broader struggles being born of the dismantling of the post WWII Keynesian pact-peace from the trade union bureaucracy in exchange for labor peace and a welfare net for those left outside the trade union structure. As I sit back at home in Portland, I can't help but believe that in the Diaspora's story, their journey, and the struggle to retake their city lie the seeds of a new movement.