



DISPLACED

LIFE IN THE KATRINA DIASPORA

EDITED BY LYNN WEBER AND LORI PEEK

with

SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH COUNCIL RESEARCH NETWORK
ON PERSONS DISPLACED BY HURRICANE KATRINA

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service provision—a solution that emerged from a gendered analysis of the movement.

Luff's work is a fitting ending to this volume because, like the other studies presented here, she explores the impact of the disaster through the experiences of those living through it. However, the group whose words, actions, and visions her work explores is unique—people working for social justice in the midst of disaster recovery. And because the movement group she examines sees disaster as a microcosm of larger failures in the social contract, Luff's insights connect the specifics of Hurricane Katrina with the broader conditions of race, class, and gender oppression in the United States.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING IN THE KATRINA DIASPORA RACE, GENDER, AND THE CASE OF THE PEOPLE'S HURRICANE RELIEF FUND

Within hours of Hurricane Katrina's landfall, social justice organizers joined millions of Americans in responding to the humanitarian crisis precipitated by the storm. In addition to mobilizing to meet basic needs, however, organizers sought to cultivate a collective, political response to what they framed as government malfeasance before, during, and after the hurricane. With an early analysis of the social origins of the disaster, grassroots leaders hoped to organize survivors and sympathetic allies into a movement that would fight not only *for* the immediate well-being of the victims, but also *against* the broader social conditions that had turned the hurricane into a disaster. They believed Katrina could be a politicizing and galvanizing experience for hurricane survivors and other Americans. Kali Alkuno,¹ executive director of the People's Hurricane Relief Fund (PHRF), characterized the perspective shared by leaders of the Black Liberation Movement: "The catastrophe—the suffering, the displacement, the broad visualization of it domestically and internationally—was going to reignite resistance; it would be a spark to bringing the Black Liberation Movement. A lot of us had had that premise." During the three years following the storm, movement organizers accomplished extraordinary mobilization in the midst of grim and often overwhelming conditions. But organizing a dispersed population consumed with survival needs and channeling those needs into political demands also proved difficult.

This chapter examines the challenge of movement-building in the context of disaster and displacement. In particular, it explores the relationship between grassroots organizing and the great demand for meeting basic needs in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Toward this end, I juxtapose the development of political strategy among Black Liberation leaders with the experience of Katrina evacuees who encountered their mobilization

efforts. A gendered analysis of the tension between political mobilization and service provision not only contributes to our understanding of the gendered nature of social change efforts among disaster survivors, but also offers broader insights into movement-building in the current national context of economic instability and shrinking state services.

This discussion is based on a case study of PHRF, a movement coalition that emerged after the storm. Headquartered in New Orleans, PHRF's primary constituency was poor, Black New Orleanians, both those who remained displaced from the city following the mandatory evacuation of August 28, 2005, and those who returned. The study suggests that evacuees in the PHRF orbit found the movement organization's political critique appealing, and some of them underwent significant consciousness-raising and activation. Most, however, were consumed by their daily survival needs, which they framed as being in tension with participation in movement activity. Their experience raises tactical questions about community organizing during displacement and, in turn, about the role of relief work in community organizing.

THE STUDY

I am a sociologist at the University of New Orleans with research interests in race, gender, and social movements, and a White woman activist in local movements for racial and gender justice. I became involved in grassroots political responses to Katrina immediately after the storm. In September 2005, while still in evacuation myself, I was invited to join a national conference call with organizers who were forming PHRF. When I returned to New Orleans in January 2006, I began participant-observation in PHRF and several other grassroots reconstruction efforts in the city.²

At the end of 2007, when PHRF was formally dissolving, I conducted in-depth interviews with two PHRF leaders, Kali Akuno and Malcolm Suber, and three paid staff organizers in diasporic cities with large evacuee populations: Addis Ababa in Atlanta, Georgia; Gina Martin in Houston, Texas; and Wilma Taylor in Jackson, Mississippi. I also interviewed four activists in Atlanta and Jackson who supported PHRF work and, in some cases, such as Chokwe Lumumba of Jackson, who were instrumental contributors to PHRF strategy. Together these nine political figures constitute the organizer interviews for this study. All of them were Black, with varying degrees of political experience, and two were women.

Interviews with evacuees also took place between January and April 2008, in Atlanta, Houston, and Jackson. PHRF activity in the diaspora focused on organizing displaced New Orleanians, and my sample was composed of people from New Orleans or a surrounding parish. Participants in the study were evacuees who had come into contact with PHRF activity in the previous two and a half years. The local PHRF organizer set up the interviews and introduced me to each respondent, whom I paid fifty dollars. Each evacuee interview lasted between forty-five minutes and two hours. I conducted twenty-seven of those evacuee interviews, and closely supervised two Black graduate students who conducted an additional seventeen. Two PHRF organizers also interviewed five evacuees, for a total of forty-nine evacuee interviews. All of the organizer and evacuee interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

The vast majority of evacuee participants in the study did not consider themselves "political" or "activist," though some had participated in civic, neighborhood, non-profit, or church activities before the storm. While a few participants had owned homes and held lower-middle-class jobs before the storm, most were working class or members of the underclass. For example, during the interviews a number of participants mentioned impending threats to their current housing status either because they had just received another round of Disaster Housing Assistance Program (DHAP, the Department of Housing and Urban Development's disaster housing program³) expiration notices or for some other reason that reflected the instability of their living conditions. Twenty of the evacuee participants were male, and twenty-nine were female. The oldest respondent was sixty-seven years old, and the youngest was twenty-one. All participants were Black.

While all research that traverses racial, economic, and gender lines involves complex negotiations, participant-observation among social movement groups expressly oriented to these issues often makes these negotiations explicit. I made methodological decisions that were designed to value and incorporate organizer input into the project, from creating the interview schedule together to paying the diaspora staff organizers as logistical coordinators to set up the evacuee interviews. In addition to remunerating them for their time, this arrangement allowed organizers to authorize me—or not—to the evacuees, who were weary of speaking with anyone who appeared to be an official. Despite these and other efforts to pursue accountable scholarship, race, class, gender, and other power differences between the research participants and me inevitably limited both what they were willing to say and what I was able to hear.

THE PEOPLE'S HURRICANE RELIEF FUND

PHRF was formed out of a loose network of racial and economic justice organizers and organizations that existed in New Orleans before the storm. Within weeks of the hurricane, longtime Black organizer Curtis Muhammad, together with dozens of local far Left Black leaders and with the support of national Black nationalist and revolutionary organizations, formed PHRF.

Much of the senior leadership of PHRF was composed of Black male baby boomers, all lifelong organizers with political roots in revolutionary, nationalist, and/or communist movements. There were also local and non-local Black, feminist women organizers who were very active in the first four months after the storm, such as Shana Griffin of INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, Mayaba Liebhenthal, and Margaret Prescod of Global Women's Strike. An Interim Coordinating Committee (ICC) was formed, which also consisted of local and nonlocal Black men and women. In the spring of 2006, in a public split, Curtis Muhammad left PHRF to form the People's Organizing Committee, and Kai Akuno, a thirty-two-year-old Californian with national organizing credentials, from the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement and involved in PHRF since September 2005, became its executive director.

While PHRF began as a coalition that included the strong presence of feminists and a Women's Caucus, by spring 2006, its organizational and gender composition had changed. Many of the key women left to work in other social justice organizations. PHRF had become less a coalition and more a political organization. It was led by Akuno and Suber and the ICC and supported by a rotating pool of additional staff, such as the organizers in diaspora cities and volunteers. When I refer to PHRF leadership in this chapter, I mean the key ideological and organizational shapers: Muhammad, Akuno, Suber, Lumumba, and members of the ICC, among others. Despite the early participation of female leaders, the input of ICC women, and the role played by two female organizers (Gina Martin and Wilma Taylor), the lasting ideological and organizational activity of PHRF was driven by men.

While there were a variety of political orientations among PHRF leaders, three central political principles emerged in the early months. The first was that the hurricane reconstruction should be directed by those most affected by the disaster, in what Muhammad called a "bottom-up" organizing strategy of the "poorest and Blackest." The vehicle for this grassroots

leadership would be Survivor Councils, community meetings of poor, Black hurricane survivors in New Orleans and throughout the diaspora.

During the first seven months after Katrina, PHRF organizers created dozens of Survivor Councils across the United States. They were to be the primary tactic for base-building, political education, and decision-making among evacuees, whom PHRF leaders called "survivors" until adopting the term "internally displaced persons" in alignment with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. Organizers and supporters, including allies from preexisting movement networks and displaced activists from New Orleans, contacted evacuees in large shelters, at service centers set up by FEMA and the American Red Cross, in FEMA trailer parks, at community centers and events, and in hotels and housing complexes where evacuees were placed by federal and state governments. Survivor Councils helped design the agenda for several PHRF Reconstruction Work Groups and participated in a variety of political events.

The second predominant political principle of PHRF was that displaced people had the "right of return," language carefully crafted to invoke international human rights principles and nationalist struggles and which quickly became a PHRF rallying cry.

The third principle moved beyond the immediate domain of hurricane relief and justice toward a more sweeping vision of national movement-building. Built on a white paper produced by Saladin Muhammad, chairperson of Black Workers for Justice, and called "Hurricane Katrina: The Black Nation's 9/11,"⁴ this position understood the disaster to be a political opportunity for reglobalizing a broad-based justice movement, led by low-income Blacks. Amid other competing political and strategic tendencies, these three foci formed the backbone of PHRF political work.

POLITICAL MOBILIZATION VERSUS SERVICE PROVISION

From the beginning, PHRF leadership made a key strategic distinction between political mobilization and relief work or service provision. This political distinction was gendered not only through the sex of its proponents (male leadership as opposed to female staff organizers), but also in the meaning and implications of the position itself, a dynamic I explore in the second half of this chapter. Certainly everyone involved during the early days of emergency response contributed to some relief activities. Akuno describes his own involvement in the Bay Area in September 2005:

I was . . . even there [in Oakland] getting into it full time you know, helping with survivors in Oakland and San Francisco and Palo Alto: doing interviews, helping people get settled, helping them find resources, things of that nature, *and* trying to build a united front in Oakland and the Bay Area.

But PHRF leadership was clear that neither their political aim nor primary tactic was the disbursement of aid. Instead they focused on politicization, self-determination, and the political organization of poor, Black hurricane survivors. Saladin Muhammad was the first to publicly articulate this orientation in the position paper mentioned above:

The response to this human tragedy must be more than a humanitarian response in order to deal with the magnitude and complexity of issues, international political ramifications, the legal aspects, and the various levels of local, regional, national, and international coalition and network building and mobilizing that must take place to build a powerful movement for social justice.⁵

PHRF leaders, as part of the broader Black Liberation Movement, explicitly resisted a service-based response to the crisis, which they perceived to be a threat to their objectives. Their substantive critique of service provision was based on a historical assessment of the role of the service industry and the “non-profit industrial complex” in the United States since the 1960s.⁶ They had four primary concerns with a relief-centered response to disaster. The first was rooted in the desire to foster political and institutional autonomy. Chokwe Lumumba, a major figure in Black nationalist politics and a core supporter of PHRF, put it this way:

[If the goal is] developing independence, then the people take responsibility in the building. We are not a welfare group. To the extent we say we are doing this *for* you, that’s betraying the revolution. . . . [Instead] it’s getting into the street.

Despite the discourse of self-reliance, Lumumba’s position is far from a culture of poverty argument. His call for autonomy links the traditional community organizing principle of self-determination to a Black nationalist platform.

The second concern stemmed from a material analysis of resources and

a political assessment of the government’s role in a capitalist economy. Akuno explained this point:

The issue is not that there aren’t enough services. The issue is who is doing them, how are they being done, with what resources. The only institution [government] that has the resources that can do the services that are needed, we have to fight in order to [have access to] those resources. But we have to have the political power to fight for those resources so they are distributed in an equitable fashion. It’s the chicken and egg then. Do you have to provide services in order to build a base? I say no. It doesn’t hurt. But doesn’t have to be.

While some forms of Black nationalism may seek complete independence, Akuno makes it clear that in the current economic system, the state is still the most important gatekeeper of resources. Building mass power in movements is, from his perspective, necessary to leverage these resources.

A third concern came out of a growing critique of the social service industry and what activists call the “non-profit industrial complex.” The non-profit industrial complex “manages and controls dissent by incorporating it into the state apparatus, functioning as a ‘shadow state’ constituted by a network of institutions that do much of what government agencies are supposed to do with tax money in the areas of education and social services.”⁷ In the following lengthy interview excerpt, Akuno argues that service and non-profit industries siphon off political energy, while institutionalizing an unequal balance of power and capacity. The provision of relief is, he argues, by nature a pacifying and temporary solution to much more endemic problems, and in the long run it exacerbates those problems:

Our movement, the Black Liberation Movement, had a clear position. . . . we’ve been very clear that on the whole, the poverty programs that got up in the ‘60s, administered through the 1970s, that set up the whole non-profit industrial complex, played a very negative role in undermining the whole political impetus of the movement. It’s the “poverty pimps” analysis. . . . All the services that were being provided, in the ‘60s and ‘70s. . . that didn’t bolster the social movement in any way. . . .

And I’m saying for us to create this whole service infrastructure [with] no political focus to it. . . . it’s not going to change that at all. The only reason that service infrastructure was created was because of the mass movement [of the 1960s], the pressure the mass movement put on the

federal government anyway. [Today] [w]e don't have that. . . . So the only way we are going to get any of those resources right now is philanthropic capital, which is reactionary as hell. So if we are going to [be] depending on the private resources, we know we are not going to get that from the Black community first and foremost, which is hurting. So it's going to come from that source. But its political orientation is not where most of us want to go. So how do we deal with that?

The federal government is the only institution that has the capacity to make people whole, to bring them home. And the reason [the disaster] happened in the first place is because we didn't have power. So we are trying to build power in order to move the government. If we use the resources to relief, it goes in a week. [We want to] use the resources to build power, to organize.

According to PHRF leadership, trying to meet the basic needs of poor Black communities is not only an exercise in futility, it is at cross purposes with a political agenda devoted to increased Black autonomy, governmental accountability, and community mobilization.

Fourth, and finally, the strategic objective of linking Katrina, the specific disaster, to ongoing social policy and inequality depended on framing the hurricane fallout as a crisis of degree, not of kind. In other words, Hurricane Katrina was understood to be both exceptional *and* representative of ongoing conditions in the United States. From the perspective of Black Liberation leaders, while Katrina magnified the survival needs of hundreds of thousands of people, it did not alter the context of service provision, race and class inequality, power relations, or the struggle for resistance in the United States. For this reason, PHRF leaders framed Katrina as a presenting symptom of a much larger, systemic problem. The political target was power relations and the distribution of resources, not a lack of disaster services.

ORGANIZING IN THE EARLY MONTHS AFTER KATRINA: SURVIVOR COUNCILS

In the winter months of 2005–2006, PHRF began to pay staff organizers to continue the work of organizing Survivor Councils. Social justice movement networks and national speaking tours by PHRF leadership raised the necessary funds. During different periods in 2006–2007, the Survivor Councils in Atlanta, Houston, and Jackson met every two weeks. Council

meeting attendance ranged from five to twenty-five participants, with some of the members coming consistently and some evacuees appearing at one or a few meetings and not returning. Special events such as those described below brought out larger numbers.

While Addis Ababa, the Atlanta organizer and former Black Liberation Movement activist, was not a hurricane survivor, Gina Martin in Houston and Wilma Taylor in Jackson were evacuees from New Orleans. The three of them ran Survivor Council meetings in their respective cities, organized local protests against FEMA, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the American Red Cross, and brought vanloads of people to Washington, DC, Baton Rouge, and New Orleans for demonstrations, meetings with government officials, and other activities. The objectives were political education, the cultivation of a survivor-led movement agenda, base-building, public mobilization, and pressuring government and relief organizations.

Each local group emphasized the issues that reflected the needs and interests of the lead organizer. The Atlanta Survivor Council, led by Ababa, who had been involved with the nationalist Republic of New Africa in the 1970s and who had the support of the Atlanta-based U.S. Human Rights Network, brought survivors to Washington, DC, to protest FEMA and organized an Atlanta Human Rights Tribunal in conjunction with the larger Tribunal PHRF put on in New Orleans in August 2007. Gina Martin, herself an evacuee engaged in a protracted struggle with FEMA and HUD over housing vouchers, focused on this issue in Houston. In Jackson, Wilma Taylor spearheaded an effort to pressure an evasive American Red Cross to disburse funds earmarked for Katrina survivors.

THE DIASPORA: SURVIVING THE RECOVERY

As others in this volume have documented,⁸ in the weeks and months after the storm, evacuee need was often absolute. Housing, clothing, food, transportation, medical care, and children's needs had to be filled from scratch. In addition to lacking financial resources and material goods, most displaced people had also lost the social networks that supplemented their resources and sustained them.⁹ In September 2005, evacuees who landed in other cities were met by a flurry of FEMA officials, social service providers, relief organization representatives, church members, national and local non-profit staff, and good-hearted individuals all proffering promises. When it actually came through, organizational assistance—whether

public, private, or non-profit—arrived with many bureaucratic rules and conditions. The majority of the displaced would spend the next years navigating among systems, opportunities, constraints, and dead ends. Approximately two and a half years after the storm, most of the participants in this study were still living in unstable conditions, uncertain about how long they could stay in their current accommodations; deciding whether they would be moving back to New Orleans, and facing employment challenges, medical problems, and ongoing family separation.

Second only to the need for material support, according to respondent narratives, was the need for information about how to get that support. An evacuee trying to extend a housing voucher or move back to New Orleans encountered a dizzying array of organizations and stacks of incomplete and often contradictory guidelines and applications for getting assistance. Accurate and comprehensible information was a rare and desperately needed lifeline. Martin, the Houston organizer, described the difficulty of trying to get coherent information even from the primary disaster relief organizations:

First of all we was like pulling teeth to get information. Now when you finally got a chance to go down to the FEMA center itself, you had things set up there, different agencies set up there that were supposed to help you. Well, you kinda got a little information there, but once the FEMA center closed . . . it was, if you went to Red Cross, you had to be cousins with your case manager for service, literally, for real. You had to really know people really well.

Because it represented the apparent lack of commitment behind institutional offers of assistance, the elusiveness of caseworkers was a particularly frustrating problem. A thirty-year-old female evacuee in Houston spoke about trying to reach her DHAP (HUD) caseworker: “[When I have questions] I try to ask my counselor, I tried to call. . . . I have a caseworker [and I can] never get in contact with him. I don’t even know who is my caseworker. . . . I have never talked to him on the phone. They say he have an assistant. I called for his assistant. Never returned my phone calls.”

In this context of protracted survival management, PHRF sought to reframe needs as the product of injustice and collective action as the only reliable solution. Organizers tried to recruit evacuees to meetings and demonstrations and to build a community of survivors who would make the links between the struggles they faced after the disaster with those they had experienced before it. For PHRF organizers, Hurricane Katrina had opened

a political opportunity for leveraging federal and public support. They believed that turning disaster grievances into collective action could be the beginning of a groundswell.

For the evacuees, however, the struggle to meet basic needs was paramount. In most cases, it was the need for information that brought them to the Survivor Councils in the first place. And when they stopped feeling that they were getting the information that made the meetings worthwhile, they stopped going. For example, there was a sixty-four-year-old man who had been involved in a relatively high level of civic activity in New Orleans before the storm, such as visiting inmates in Orleans Parish prison. When I asked why he had attended Survivor Council meetings in Houston, he replied:

Oh, searching for help. And so the most reason why I went, I was enthusiastic so I can come back and pass this on to my fellow brothers here in the [apartment] complex. Whoever else I would run across, inviting them all, if they from New Orleans, I can have information to pass on to.

A fifty-four-year-old divorced mother, avid churchgoer, and substitute teacher who was living in Jackson gave a similar account of why people came to Survivor Council meetings and to the Red Cross protests:

Well, they wanted help. People aren’t doing real well here, they wanted to see what kind of assistance we could get to help us, you know. Some people probably needed jobs, some people probably still need counseling, vehicles, whatever kind of assistance they could have gotten.

A sixty-seven-year-old evacuee who was caring for her elderly mother, with whom she had evacuated, became highly involved in the Atlanta Survivor Council. A gentle, soft-spoken woman, she had been to three PHRF demonstrations and testified at the Atlanta Human Rights Tribunal. During 2007 she made regular calls to bring people out to the Survivor Council meetings, and she too was aware that the pull for many was information. She explained:

I’m sorry [PHRF] went down, because I found that they was the only ones giving out lots of information. I would help here in Atlanta, because that’s where I live, help give out information. Addis would have it, Addis would have all the information. And all of us would come to the meeting and take some. Information about how you can get help from different

organizations. Information about Red Cross, information on the human rights, information just on a lot of things. How you can get help to get the mold out your house. I know he got some information because he got stacks and stacks. I had some at my house.

Finally, a former resident of the St. Bernard housing project described her relationship to the Survivor Council. She was explicit about her instrumental connection to the group:

Only way I'll go to a meeting down there now is if they saying we having a meeting to discuss "where you guys want to move at," and "we gonna have some funds for y'all to move wherever y'all want to move," you know. Or maybe if we giving out cards or we giving out some free something, you know, that's the only way I would want to go.

While these participants were conscious that their own or others' primary motive for being involved in the Survivor Councils was getting immediate help and vital information, others did not say so directly, but the desperation of their situation communicated something similar. For some, participation in any organized activity became too much. A forty-nine-year-old man who was bused from the New Orleans Superdome to Texas initially participated in PHRF events and had been enthusiastic about bringing people from New Orleans together. A veteran and former felon, he had stopped using drugs and was holding down an industrial job before the storm. He had gone with the Survivor Council van to New Orleans for the second anniversary of the storm and attended the PHRF commemorative march. "I heard about [PHRF meetings], and I got in touch with Ms. Martin, and she turned me, she put me in a new way. I went on a trip to New Orleans. It was very inspirational. They were speaking about all the laws that were violated by the United States, and trying to help people get back home you know, giving you insight on what's going on with that now." He also attended a Red Cross protest in Houston, and helped bring people to the meetings.

But over his two and a half years in Houston, he had had "forty or fifty job interviews," and no one would hire an ex-felon. He was living in a converted single-occupancy hotel, washing dishes in the bathtub, and had started using drugs again. By December 2007, he said, "I just bottomed out." His mother had died in a hospital in New Orleans during the storm, and her death haunted him. The difficulty he had in getting a job and finding a stable place to live was overwhelming:

Katrina is something all of us from New Orleans, a lot of us, never come to recognize it. It flipped our lives and it flipped our minds, our brains, our feelings. Wiped us out . . . Right now I'm [getting] psychiatric care. I just gotta deal with it, you know. I would love to go home . . . but I don't have the finances to really start over. FEMA feel like they gave us ten thousand dollars and that was enough.

Later during the same interview when I asked about the issue he had found inspirational at the march—the pursuit of the human rights case against the United States government—it was apparent that he was in a different place: "I think it's a waste. I don't see it happening." When I wondered what he thought *would* be useful, he was clear:

Helping those who wanna move back home, you know what I'm saying, cheaper rent, letting [those] who wanna go home [go home], you know? Rent's so high down there. Like I said, at the present time today, I'm stressed out. What would I support? Basically nothing right now. You know, I got to think about me. See what fits in. I don't have too long. The first two and a half years I was here, you know, I was out there. Now I don't even wanna go out there. Like I said, it's been stressful on me. It's very long, very long. I dunno. I just want peace right now . . . It . . . seem like . . . it's like it's over with . . . Everyone else is movin' on. I just wish I could go home. I really do.

If the prospect of getting support was the primary incentive for attending meetings or demonstrations, then the sense of having even more pressing needs was a significant disincentive. Because most participants had no prior personal exposure to social movement activity, they had little reason to believe in collective efficacy. If their pre-Katrina experience of the government was of intransigence, they had no reference point for collective power. When filtered through a lifetime of state and agency encounters, their post-Katrina experience only confirmed the negative aspects of these encounters. In Jackson, the churchgoing woman who used to call people to come to the Survivor Council noted:

[T]he meetings got smaller and smaller. And I really believe it's because people weren't getting their needs met and they just felt like, why am I coming here? I'm not gonna sit here for a couple of hours and listen to somebody [officials, in this case from the Red Cross, brought in by the Council] lie to us . . . People are looking for results. Nobody wants to hear

somebody lie to them and that's all they did. . . . Finally [the Red Cross] got a couple of social workers and then they started working with us, like I said on the vehicles [that Red Cross had said it would make available], but people just felt like it was just a bunch of talk and that's really what it wound up being.

For the majority of participants, mistrust of government agencies became cynicism that any official or organizational representative could be trustworthy or efficacious. Their perspective on social services bled into an outlook on all groups—including grassroots movement groups—promising support or change. For many participants, PHRF was indistinguishable from a blurry spectrum of other kinds of organizations—federal, faith-based, and non-profit—from HUD, to ACOORN, to local church groups.

PROVIDING SERVICES, MEETING NEEDS

Wilma Taylor and Gina Martin, the two women staff organizers of PHRF working, respectively, out of Jackson and Houston, were very clear about the degree of ongoing need faced by their constituency. They were moved to respond to it individually and collectively. Before having had any exposure to Black Liberation Movement politics, Taylor had her own reaction to the activities offered by movement and service organizations at an event for displaced people in Jackson in 2006. A friend had received an invitation to attend the event, and Taylor accompanied her. She described her experience:

And so we went to see what it was about and I think at the time [one of the organizers of the event] is more into [a] vegetarian [diet]. And so they had a vegetarian thing for us and some people just wasn't for that. I think she wanted to deal with our health issue, which she had very good intentions about, but we weren't studying health issues. We were more on survival mode. So her timing was off. . . . See, they lost them when you're trying to get people to worry about their high blood pressure and they don't have a roof over their head. And I just think our timing was off 'cause a lot of people just didn't want to hear that and so they just didn't go back.

Taylor's sense of the gap between what was being offered—no matter how well meant—and what was needed was part of what inspired her to get involved in collective action.

Both Taylor and Martin organized around issues that, if successful, would provide immediate material benefits. Unlike Ababa and some of the senior PHRF leadership, they were hurricane evacuees like the people they were working with, and their perspective was filtered through this experience. Indeed, the Katrina displacement brought them to political activity, which neither had participated in before. For example, Martin was struggling herself to get the Houston Housing Authority to transfer its voucher to New Orleans so that she could return. She subsequently organized events exposing the Housing Authority's stonewalling and worked on other issues having to do with public and affordable housing in New Orleans. Similarly, Taylor's work revolved around pressuring the Red Cross to release its funds, and she contended that the campaign was instrumental in winning financial awards for eighty-five evacuees in Jackson.

Martin and Taylor shared the view that needs should be prioritized. To Martin, it made no sense to focus on political activity when people were barely hanging on. It was a position based on her own experience of displacement and her gendered attention to daily needs. She noted the reasons that many people contacted PHRF:

[B]ecause they didn't have lights. And they didn't have food. A lot of it was just, a lot of people was not mentally capable, and I'm [not] saying they had a mental illness, but after a natural disaster, they just had to shut down. You know, I was to that point. But that is a lot of it, because they didn't have their basic needs, so they couldn't focus on nothing else.

Martin's response was to help the evacuees she encountered in any way she could. She made house calls, gave rides, and supported persons displaced by the storm in a variety of additional ways, though in some situations she was hardly better off. For her this was part of what it meant to be an organizer as well as being the right thing to do. But she knew this position was not shared by PHRF leadership:

They just didn't want you to focus on social service. You were not a social service agency. "We don't provide rides, we don't provide food," or whatever. They will tell you [that] if you know of a place that provides food, or provides transportation, [if] you know, [then] you tell them, but you don't research it, that was the part, you don't research to go and give people that kind of information. "We're a political organization."

When I asked her what being a “political organization” meant, she laughed:

I had no idea . . . They really wanted to, they just wanted to just educate, showing the rights, you know, how they really shouldn't depend on government agencies and that sort of stuff, and what leadership we had years ago that failed, what kind of leadership we should be looking towards now, or no leadership at all, that kind of stuff. Just, you know, that's the kind of stuff they talked about politically.

While Martin and Taylor were the two female PHRF paid organizers, I include Nefesh Funnmlayo in this discussion as well. Funnmlayo was a long-time community organizer from New Orleans who prefers to be identified as “African” rather than “African American.” Together with her mother, Miss Oyo, she had run a community center before the storm.¹⁰ After evacuating to Houston, she helped get PHRF off the ground, but eventually split off because of some of the strategic differences described here, and continued doing her own form of community-building. She and Martin had become friends, and as someone with more political and organizing experience, she had become a mentor to Martin. Funnmlayo did not accept the distinction between political mobilization and basic human support:

People's Hurricane Relief Fund, I'm a part of that, and we actually started the Houston Katrina Survivor Council from that, but when People's Hurricane Relief Fund, when they thought that, basically, that helping people, it wasn't political, it wasn't making a statement that you were organizing the community . . . Because you have to have the people. You nothing without the people.

Martin characterized Funnmlayo and Miss Oyo's approach: “They were already in the community doing everything. And I don't know, they was with no specific group or anything, that's just in their nature, that's what they do.” Though Funnmlayo and Miss Oyo were living out of a van for months after the hurricane, they soon created a small non-profit organization for Katrina survivors, called Safe Return: “People want to go home, you help them with the moving, first month, last month's rent, and stuff like that, and then help people who [are] here who needed assistance.” Funnmlayo elaborated on their activity:

Well, what I've been doing is if the need is rent or utilities or food, I usually call up the place [e.g., social service agency or church group], and

I give them the name of the evacuee, and you get a faster reaction from the people. “Okay send 'em over, give me their names.” . . . I intervene and I call, “Look, this person is coming over. I need to make sure this is real resources, I'm not going to have them on the bus or taxi to come to nothing. Let me know if you can help them or if they can come get help.” And I reassure them that, if I'm getting something, you have it.

Martin revealed a similar orientation in her own efforts:

[PHRF leadership] told us, you know, you can't do that, you can't be a social service agency. Addis would fuss about that all the time, and I would just hang up from the two-hour phone call and go over to somebody's house, you know, go over somebody's house who I know needs. [Pause] There are people who couldn't get to the meetings, there was this older woman [in a neighboring community] . . . she couldn't get to the meetings, she was way on the south side, she couldn't even get to her doctor's appointments. I would go and take her to her doctor's appointment, because she couldn't get to them, you know. But of course I didn't tell [PHRF leadership] that's what I did.

Martin, Funnmlayo, Miss Oyo, and Taylor were driven by a variety of motives, not the least of which was their own displacement experience. It was apparent in the language that the women used, however, that a gendered imperative to caretaking work was central to their activity. Indeed, they had an explicit gender analysis of PHRF leadership and strategy. Martin explained:

You know, because men wanted only to be political, and it's not just, you can't mobilize people with just politics, you have to address basic needs, especially in the aftermath of a disaster. And women [are] willing to address needs *and* mobilize politically, and that's where the difference is.

While Martin reserved the word “political” for a narrow range of activity consistent with normative masculinity in accord with classical models of politics,¹¹ she believed that caretaking could also achieve movement aims. The evacuee whom Martin took to the doctor, for example, was a retired teacher. Martin described their relationship:

[S]he was so fiery and she had all these good ideas, you know, and she couldn't get to the meetings and I just would go and sit down and talk

to her about the things we talked about in the meetings, and she would have great ideas. And she can't get to her doctor. I just take her to her doctor too, even though we weren't supposed to do that, that's what I did. I needed her.

In movement terms, Martin received “mentorship”¹² from her support work with an elder. She remained convinced that service provision was a worthy component of movement-building and that it would ultimately strengthen the constituency:

I believe that had we kind of focused on getting some kind of, I don't know, grants or whatever, money to assist people with their needs, or even partner with some kind of agencies that did that, that you know, if people's needs were met then they would have the means to come out.

REFRAMING NEED

Feminist movement scholars have criticized narrow, gendered conceptions of the “political” that reduce movement motives and outcomes to lofty, abstract, rational elements.¹³ For Martin, personal needs and political frames were not mutually incompatible; neither were they limited to political instrumentalism. In the early months after the storm, while moving between relatives and hotels and facing the loss of her father, despite having never participated in social movement activity, she had begun to gravitate to political analyses of the disaster. Later she described the process by which her expressive and emotional needs were being met through political activity. She explained that getting involved in political organizing was initially for “sanity”:

I felt a need to do this. . . . I was just doing that for therapy. . . . I was sitting in front of the TV in the beginning and trying to figure out what to do. I just knew that if I didn't do something, if I didn't volunteer, if I didn't get a job, if I couldn't go home and get a job helping with the rebuilding process, then I literally was going to lose my mind. Because, you know, I felt like I was going to be in the state I saw other people in. A depressed state. And just not come out of it. I just felt like I had a little piece to do. Like I believed every single person who was from New Orleans had a little piece to do and I needed to do my little, little piece. It wasn't much but I can sleep at night saying my city was totally destroyed but I did this to help.

Applying these insights to the survivors she saw around her, Martin linked a lack of political involvement to increased post-traumatic stress. The reciprocal was true as well; she concluded that trauma and rage not channeled into collective action were partly responsible for the absence of a political groundswell: “And it's the reason why the mobilization didn't happen, you know, people stayed angry to themselves. . . . and we could have used that anger to turn into action the way it did for me.”

Human needs are not only material, but have the potential to be filled by “political” activity in the way PHRF leadership had hoped. Conversely, political activity when linked to basic needs can help to politicize those needs. By directing a broader range of expression than appeared in most PHRF discourse—including psychological distress and a gendered awareness of the importance of daily maintenance—into resistance, Martin herself achieved the PHRF aim of developing a political consciousness and becoming politically active, and sought to do that for others.

SOCIAL CHANGE LESSONS FROM THE KATRINA DIASPORA

Feminist social movement scholars have noted that women's movement participation often emerges out of traditional gender roles.¹⁴ They agree that many of the responsibilities and skills that constitute “women's work”—such as organizing the food, shelter, and care necessary for daily survival (reproductive labor); maintaining ties (networking); and emotional labor (solidarity work)—are central to community organizing and other forms of movement-building. However, “only recently has women's social-reproduction labor in the community, often essential for survival in lower-income communities, been recognized as a type of resistance or political activity.”¹⁵ Feminist reframing has helped scholars and activists recognize women as social change agents and movement leaders, and broadened their conception of what counts as “political” activity.¹⁶ In light of the great threat to human survival in the prolonged displacement of Katrina, the role of community maintenance should not be underestimated. At the same time, while survival is the first step of resistance, it is not in and of itself social change. For incisive political reasons, the male leadership of PHRF was concerned that the effort to meet basic needs would consume all activist energy. Their objective was to build mass power as the necessary ingredient for *change*, beyond sheer survival.

Because of the ongoing crisis of basic needs in the United States today, the Katrina disaster is in many ways a microcosm of the broader politi-

cal landscape. Changing economic conditions, growing privatization, a national housing crisis, and a shrinking welfare state have swelled the ranks of people struggling to survive; an increasing number of whom are also facing displacement—whether by disaster or at the hands of the state.

Feminist scholars have identified how the very framing of “needs” in the early-twentieth-century founding of the welfare state was feminized.¹⁷ Caring for needs is also deprecated as women’s work.¹⁸ Since the expansion of the social service industry in the 1960s, the professional class of service providers is also overwhelmingly female. So much about needs—having them, filling them, providing or denying services for them—has been gendered female. Further, women of color are overassociated with the ranks of the “needy” and disproportionately represented in the ranks of social service providers. A political critique of the service complex must carefully walk a fine line between uncovering its repressive and mystifying dimensions while not further targeting the people caught in its web, whether they are those who need, receive, or provide services. To reject the current social service industry accountably, we must do so without pathologizing or further impoverishing the people who are associated with it, who, whether female or male, are often pathologized through feminization. The experience of Katrina evacuees further underscores the need for intersectional analysis, strategy, and tactics that take into account the interaction of race, class, gender, and the state. Recent work by feminist scholars and activists of color has elucidated these convergences through pathbreaking work on the social service and non-profit industries.¹⁹

As the leaders of PHRF were aware, “The problem is not with providing social services. Many radical groups, such as the Black Panthers and the Zapatistas, have provided social services as a tool for organizing. The problem comes when *all* our time and energy is diverted toward social services to the detriment of long-term social change.”²⁰ The Black Panther Party is perhaps the best US example of the successful synthesis of service provision and movement-building. The Panthers tied humanitarian interventions to strategic mobilization and called them “survival programs pending revolution.”²¹ In the current era of a shrinking welfare state and significant macro constraints on social movements, an important question for movement organizers today is how providing community care and meeting basic needs can be a tactic for movement-building. As Gina Martin, Nefesh Fumilayo, Miss Oyo, and Wilma Taylor discovered, there is no political base if people cannot survive, for “you have nothing without the people.” While great impoverishment has precipitated mobilization in other countries, it has rarely done so in the United States.²² After three years of trying to mobi-

lize, PHRF leadership came to some of the same conclusions. Lumumba reflected on the lessons learned and the struggle for new models linking relief work and movement-building:

There was no way to organize without dealing with the people’s need to survive. This was a failing on our part. We were faced with an overwhelming problem we weren’t ready for. People being more concerned with their immediate need, and some pimping that need. And we on the ground trying to go in a totally different direction. Going total organizing, we didn’t stop addressing needs, but it wasn’t a priority. That’s a problem. Political organizing is part of that, service and survival, meeting the needs of the people. It is easier said than done. The secret becomes, how do you organize something for the people that also organizes them politically? We didn’t have modern-day models. We had the Panthers.

To argue that community caretaking work is an important part of movement-building does not mean that it is always already in the service of social change, but rather that it can be when tied to other dimensions of political activity. Ideally, “the realm of community which women create through their everyday activities becomes ‘the third element’ that mediates between the public and private spheres and provides the base for a new politics.”²³ The challenge for social justice movements in a time of increased suffering and shrinking public services is how to maintain and nurture this “third element” in a politically galvanizing way.

It is too soon to evaluate comprehensively the movement-building tactics of early Katrina organizers, because both disaster and struggle are ongoing. Additionally, the seeds that the Katrina resistance movement sowed are still gestating. They were planted in the individual consciousnesses of its constituency and also in the lessons learned by movement groups. What is apparent, however, is that the challenges Katrina raises for organizers about political resistance in the context of ongoing basic needs crises are already applicable to the broader, non-disaster-specific context of the United States in the twenty-first century.

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NOTES

1. In this chapter I use the actual names of the PHRF organizers, because this information is in the public domain.
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5. *Ibid.*
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8. Lein et al., this volume; Peek, this volume.
9. Fussell, this volume; Litt, this volume; Mason, this volume.
10. Nefesh Funnliayo and Miss Oyo are pseudonyms.
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12. Thanks to Rowan Shafer for this insight.
13. For instance, Martha A. Ackelsberg, "Communities, Resistance, and Women's Activism: Some Implications for a Democratic Polity," in *Women and the Politics of Empowerment*, ed. A. Bookman and S. Morgen (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), pp. 297–313.
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20. Paul Kivel, "Social Service or Social Change?," in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, ed. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2007), pp. 129–149, quotation from p. 143 (italics in the original).
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22. Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeeded, How They Fail* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).
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