

## WHO WILL HOUSE OUR MEMORIES?

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Archon Khephra Burns

**H**oodoo ran my grandfather out of New Orleans. Said he couldn't go back when I once mentioned a family reunion that was to be held there; something had been buried at the crossroads, which he couldn't get past to get back in. With my college education and interest in the cultural anthropology of Zora Neale Hurston and Milo Regaud, I probably smiled patronizingly. I probably had Stevie Wonder's wise and

wonderfully lyrical admonition spinning through my head: "When you believe in things you don't understand then you suffer." Belief in the power of unseen forces to direct our lives seems quaint when the forces credited are other than those we acknowledge and give power to. Grandpa smiled right back, perhaps thinking, "You don't know everything either."

No such gris gris impedes my father, who has seldom missed an opportunity to return home to New Orleans. Ostensibly, he would go for the annual music festivals or a family reunion, but any excuse would do, especially after my grandmother and then my grandfather passed. Something buried deep in the soil of the folk soul there called to him with increasing frequency and power. It got to be a ritual of his return that he would rent a car or van and drag family and friends along on a personal tour of every shotgun, ramshackle little house he had ever lived in - uptown, downtown, back of town, Gertown, the Lower Ninth Ward, Gravier, Perdido - retelling stories we had come to know by heart. The family had had to move often during the years of the Great Depression, and the responsibility for raising him and his siblings had been shared among his parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles and sometimes even neighbors. So many houses, and each one had a story.

Those houses had been there since before he was born. His parents and grandparents had inhabited some of them. Mama Rosie and Mama Clara had baked him peach cobbler in those houses and, often enough, had sent him out back to pick a peach switch, alleged to be a potent aid to his selective memory when properly applied to his

behind. It must have worked. He remembers those remedies and every house in which he met them to this day. It never seemed to matter that he'd been gone for 60-odd years when he returned to the old neighborhoods. New Orleans was still home, and the homes were still there. In their stoic, weathered facades he could read his unwritten memoirs.

How many others since had those houses sheltered, providing attics for their memories, windows for dreaming and doorways through which walked both their blessings and bad news? How much has been lost with those homes now gone, swept away or pounded into splinters, leaving shards of half a million histories buried beneath the rubble, mired in some decomposing strata of state and federal neglect?

The flood waters washed away more than just old goofer dust and assorted personal demons, it carried away the spirits that informed a culture. Like the folk that fed and were fed by them, those spirits resided in houses too, in diaries and photos and family trees tucked into Bibles, in old recipes and whole libraries that were lost. The Lower Ninth today is a vast expanse of tall grass concealing concrete slabs that lie like toppled headstones of the houses that once stood there. Only old ghosts linger like pathetic place holders awaiting the spirits return. The spirits, the people and the culture now lie dispersed into an American diaspora, slowly dissipating and in danger of disappearing unless aided in their return.

Nearly two years later, 200,000 people are still living in trailers. More than 250,000 evacuated residents are still scattered across the country. Two year later, 70 public schools in Orleans Parish remain closed. There are no mental-health services, no hospitals to serve the uninsured poor. A local surgeon suffering from post traumatic stress syndrome says he can't remember even little things, has to write them down or they too might slip away in the current confusion.

There may be legitimate reasons for the delays in rebuilding the lives of some of New Orleans's citizens, but we also know enough to know that there are no malevolent unseen forces like the bad gris gris of bureaucratic red tape tied around strange bits of local business reeking of racism and greed. It was recently revealed by the People's Hurricane Relief Fund that the American Red Cross was concealing millions of dollars it had received specifically to aid Katrina-Rita families. The Road Home program could more accurately be described as the Roadblock Home. And there are elements of the local business community that in fact would like to see recovery go no further than a Disney-like version of pre-Katrina New Orleans, who would like to see the Lower Ninth Ward turned into a golf course, who would like to see a lot fewer black folk back in the city.

New Orleans is a test case for how much can be gotten away with. The entire nation should be outraged and mobilizing to demand accountability from state and federal officials, should be demanding a regional Marshall Plan to restore New Orleans and the entire Gulf Coast region, should be demanding that our government redirect our tax dollars away from war and war profiteering and no-bid contracts to administration cronies and put those dollars to use where they are needed most, by those whom the system has failed. With just one month's spending in Iraq, all of New Orleans could have been rebuilt by now - fast-tracked, completed and stronger than it ever was. This is what we should be doing. But despite all evidence to the contrary, we still believe the system is working for us. And when you believe in things you don't understand, you suffer.