

An American Journey

Tuesday, 18 October 2005

Published in The Guardian

Hurricane Katrina not only destroyed New Orleans, but also laid bare the ugly truth about America's racial divide. Former MP Oona King set out on a personal journey through the southern states to see what has changed since her black father was forced to flee the US. The last time I visited New Orleans I was a student travelling around America. It was the first time in my life that I was physically thrown out of somewhere for being black. "We don't have niggers like you here!" yelled the manager of a scummy youth hostel before throwing my belongings out of a first-floor window, scattering them over the street.

I vividly remember sitting on that New Orleans pavement, eaten up with rage, wondering where I would sleep that night, and how long it would take to become mad or violent if you faced ingrained racism everyday. Hurricane Katrina showed us what happened to African-Americans in New Orleans who faced ingrained racism every day: they found themselves with the poorest-quality housing on the lowest, most treacherous land, and when catastrophe struck, they were left to rot.

Last month, I went back to the Big Easy. I wanted to see if it was really the case that the colour of your skin could determine your chance of surviving a catastrophic incident such as Hurricane Katrina. I had been warned that, post-Katrina, New Orleans had become like Haiti with skyscrapers. I drove along a freeway scattered with speedboats. The natural order of things had been turned upside down - together with palm trees, cars, bridges, even houses.

In the midst of the seventh ward, I came across three men sitting outside a bar listening to Stevie Wonder. A boat on the pavement blocked the entrance. A statuesque black man in his 60s, Alonzo Dawson, was cooking meat on a barbecue. Both his Latino friends, Rollin Garcia Sr and Gary Ker, had a beer and a gun to hand. It was like a sci-fi film in which they were the only ones left. I asked Alonzo what his worst experience was. "Looking out of my back window and seeing a dog eating a dead human body," he said. They had seen Federal Emergency Management Agency trucks arrive to deliver food to the white areas, they said, while most of the needy, who were black, didn't get help until some days later.

New Orleans is now dead; like Pompeii, Dresden and Hiroshima, suddenly annihilated with no time for farewells. Like most of those cities, it will return again, but so too will the schism of race that haunts America. Race governs the lives of most black people, but remains barely visible to most whites. Time and again, I have met white people who are genuinely confused as to why blacks are obsessed with race. Like a Punch and Judy show, they get bopped over the head by angry black people shouting, "It's behind you!"

The remarkable thing about Hurricane Katrina was that, like a bolt of lightning, it clearly and unavoidably illuminated the chilling impact of race. It has finally been revealed for all to see: the elephant in America's living room. Katrina not only defined what it means to be black, it also redefined what it means to be white. And the point about whiteness is that it isn't defined.

"Defining whiteness is really difficult because it is a default category," says Dalton Conley, director of the New York-based Centre for Advanced Social Science Research and a writer on race and social policy in the US. "It's something we don't define. And part of whiteness is the fact that whites don't have to think about race."

At the same time, however, black people - in the UK as much as in the US - always have to think about not being in the norm or dominant group. We have to consider that all our social interactions are governed by this thing, previously invisible to the majority.

In my secondary school in north London, for example, I was one of five ethnic-minority kids in the class. I knew from the minute I walked into that class that there was only one boy there, the one black boy, who could ever be the first boy I kissed. There was no sign on the door, it was never mentioned, and the white girls (who remain my very best friends to this day) wouldn't have noticed. But to me it was blindingly obvious: the white boys wouldn't want a black girl (however light-skinned), and if I wanted to be like other girls and kiss a boy, my choice was clearly limited to this one black boy. Two years later, sure enough, he was the first boy I ever kissed.

When I was 16 I went to Atlanta to attend a summer-school. It was a revelation. For the first time, I was in an all-black environment. I was still "different", not least because of my British accent, but the social dominance flowed the other way. I was part of the dominant culture (black). Yet my light skin still put me in an even more dominant position within the group. Of 60 kids on the course, there was one white boy there. Again, as soon as I walked in the door I knew which boy I would be paired with. It wasn't a decision, more a recognition of reality. If it all sounds complicated and paranoid, that's because that's often the reality of being black. Not so much any more, and especially not in Britain. Notwithstanding the horrific recent axe-murder of Anthony Walker because he was in a mixed relationship, Britain still has one of the highest rates of interracial relationships in the world.

But in America, the effects of slavery remain visible - to blacks at least. There is a cousin I had who was never born. My aunt, eight months pregnant, took food to my uncle who had been arrested during a civil-rights demonstration. The first policeman she met attacked her, and the baby died. Past losses always linger, passed down in attitudes and anger from one generation to the next. The African-American community is crippled by an overwhelming sense of anger and loss - lost identity, lost homeland, lost kinship, lost pride, lost history, lost future.

So when Jesse Jackson visited New Orleans evacuation centres last month and said, "It's like looking at the hull of a slave ship", he brought home the proximity of slavery and its consequences for many African-Americans. Much of white America has the view, "Move on - slavery ended 140 years ago." But African-Americans see the emancipation declaration as the beginning of slavery by other means - first a vicious share-cropping system of indentured labour, and then jim crow with its constant whippings, lynchings, and humiliations. Changing the realities of race in America is a painfully slow process. It took 100 years from black emancipation, at the end of the civil war in 1865, to black enfranchisement with the Voter Registration Act of 1965. And yet when Bush stole the White House from under the nose of disenfranchised African-Americans at the turn of the millennium, it was clear that nothing much had changed.

I'm glad I don't know most of the humiliations my family was subjected to - instead, I just like hearing about the vaguely entertaining ones. Like the one about my grandfather Alan. His grandfather was a slave, but he was a share-cropper in Florida who was heading for a lynching due to his uppity behaviour - he was driving a horse and cart, and hadn't given way to a white person's cart. So he walked to Georgia, taught himself to read and write, set up his own business, and had seven sons whom he instructed to "do good" for the community.

The symbol of his success, both economically and socially, was that he was the first black person in the area to buy a car. The car was shipped to Albany, Georgia, from Atlanta, and Alan arrived at the station no doubt full of the pride and excitement that all owners of new cars feel even when buying a car doesn't represent a miracle. But the white stationmaster believed that it simply wasn't possible for a black man to own a car. Even though Alan's name was on the paperwork and the car was already paid for, the station master refused to let him have it, and instead shipped it back to Atlanta. And Alan went home empty-handed.

Jim crow kept black people in check psychologically as well as materially. Segregation had a specific agenda: to remove political and human rights that, on paper, were "inalienable". It worked brilliantly. The basis of it was the view that blacks were not quite fully human. Black people, excluded from the political process, retreated into their churches, and that's where they are today, and where, until Katrina, President Bush targeted them fairly successfully with his faith-based initiatives. Bush even increased his vote among African-Americans from 8% in 2000 to 11% in 2004 - enough to swing the election. As one black southerner put it, "Black southerners will run to anyone with a Bible." The race legacy in America is one of guns and Bibles. It has made both white and black culture more God-fearing and more violent.

Fear of the "other" drives people further apart, and I'm surprised to find that even my Dad lives in a segregated black enclave. When I ask him why, he says, "It's not so much that it's black, it's just that whites won't live here." The irony for most middle-class African-Americans like my Dad is that they have been detached from the rest of the black population. They can't live with white people, and they can't live with (working-class) black people - or if they do, they choose to live with a level of insecurity that is anathema to the middle classes the world over.

So the past has a grip on African-Americans. And yet to white people, race is invisible. As a child, my white family would tell me that if I got lost, I had to go and find a nice policeman. But I got the idea from my black family that I should steer clear of policemen, avoid them at all costs, because they were racist and violent and might beat me to death.

Myrtle Jones returned to her house in New Orleans with her two daughters and one granddaughter, driving from Houston, Texas overnight with a truck to salvage what they could. I followed Myrtle into the hallway of her home. Imagine all your household possessions are put into a giant food-blender: carpets, fridges, clothes, sofas, stereos, food, plants, jewellery. Then throw in some external objects - say a water hydrant, a car, and a couple of dead animals. Add a generous helping of black toxic sludge, blend for a minute, then rip off the roof, and pour the mixture into all remaining rooms - and, voila, the perfect recipe for life-long depression.

Myrtle's daughter Chanel, 23, clutched her first prize track trophy as though it might help her out-run disaster. Dionne, 34, was telling her 16-year-old daughter Brionne to load other salvaged mementos of a former life into the truck.

"Where are your men?" I asked. It was an old-fashioned question, one you would ask women during a war. "Right now," said Myrtle, "we don't have any. Dionne's man is sick. Chanel's is separated. And Brionne's too young to have one. We gonna keep her single a while." She chuckled. "We want her to go to college so she can look after us all." I looked at this African-American family of women, strong as they are, and I couldn't help feeling the pain that always rips our community apart: the bequest to each new generation of African-American children of family breakdown.

Where are the men? Well for a start, nearly a million of them are in jail. There are roughly as many African-American men in prison as there are in college. Numbers of federal prisoners have doubled in the past 10 years, most of it down to the "war on drugs" and three-strike automatic prison sentencing. In some notorious cases, prisoners have received life

sentences for stealing food. The land of the free keeps more of its people in jail than any other. And, of course, the people jailed are disproportionately black. In fact, black men are locked up at seven times the rate of white men. In more than a dozen states, black men arrested on drugs charges are 57 times more likely to be sent to prison than white men on the same drug charges.

In short, many black men are sent to jail because they're black. During the early 1960s, my father was one of them. Of course, as with all racism, it's hard to prove conclusively that a white judge sentenced you because you were black. So my Dad fled the country and was exiled for 40 years. His crime? He joined nine white scholarship students at the LSE for a year, and asked the Georgia parole board (who considered draft-referral applications) to address him the same way they addressed his white peers - using the prefix "Mr". They jailed him instead.

It was a rule of Bible-belt bureaucracy that all blacks were addressed by their first name (like calling them "boy"), and all whites were addressed as "Mr". In asking for the same rights as whites, in a similar way to Rosa Parks on the buses, my Dad was challenging the whole edifice of white rule. So they punished him - hard. And yet after decades locked out of his home, the government told him he could never return unless he could prove the most obvious, yet least provable fact: that he was jailed because he was black.

I thought he would never go home, and that I would always be sent to Georgia, like I was as a child, to represent him at funerals and family gatherings. And then a miracle happened, a once-in-a-lifetime get-out-of-jail-free card. In fact, it was a letter from the 96-year-old white judge who sentenced him, addressed to President Clinton. It said, "I jailed him because he was black." And so my father got a presidential pardon, and Jim Crow's stranglehold on our family was finally broken at the beginning of the 21st century.

The critical failings of the US government's response to Katrina forced many grassroots organisations to plan the relief effort themselves. I visited one named SoS (Save our Selves) in an Atlanta basement. An 18-year-old black volunteer from Alabama was manning the phones. She said her name was Margarets. "Really? With an 's'?"

"No, not with an 's' - just I never been able to say my name. It's too long. And don't ask me to spell it neither, 'cos I never learnt." Wow. It was harder to digest that Margaret couldn't spell her name than that she was looking after traumatised black evacuees.

Save our Selves is an informal umbrella organisation of black community groups and churches. One of those involved, LaTosha Brown, is a community worker with a prisoner advocacy group in Alabama that works to restore prisoners' voting rights. The first relief operation came about when she was contacted by a group of concerned ex-prisoners. "They rang me up, and said, 'Listen, these people need help. We'll get the resources, but can you get us the petrol so we can drive it down there? We just need to help the community get through the next 24 hours, till help comes.' But," said LaTosha, still incredulous, "help never came. So we had to set up a distribution network. And we've never stopped."

Churches are the other key organisations working in SoS. The Reverend Tony Lee is the youth director from Ebenezer African Methodist Episcopal Church which has 15,000 members in Washington DC. He's also a rapper and on the board of the Hip Hop Movement, dedicated to advancing education and family values, and preventing gang killings (I applaud their efforts, but reckon that the first step to reducing violence and the mistreatment of women will be to encourage the black community to stop listening to 95% of commercial hip-hop).

Viola Plummer, a prominent activist in Brooklyn, rallied everyone shortly after the disaster by pouring a libation to African ancestors. "Brothers and sisters, on this day we have turned a corner. No longer do we look outside of ourselves for anything. This is just the beginning. We will fight to repair our families, our people and our human rights. Now, more than ever, it has become crystal clear - we cannot depend on anyone else."

Of course, it's not all doom and gloom for African-Americans. College enrolment of black women like Myrtle's granddaughter Brionne has increased by a third in six years - the sisters are doing it for themselves. And even the brothers have halved the murder rate in their own community since 1990, as well as energising a whole new generation of "Million Man Marchers" to rise above discrimination and set an example to their children.

But I also understand why community activists such as Plummer turn to the traditions of our African ancestors to seek strength. My cousin Peggy worked on the New York City African Burial Ground for five years. In 1790, 40% of white households around New York City owned slaves, and it was here that they were buried in white shrouds and wooden coffins, with a few cowrie shells or beads to remind them where they'd been kidnapped from. Nearly 45% of those buried were children under the age of 12.

One coffin lid found in New York had a sankofa symbol on it that still exists in Ghana, the meaning of which is, "Look to the past to inform the future". If you look to the past, it's easy to understand why the life expectancy of African-Americans in Harlem is lower than life-expectancy in Bangladesh. Am I surprised that it was prisoners and rappers who organised the relief effort to poor black people in Mississippi? No.