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Anne M Lovell

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VARIETIES OF EXPERIENCE IN NAVIGATING DISASTER

ANNE M. LOVELL
INSERM, CERMES3, Université de Paris, CNRS

A WATERY CITY: SUMMER 2006

Louisianans live in a watery place. You sense it entering New Orleans on the nearly two-kilometer bridge through the Bonnet-Carré Spillway, bald cypress-dotted wetlands on either side of you. On stormy days, the murky swamp seems so precariously close to the highway pavement that driving on the bridge's rain-drenched lanes feels like gliding on the surface of water.

Downriver from the other side of the city, exotically named barrier islands off the Mississippi Delta have simply been swallowed up by the sea. Isle Dernière disappeared in an 1854 storm,¹ Manila Village during Hurricane Betsy (1965). Today, Isle de Jean Charles, home to Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw indigenous people, has already lost most of its landmass to climate change.²

New Orleanians orient themselves by water – the river and Lake Ponchartrain, canals and city bayous – as they turn their mental map of the city clockwise from its coordinates. “Uptown” is upriver, not north; “West Bank” lies south, on the other side of the Mississippi, across from “Below Canal”, the broad avenue that separates the central business district from the historical center. (The canal referred to was planned but never actually built, although others were.) In Flaubert’s *A Simple Heart*, the

pretentious Pont-l’Évêque lawyer laughs at the domestic Félicité’s bewilderment when he shows her a map, her disorientation a validation, for him, of her unenlightened class. Yet people everywhere read maps within their own narratives. In New Orleans, a shared conventional geographical orientation cements a place identity with the watery city rather than along the Cartesian grid of colonial urbanists who built the city.³ When, during those months after Katrina the city overflowed with helicopter researchers,⁴ New Orleanians sometimes told me, as if reassured before the inundation of researchers,

1. Lafcadio Hearn immortalized its disappearance through a revenant in his 1889 novella. Cf. L. Hearn, *Chita: A Memory of Last Island*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2018.
2. Lauren Zanolli, “Louisiana’s Vanishing Island: The Climate ‘Refugees’ Resettling for \$52m”, *The Guardian*, 15 March 2016. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/mar/15/louisiana-isle-de-jean-charles-island-sea-level-resettlement>.
3. Shannon Dawdy, *Building the Devil’s Empire: French Colonial New Orleans*, Chicago, University Chicago Press, 2008. Compare such conventional geographies to the watery discovery of the city in Elisée Reclus, *A Voyage to New Orleans*, Thetford, VT, Glad Day Books, 2004.
4. The expression “helicopter researchers” came up post-Katrina to refer to researchers who, locals sometimes complained, “flew in and flew out”, contracts in hand, to do “quick and dirty research”,



← Mithra, Mark Bradford, 2008

726.4 x 1963.4 x 635 cm / 286 x 773 x 250 in
Installation view, 'Prospect.1', New Orleans, 2008

PHOTO: SEAN SHIM-BOYLE © MARK BRADFORD COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH

“but you’re one of us”. It’s not that they knew my Louisiana roots. Rather it’s because I orient myself the way they do. “I don’t have to explain to you what the North Shore is,” someone might tell me; it’s not a bank of the Mississippi River.

Useful habits become hand-me-downs when living in a watery place. Viola Green told me how she escaped drowning by hauling her aging, diabetic body up the ladder in her living room and, as the water rose to her shoulders, hollered for her life. That ladder had always been there, leaning on the wall next to the front door, because that’s where her now-deceased brother had always told her to keep one, waiting for the day when the water would rise. And rise it would. My Uncle Emile – he passed away long before Katrina, too – used to say Old Man River⁵ could never be stopped from its natural course by the US Army Corps of Engineers. I smiled at that memory a couple of years after Katrina when a New Orleans French Consulate *fonctionnaire* insisted to me that had France sent its engineers, cleaning up Katrina’s mess would not have taken so long. There were always lots of hypotheses, from those of nineteenth-century French *polytechniciens*⁶ to my uncle’s, about when and why New Orleans would finally, inevitably flood. Other than when he was deployed to France in World War II, my Uncle Emile never left his river-bound parish and the water-courses where his father labored in the early 1900s, floating logs from backwaters to lake to the Mississippi. Both of my kinsmen could read the great river and its tributaries, the lakes and the bayous, and the level of the land far better than I have ever been able to read any book.

I arrived in New Orleans five months after Katrina’s storm surges breached faulty levees and floodwalls, spilling tens of billions of gallons of water, drowning 80% of the city infrastructure. The antiquated municipal water pump system took two weeks to drain it all. Katrina also destroyed the health and mental health infrastructure, leading to the largest ever exodus of medical personnel in US history. By early 2006, I began collecting anecdotes to understand how people previously diagnosed with severe, ongoing psychiatric disorders navigated the storm and the post-disaster quotidian.⁷ I began to see firsthand how the annexing of the trauma paradigm onto the assemblage of organized disaster response worldwide invisibilizes people with disabilities by focusing instead on how the “abnormal” event of a

disaster affects the mental health of “ordinary” people. Throughout that year, observing evacuee trailer camps and Red Cross meetings and volunteering at major health events where NGOs provided everything from typhoid shots to open-air dental surgery to over 7,000 displaced New Orleanians, I never heard mention of what happened to the thousands in psychiatric care before Katrina. Nor could local medical personnel answer my question.

As I encountered those invisibilized women and men whose severe mental disturbances pre-existed Katrina’s tragedy, their own stories of the disaster and evacuation fit no single pattern. Rather, in the qualitative, undifferentiated time of emergency, some inhabited, in seemingly full consciousness, a rapidly changing atmosphere, in which the transformed watery world created new resistances and flows. They constantly improvised in the rapidly occurring sequences of these propitious moments that comprise the compressed time of emergency. To capture that fully, as an observer, calls for a *fluvial* way of thinking.

FLASH FORWARD: A WATERLOGGED STORY

Can a story be waterlogged? I hear in Ella’s husky voice and smoker’s cough the sound of hard-working country women from the poor piney wood rural areas my uncle never left. Ella’s approaching eighty when I meet her, in 2009, at an abandoned elementary school, where a charity has

without really deepening their knowledge or engaging with New Orleans and the disaster. In fact, thousands of researchers and volunteers came to New Orleans in the years after the flood.

5. The moniker for the Mississippi River shared by Blacks and poor whites.

6. John Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2007.

7. As part of a larger study examining the interrelation between endogenous violence embedded in the ecological disaster itself, the social and symbolic violence of post-disaster reconstruction and public health, funded through ANR-07-BLAN-008-2 to J.S. Bordreuil (PI) and A.M. Lovell (Co-PI).



→ A post-Katrina wayfarer’s map, Abigail Frantz, 2022

© INSERM

converted thick-walled rooms into shared bedrooms for women with mental illnesses whom Katrina left homeless. Today, she shuffles tap tap tapping her walker to the common area, where two visibly protective younger residents ease her onto the hand-me-down couch. Last week, I audio-recorded as she pieced together her life in milestones weathered by memory.

Now, she cries softly as she describes her evacuation from Katrina on a bus headed back to piney-wood country.

I got off the bus from New Orleans and I was feeling depressed, you know, I was very depressed. All I would do is cry. My friend picked me up, and I was at my friend's house in the country, watching New Orleans flood on TV. I was crying. People kept calling me. They would try to tell me "it will be all right". But I wasn't all right. I couldn't stop crying. I don't know how to explain it.

Ella's tears flow like rivulets curling along the streets of New Orleans seventy miles north of her, glimpsed on a plasma screen. She strains to make out her street, then her submerged boarding house, in the aerial views. She will weep for days. Soon her daughter will drive her to an inpatient psychiatric clinic even further from New Orleans. She will stay for weeks, then move to a group home. Months later, she will return to New Orleans, homeless.

Can a water-logged story mirror Katrina's floods? Ella's experience in a watery world reflects the unfolding of the disaster itself.

WAYFARING AWAY FROM THE DOLDRUMS: NOTES FROM AUGUST 2006

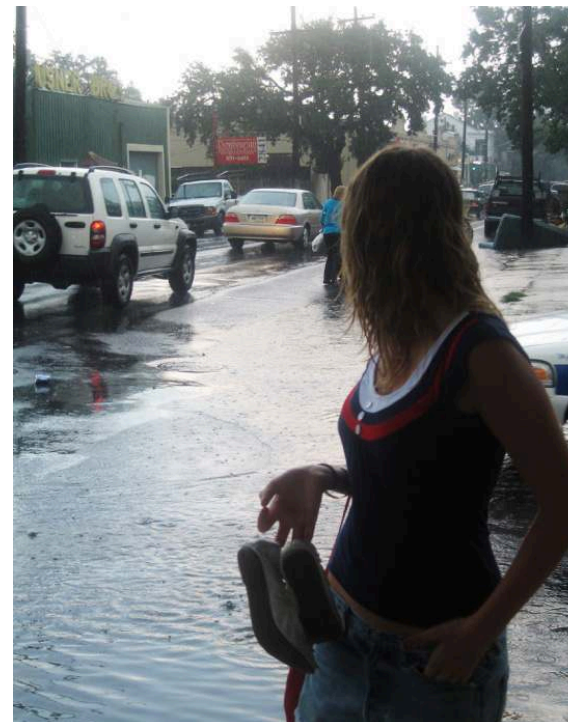
The first mental health service to reopen after Katrina, a drop-in center run by self-designated families "of the mentally ill", occupies a nondescript raised building overlooking a gas station in the "sliver by the river". This is how New Orleanians outside the area refer to the relatively undamaged uptown, an urban patchwork of economically and ethnically diverse neighborhoods, hospital corridors, commercial strips, and universities, capped by a

magnificent park of great oaks that stretches to the levee. Alternately, some designate the sliver as "the isle of denial", in reference to its genteel, well-heeled families, historic landmark homes, and general self-protection. Recently, I picked up some of that denial in conversation with a group of residents grumbling about a mental health clinic being placed in an unused building near their children's private school. This, when few suitable buildings elsewhere have been returned to a habitable state.

Today I sit with a dozen or so "clients" at the drop-in center. We've pulled chairs together in the large space that serves as office, group therapy room, canteen, and TV and game lounge. Katrina stories flow freely, buoyed by excitement. Home-produced CDs and DVDs have become a genre among people I meet serendipitously or interview; I'm even accumulating a collection of disks that they – or their church or family – have put together of "their" evacuation story, with photos, home videos, music, letters, and more. Here at the center, though, except for some paintings and poems on the wall and in a newsletter, that memory is oral.

Leo, fortyish, sits upright in his ironed, fully buttoned long-sleeved shirt, monologuing: "A lot of people were killed [in Katrina], but I was prepared all my life. I can't relate all the different parts. It was slim that I was even in one piece." In counter-flow, some women have been comparing notes on how their medications repeatedly ran out in those weeks of traveling after Katrina, how they had to produce empty medication bottles in strange cities because nothing else identified them to a clinic as "someone with mental problems". To run out of meds, a woman interjects, is worse than death. Leo pipes on: "I walked back in, my things were still there. It is a little bit as if things passed in a fantasy. It's hard to relate to the reality you need to relate to." Katie complains how often her medications were changed. Juanita adds how her diagnoses changed a couple of times after Katrina; others nod in familiarity. Unperturbed, Leo continues his monologue, never missing a beat: "I still find the same ideas: when you do something, you get resistance."

Like Leo, nineteen-year-old Tabby's words eddy around Katrina's moments. In a later interview, her description of experiencing the disaster, too, does not differ from her account of life before and after.



→ *Untitled*, Neal Alexander, September 2005

© NEAL ALEXANDER - COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

→ *Typical summer day, Watery city, New Orleans, 2006*

PHOTO: ANNE M. LOVELL



→ *Things that Float*, Rontherin Ratliff, 2010, New Orleans

© RONTHERIN RATLIFF - COURTESY DIVERSE WORKS

She is passed along from the police to hospitals to prisons to clinics to group homes and back again.⁸ Money never arrives, before Katrina or after. Since birth, she has had a mole in her head which causes her hair to fall out. They treat the mole with “leukemia treatment”. It’s all the same old “moling”, old “foothing” (food and clothing): cancer, Katrina, life. Her life appears to be one circuitous movement, within which the disaster made no waves. Time is flattened, space reduced.

I begin to hear Leo and Tabby as if they were caught in a circular pattern of water, simply floating along, with no external force to push against, to provide momentum. They are like sailors stuck in the Doldrums⁹, the belt around the Equator in which atmospheric conditions deprive the sea of the wind-force to move forward. Before steam engines, ships could be stranded for weeks in the Doldrums. Whereas the Doldrums freed sailors from the tediousness of work, even affording festivities, in their doldrums Leo and Tabby communicate dispiritedness and listlessness. To be stuck psychologically in the doldrums is to stagnate, go in circles.

*
* *

“You have to talk to Sylvia!” In the next weeks, those words refrain every time I come to the center. “She really has a story!” Staff and clients both pick up the very public elements of Sylvia’s long adventure, elaborating them, “dining out” on her story, as an old local expression goes. Sylvia finally strings together those elements for an interview with a graduate student helping me. How Sylvia and her boyfriend Jack left their apartment¹⁰ to ride out the hurricane in a high-floor apartment belonging to a friend from the center. How the landlady forced them out the next day as water started seeping into the city. How they lugged suitcases filled with canned food and clothing along pitch-dark streets that night, in a city without power. How they slept three nights on the cement outside the Convention Center, surrounded by strangers and even a deceased person, still in a wheelchair and covered with a blanket, until bullets flying overhead scared them off.

And then the long trek towards the sliver by the

river. The abandoned porch they slept on. The sweltering heat. The priest who offered them a lift in his air-conditioned car. The shopping cart “borrowed” from a ransacked supermarket. The looters who gave them a big jar of olives and container of ice cream which was melting anyway. The police patrol that offered to drive them a few blocks. The massive wind-damaged tree that fell, barely missing them. The insect bites, thirst, swollen legs. A soldier who offered them a ride to Texas but refused their offer to share gas money: “Ya’ll poorer than I am, ya’ll ain’t got nothing.” Locating Jack’s cousins in Texas in what turned out to be one big family reunion, as more relatives streamed in from New Orleans. The \$50 gift certificates to buy clothes and stuff at Target and Walmart. The expensive aquarium and museum visits, free because Sylvia and Jack were now Katrina evacuees. A windfall of more money than either had ever possessed, thanks to a mistaken FEMA overpayment and insurance for all they had lost. “Katrina was a terrible, terrible tragedy,” Sylvia summed up, “but Jack and I came out smelling like a rose.”

In a rural FEMA trailer camp, earlier in the spring, a statuesque woman separated her hands before me, her fingers fluttering and glitter-specked purple nails shimmering under the sun, animatedly recounting how, after she was marooned for days by flooding around her building, a ray shone down from the sky and God parted the waters so she and her husband could walk away from New Orleans. They found an evacuation bus and began a long route to towns they’d never been to, Red Cross shelters, camping grounds, striking up friendships with strangers, cooking up a storm, praying, deciding when to move on.

Far from being transported along a mental or actual circuit of institutional care, Sylvia and Jack seize the opportunities that present themselves, even momenta-

8. Although there was virtually no state evacuation policy for psychiatric patients, Tabby was brought to a psychiatric hospital across the lake from New Orleans, whose patients were then evacuated to yet another state hospital further upstate.

9. Jaime Rodrigues, “A New World in the Atlantic: Sailors and Rites of Passage Crossing the Equator from the 15th to the 20th Century”, *Revista brasileira de historia* n°33: 65 (2013), p. 233–275.

10. Independent living sponsored by the family association.

rily, alongside the dangers of wind and water and violence unleashed during Katrina. Rather than stagnating in the doldrums, they move along, improvising at every turn¹¹. Disaster, in rupturing of the taken-for-granted of everyday life, creates flux, the undercurrents with which Sylvia and Jack and the statuesque woman and other wayfarers interact, routing their way through a constantly changing world. Thinking further with Tim Ingold, I see these wayfarers as inhabiting with the fluxes of a disastrous world, crafting temporary solutions with what they find at hand, navigating with no final destination.¹²

In resonance, Mark Bradford's painting *Noah's Third Day*, wavy lines predominate, multiple lines of flight thick with possibility for wayfarers. A rearing fuchsia Pegasus on the right – or is it a bird in flight? – suggests wondrous escape, while other bright patches of color – a blue ring or is it an overturned bucket near the top? – and collages of partially hidden words torn from newsprint (“Find your flavor,” reads one) suggest serendipitous offerings along the way. Here and there, a concentration of smaller repeated lines suggests the undercurrents in the stricken city, those a wayfarer might encounter. Larger overlapping curves in the bottom half frame but do not contain the painting. They mimic the course of the Mississippi along which New Orleans was built, while the blue at the top of the canvas recalls Lake Ponchartrain – real North – in one complex summoning, in Katrina's flooding, of the biblical deluge of Noah's Ark.

LIKE A RIVER SPILLING OVER ITS BANK: GOING OFF SCRIPT

The task of a wayfarer [...] is not to act out a script received from predecessors but literally to negotiate a path through the world¹³.

When disasters occur, they open up the possibility of appropriating, however briefly, new spatial and temporal niches (the Convention Center becomes refuge, night the moment of travel, a stranger's porch a place to sleep).¹⁴ Wayfarers like Sylvia and Jack place-mark a world suddenly opened to those,

like them, whose lives are usually confined to a circuit of institutions and marginal spaces beyond, that stymie agency and narrow relationality. To capture their variety of experience, in contrast to those who remain stuck in the circuit, requires bracketing the knowledge cognitive neurosciences and phenomenological psychiatry construct about, respectively, abnormal or anomalous awareness of space.

Making their way through the material world, wayfarers place-mark or “make place” (*font lieu*) that, pluralized, simultaneously comprise the lines of their journey and transform the usual relationality of such space itself. Within public, domestic, and institutional spaces, personal boundaries are often encroached, if not erased in the life-world of patients. Psychiatric practices and institutions violate personal territory by intruding on bodies, surveilling (even subtly) and relegating those bodies to limited, marginal spaces of interaction.¹⁵ Even in public space, so-called normals will distance themselves from interaction with those they perceive as “crazy”, or “mentally off”. The rupture of disaster inadvertently broadens the boundaries and hence the possibilities of interaction beyond the usual scripts and roles.¹⁶

Sylvia's and similar accounts detail how, in Katri-

¹¹. Tim Ingold, “Footprints through the Weather World: Walking, Breathing, Knowing”, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* no. 16/s1 (2010), pp. S121-S139.

¹². Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History*, New York, Routledge, 2007, chapter 3.

¹³. Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, New York, Routledge, 2011, p. 162.

¹⁴. Étienne Hellmer, *Ici et là. Une philosophie des lieux*, Paris, Verdier, 2019, chapter 2.

¹⁵. Franco Basaglia, “Corpo, sguardo, silenzio”, in Franca Ongaro Basaglia (dir.), *L'Utopia della realta*, Turin, Einaudi, 2005, p. 27-42.

¹⁶. This discussion on boundaries and personal territory draws on Goffman's dramaturgical model and studies of public space. See: Erving Goffman, *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order*, New York, Basic Books, 1971. For what I called the scripted ways of interacting, see Goffman, *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction*, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1961, and in public places, especially his “The Insanity of Place”, *Psychiatry* no.32/4 (1969), p. 357-388. Anthropologists' uses of these concepts are too numerous to cite. My use of the concept of scripting owes much to Summerson Carr's (albeit more



→ *Noah's Third Day*, Mark Bradford, 2007
Mixed media on canvas.

© MARK BRADFORD COURTESY THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH

→ Asylum patients joining the evacuation from the German invasion, 1940, *Folle embellie*, Dominique Cabrera, 2002

© PHOTOS: BAYLEY SWEITZER, DOMINIQUE CABRERA / LES FILMS DE LA CROISADE



na's rupturing of the everyday, people with psychiatric disabilities often went off script, like a river no longer following its riverbed and spilling beyond its banks. And they might move through public spaces where they might otherwise have felt shunned or stigmatized.¹⁷ Forced from damaged domestic spaces into public ones, their carers absent, roles were transformed (the social worker become homeless, rejecting relatives become welcoming, the client become resourceful evacuee, stealing goods become a type of borrowing, and so forth).¹⁸ Going off old scripts and engaging in watery wayfaring after Katrina's storm are thus mutually necessary, as Ingold, in the citation opening this section, proposes for wayfaring more generally. They are necessary to the creative movement with and against the flows brought about by the disaster and its rupturing of the usual ways of being with others.

"Way", derived from the old English *weg*, refers to road, path, course of travel, space, freedom of movement. "Faring" originally signified adventure, trek, journey. The wayfarers I encounter momentarily join "communities of adventure", partaking in a collective trial.¹⁹ encountering eventualities on the evacuation path that transform their being-in-the-world with others in ways not pre-determined. Momentarily, volunteers and disaster assistance personnel may even view them no differently than they do other evacuees, to the point that some (as in the group session above) actually have to present empty medicine bottles as proof that they do suffer from serious mental illness when they seek treatment along the evacuation route.

Of course, wayfaring is the utopian version of going off script in exceptional circumstances. In Dominique Cabrera's 2002 film *Folle embellie*, the interns of the Charité-sur-Loire asylum in France escape through the gates to join ordinary families fleeing the advance of the invading German troops. *Folle embellie*: in English, a "fantastic prospect", a "wonderful spell". Adventures of freedom may be short-lived; for patients to become refugees, leaving behind scripted dependency, requires the event that spawns the fleeing in the first place. In the wartime events that actually took place at Charité-sur-Loire, on which the film is loosely based, the asylum had released those patients deemed to be

curable, to have the best prognoses, into the community. The patients who escaped were ones the staff considered most disabled and confined to the "chronic" wards. Yet in the end, the escapees fared far better than did the released patients, even remaining after the war in the agricultural communities where they had

linguistic) approach, although "going off script" involves a slower process than the particular strategy of "flipping the script" that she describes. See: E. Summerson Carr, *Scripting Addiction: The Politics of Therapeutic Talk and American Sobriety*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2010.

¹⁷ Elsewhere, I have described numerous examples of going off script during and after Katrina. On the reversal of the care relationship and other types of examples, see: Anne M. Lovell, "Aller vers ceux qu'on ne voit pas: maladie mentale et care dans des circonstances extraordinaires (la catastrophe de Katrina à la Nouvelle-Orléans)", in Anne M. Lovell, Stefania Pandolfo, Veena Das & Sandra Laugier, *Face aux désastres. Une conversation à quatre voix sur la folie, le care et les grandes détresses collectives*, Paris, Ithaque, 2013. On the temporary return to extended family who previously shunned their disabled relative, see: Anne M. Lovell, "Le miroir de l'insensé : une anthropologie des formes de vie face aux dislocations et aux désastres", in Sandra Laugier & Estelle Ferrarese (eds), *Les Formes de Vie*, Paris, Les Éditions du CNRS, p. 303-324. On engaging in interactions subtly prescribed by what W.E.B. Du Bois called the color line, as when a Black woman visibly aged by her mental disorders and alcoholism was able to save an elderly "White" man from drowning (which required trust on the part of each), see: Anne M. Lovell, "Tending to the Unseen in Extraordinary Circumstances: On Arendt's Natality and Severe Mental Illness after Hurricane Katrina", *Iride. Filosofia e discussione pubblica* no.26/20, p. 563-578.

¹⁸ In another example, the social transformation of towns into peri-urban areas in Senegal allowed a different recognition of the "mentally ill" in public space. It might engender a carer relationship on the part of strangers, though, as elsewhere, fear and often violent stigmatization continue to characterize the encounter of psychiatrically disabled people with those who are not in peri-urban public space. See: Papa Mamadou Diagne & Anne M. Lovell, "Vivre avec la folie dans le Sénégal périurbain mondialisé : care, contraintes économiques et reconfiguration des solidarités", *Politique Africaine* no.157/1, p. 143-164.

¹⁹ Louis Quéré, "Le public comme forme et modalité d'expérience", in Daniel Cefaï & Dominique Pasquier (eds), *Les sens du public*, Paris, PUF, 2008, pp. 113-134.

hidden,²⁰ paralleling the confluences of wayfaring and doldrums in Katrina's evacuees.

"WHEN DESIRE COMES BACK": FALL 2008

I've become friends with N, a feisty, outspoken psychiatric social worker, who incessantly challenges the ethno-racial hierarchies of New Orleans recovery but also my "whiteness" (which she implies but never pronounces as such) and how it separates the way we each of us navigate life's fluctuations. Today, after I entered the public mental health clinic through the metal detector, passed the armed guards, and waited for her to unlock the reinforced steel door that separates the reception area from the offices, she asked where I was parked. I pointed in the direction of the only spot I'd found, a half-boarded-up "candy store" (drug dealing site). "Uh huh. Next time, park on ---- Street. You see, you and I live in different worlds. *You* can't just walk places where *I* can."

This clinic, one of only two now reopened on this side of the river, is the fourth venue N has worked at since Katrina. "We're trying to find housing for our clients," she told me last fall, "but none of *us* is back in a normal situation." I pressed for what she meant. "Some staff are living outside New Orleans and commuting, some are in FEMA trailers, some with relatives. A couple were lucky enough to get into a Doubletree Hotel." In a parallel forced displacement, N's decimated pre-Katrina staff find themselves continually separated and moved around by the mental health office from one venue to the other. Some of their patients, too, have commuted, some from "hundreds of miles away", miraculously finding their former psychiatrist or social worker, in creative acts of wayfaring, even though their mental health center no longer exists.

"When Desire comes back, we'll have our people back together." I often hear this refrain at the staff meetings N invites me to observe. Today, N and I drive to the vast wasteland of Upper Ninth Ward to see what is left of the Desire clinic, a mental health center in New Orleans's poorest neighborhood. She wants to show me how "the neighborhood has come back".

The shell of the mental health clinic stands shutte-

red on a long empty block. Winds failed to blow down the low building's walls, constructed of brick typical of other older institutional structures in the city – schools, community health centers, housing projects, jails – but rising water filled the rooms to the ceiling. Fencing erected after Katrina has not stopped graffitists or protected the inside from burglars. Somehow, the pummeled building prevails, a symbol of institutional steadfastness.

"I brought you here because I wanted to show you how the neighborhood has come back." N motions proudly to a few houses, some newly constructed by Habitat for Humanity. Mostly, the landscape is that of dozens of weed-filled lots from which collapsed houses have been removed. I see a chicken shack here, a bar further away. N turns towards the back of the clinic, pointing to the row of pastel-coloured houses in the distance, near the Industrial Canal. I don't mention that I visited those streets recently. A construction worker told me that the houses had been finished right before Katrina, but never had a chance to be occupied. Three years later, battered and faded, they have been abandoned, ruins of a future never attained.²¹

"I'm sure there are still patient records in there," N muses, now facing the ruined clinic. "People went in and took everything else, petty cash, furniture..."

I'm not certain Desire will come back.

MITHRA: MARK BRADFORD'S ARK: WINTER 2008

With Desire to my back, I walk along a street in Lower Ninth, a historical working-class neighborhood of 15, 000 mostly Black residents before Katrina, razed to the ground after the storm, when flooding destroyed the entire area. I've been attending community meetings on recove-

²⁰. Louis Le Guillant, cited in Lovell, "Tending to the Unseen in Extraordinary Circumstances", p. 564.

²¹. On post-Katrina Desire, see Rachel Breunlin & Helen A. Regis, "Putting the Ninth Ward on the Map: Race, Place, and Transformation in Desire, New Orleans", *American Anthropologist* no. 108/4 (2006), pp. 744-764.



→ *Flotsam: Collapsed House*, Rachel Lovell, New Orleans, February 2006

PHOTO: RACHEL LOVELL

→ *The abandoned Desire clinic*, Upper Ninth Ward, New Orleans, 2008

PHOTO: ANNE M. LOVELL

→ *Detail, abandoned Desire clinic*, Upper Ninth Ward, New Orleans, 2008

PHOTO: ANNE M. LOVELL





→ Mark Bradford assembling *Mithra* in Lower Ninth for Prospect 1, New Orleans

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ry of the neighborhood and sometimes stopping by Ronald Lewis's House of Dance & Feathers, a cultural museum behind his new house. Volunteers helped him build both after Katrina destroyed his home. At other times, I've tried to locate the streets where people I've interviewed once lived.

But today I've come to see Mark Bradford's gigantic sculpture, created for Prospect 1, the first ever US-based international art biennial, being held in New Orleans. The patchworked biblical ark rises three stories high where a funeral home once stood until Katrina.²²

As I'm still steeped in my *récits*, the vessel looming before me first conjures a fluvial way of knowing: forced circular patterns, like the Doldrums. The trope behind my image is that of the Ship of Fools, born from the expulsion of the mad from late medieval communities, but even in earlier variations always a ship of exclusion. Built from Katrina's flotsam and jetsam, Bradford's patched-together ark, however, sets off another association: "mental shipwrecks", as Emil Kraepelin wrote of sufferers of *dementia praecox*, schizophrenia's conceptual predecessor.²³ Philosopher Angela Woods emphasizes the degree to which such metaphorizing, as battered psyches blown off the course of recovery, projects people with schizophrenia beyond human ordinariness, rather than as flesh-and-blood individuals living on the edge of the varieties of human experience.²⁴

That the vessel is an ark, however, inverts the metaphors of exclusion and Kraepelin's human wreckage, by extending the community of the marginalized. Bradford's vessel evokes the barge that crashed into Lower Ninth during the hurricane, with a boom some residents interpreted as dynamite, recalling stories of the blowing up of poor downriver neighborhoods during the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, commandeered by New Orleans' elected officials to divert the floodwaters from the wealthy port city. Bradford built his ark from plywood picked off the streets after the hurricane, topping it with shipping containers and plastering faded posters advertising services for Katrina's displaced and other detritus onto the outer surfaces. His art projects often connect with communities of the marginalized, to which he, too, has belonged; hence his decision to reassemble it in Lower Ninth, with the help of local laborers.²⁵ *Mithra*, as his ark is mythically named,

promises rebirth and regeneration. Through utopian wayfaring, similarly, people whose being-in-the-world falls under descriptions of psychiatric diagnoses are joined to a larger community. Whether this process can endure as socially regenerative remains an open question.

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²². Prospect 1 matched up the works of eighty-one artists from thirty-nine countries with devastated sites, local museums, and other venues throughout the city.

²³. Emil Kraepelin & A. Ross Diefendorf, *Clinical Psychiatry*, New York, Macmillan, 1907, p. 241, 275.

²⁴. Angela Woods, *The Sublime Object of Psychiatry: Schizophrenia in Clinical and Cultural Theory*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 46. Schizophrenia as "the edge of experience" was coined by the editors in Janis H. Jenkins & Robert J. Barret (eds), *Schizophrenia, Culture and Subjectivity: The Edge of Experience*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004. See also William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, London, Penguin Classics, 1983 [1902].

²⁵. Katy Siegel & Christopher Bedford (eds), *Mark Bradford: Tomorrow is Another Day*, New York, Gregory R. Miller & Co., 2017.