

Encrypting Katrina: Traumatic Inscription and the Architecture of Amnesia

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THE KATRINA MEMORIAL: ENCLOSING THE DEAD IN THE EYE OF THE STORM

On August 29th, 2008 the remaining unidentified and unclaimed victims of Hurricane Katrina were interred in mausoleums at the dedication of the New Orleans Katrina Memorial. In his commemorative address, Mayor C. Ray Nagin described the interment as signifying the enclosure of “the final bodies from Katrina, the last unknown victims. [It] represents the pain and suffering.”¹ As a vehicle for the containment of these “final bodies,” the Katrina Memorial inhabits politically and historically haunted ground. The monument ironically occupies a pre-existing burial site for the anonymous dead, while appropriating the form of the hurricane as its architectural structure. Dislocating the historic Charity Hospital Cemetery, it houses the unknown and abandoned casualties of a disaster that is as much governmental as environmental. These bodies, ignored by governments and bystanders alike, were simultaneously consumed by media spectators of the disaster’s aftermath—trauma by proxy. Figuring the site as an incorporative attempt to contain the trauma of Katrina, conceptual designer Jeffrey Rouse explains that the memorial “*incorporates* both the curves of the Hurricane and the meditative quality of a labyrinth.”² The memorial evolved from a committee initiated by New Orleans coroner Frank Minyard, which included Rouse, a psychiatrist with the coroner’s office who had the initial “vision” for the design. Rouse envisaged a “curving, concentric form that draws visitors toward its center, like a labyrinth for meditative walks.”³ Minyard established a charity to solicit funding for the

¹ Laura Maggi, “Katrina Dead Interred at New Memorial,” *New Orleans Metro Real Time News* (August 29, 2008), <http://www.nola.com>, (Accessed September 2008).

² *New Orleans Katrina Memorial*, http://www.neworleanscoroner.org/katrina_memorial.html, (Accessed July 2009, emphasis mine).

³ Doug MacCash, “New Orleans Katrina Memorial is Almost Perfect,” *The Times – Picayune* (September 14, 2007),

memorial, which raised over one million dollars toward construction and maintenance costs.⁴ The plans were entrusted to Matthews International, a corporate “memorialization” company that has constructed thematic monuments for an oddly diverse range of entities, including the Atlanta Olympics, 9/11 firefighters, and Elvis Presley. Under the direction of Corporate Vice President Dave DeCarlo, a design team headed by Chris Kroll developed the architectural rendering of Rouse’s hurricane-labyrinth (see Figure 1).⁵ Despite its meditative intentions, the structure implicitly memorializes entrapment, recalling the failed evacuation that followed the storm’s landfall. The memorial’s spiral pathways draw visitors inward, toward the metaphorical “eye” of the storm, symbolized by a marble plaque adjacent to the mausoleums.⁶

http://blog.nola.com/dougmaccash/2007/09/new_orleans_katrina_memorial.html, (Accessed September 2008).

⁴ New Orleans Katrina Memorial Proposal,

http://www.neworleanscoroner.org/katrina_memorial.html, (Accessed September 2007).

⁵ New Orleans Katrina Memorial Proposal.

⁶ No demographic data on the memorial’s visitors currently exists. Likewise, no scholarly research has yet examined the memorial, either from an architectural or psychoanalytic approach. I am currently seeking research funding that would enable me to interview residents and Katrina survivors regarding the memorial’s design and location at Charity Hospital Cemetery on Canal Street.



Figure 1. Artist's rendering of Katrina Memorial. © Matthews International. Reproduced with permission.

The labyrinthine design concretizes the aftermath of Katrina, invoking the inaccessibility of relief that resulted in hundreds of post-hurricane deaths.⁷ While numerous casualties drowned, many more died from exposure during the immediate aftermath, and over the following months from the physical stress of evacuation.⁸ The figuration of memorial as maze participates in the architectural containment of the dead. Their enclosure within the labyrinth's eye recalls post-Katrina containment strategies employed by federal and local law enforcement officials, aimed at preventing survivors from

⁷ According to Frank Minyard, Coroner of Orleans Parish, who performed autopsies on approximately one thousand Katrina fatalities, the "number one killer with Katrina was not drowning, it was not accidental falls, it was the exacerbation . . . of a heart condition, or a liver condition, or a brain condition . . . Any kind of a disease that a person had was made worse" by the traumatic stress of the storm's aftermath. Federal Emergency Management Agency Interview with Minyard, http://www.neworleanscoroner.org/katrina_memorial.html, (Accessed February 2010).

⁸ "Sign of Katrina Fatigue? Memorial Delayed," *The Associated Press* (July 13, 2008), <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/25655773/>, (Accessed August 2008).

“unlawfully” evacuating New Orleans.⁹ On September 1st, 2005, Police Chief Arthur Lawson ordered his deputies to barricade the Crescent City Connection, a three-mile bridge that spans the Mississippi River between New Orleans and the neighboring town of Gretna in Jefferson Parish. The bridge represented one of the few remaining outlets for escaping the devastation of New Orleans. As hundreds of survivors (including children, the elderly, and the disabled) attempted to cross the bridge, they were met by armed police who fired warning shots over their heads. The blockade prompted accusations of racial prejudice; the small town of Gretna is largely white, while the demographic of survivors fleeing New Orleans was predominantly African American.¹⁰ The legacy of sequestration surrounding New Orleans long predates Hurricane Katrina. In 1987, officials erected a barrier to prohibit New Orleans residents from entering Jefferson Parish. The concrete blockades were known as “The Berlin Wall” by New Orleans locals. The barricades created traffic gridlock and prevented ambulances and fire trucks from accessing homes and hospitals efficiently. Three months prior to their construction, the Jefferson Parish Sheriff’s Office mandated deputies to interrogate black drivers in white neighborhoods without probable cause. New Orleans Mayor Sidney Barthelmy, who declared, “Jefferson Parish cannot lock my people in”, eventually bulldozed the barricades.¹¹

One of the most violent examples of post-Katrina “law enforcement” is the Danziger Bridge shooting, which claimed the lives of James Brissette and Ronald Madison; four others were wounded.¹² On September 4th, 2005, New Orleans police opened fire on a group of unarmed African American civilians attempting to cross the Danziger Bridge in search of supplies. The officers claimed to be responding to a shooting reported in the area. Federal prosecutors initially focused on the police conspiracy to cover up the events surrounding the shooting. The investigation deepened in April 2010, when former New Orleans Police Officer Michael Hunter

⁹ See Michael P. Bibler’s “Always the Tragic Jezebel: New Orleans, Katrina, and the Layered Discourse of a Doomed Southern City,” *Southern Cultures* 14.2, 6-27. See also Billy Southern, *Down in New Orleans: Reflections on a Drowned City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 128-132.

¹⁰ John Burnett, “Evacuees Were Turned Away at Gretna,” *NPR*, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4855611>, (Accessed October 2010).

¹¹ Southern, 63.

¹² Laura Maggi and Brendan McCarthy, “Danziger Bridge shooting plea, second in case, provides new cover up details,” *The Times Picayune* (March 11, 2010), http://www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/2010/03/danziger_bridge_shooting_plea_1.html, (Accessed April 2010).

told a federal judge that he witnessed fellow officers shoot unarmed civilians without provocation. His testimony alleged that Sergeant Kenneth Bowen, one of seven officers charged in the case, shot civilians with a military assault rifle and continued firing after the victims were wounded and immobile. He also claimed to have witnessed Officer Robert Faulcon shoot Ronald Madison, who was mentally handicapped, in the back as Madison fled the scene. Most gruesome of all Hunter's testimony was his allegation that Bowen "kicked and stomped" Ronald Madison as he lay dying on the Danziger Bridge. According to court documents, Hunter told federal prosecutors that a supervisor ordered police officers to bury the evidence, "because we don't want this to look like a massacre."¹³



Figure 2. The Katrina Memorial. April 2010. Photograph by the author.

¹³ Laura Maggi and Brendan McCarthy, "Judge in Danziger case sickened by 'raw brutality of the shooting and craven lawlessness of the cover-up,'" *The Times Picayune Online* (April 7, 2010), http://www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/2010/04/judge_sickened_by_raw_brutalit.html, (Accessed May 2010).

The Katrina Memorial enacts a similar (albeit posthumous) containment function. The location of the mausoleums within the center of the labyrinth ensures that, while visitors may be able to find their way out again, Katrina's ghosts will not. The memorial houses the casualties not only of a disaster but also of a diaspora. The inscription on the marble tablet marking the center of the labyrinthine hurricane attests to the diasporic traumas of the bodies it contains: "Most of the deceased were identified and buried by loved ones in private ceremonies throughout the nation. Here lie the remaining. The unclaimed and unidentified victims of the storm from the New Orleans area. Some have been forgotten. Some remain unknown." As further evidence of the failure of recovery efforts, many families of the Katrina diaspora lacked the means to return to, and bury, their dead. The seemingly permanent uprooting of many Katrina survivors has made the reclamation of remains practically impossible. Julia Powers, the FEMA Forensic Anthropologist assigned to assist Minyard, explained: "some families have chosen not to claim the bodies; some we cannot find families for."¹⁴ The implication that families scattered by the chaotic (and belated) evacuation "choose" not to claim their dead perpetuates the flawed logic that pervaded many aspects of Katrina recovery, which presumes that residents chose to stay and that they now choose not to return.

By virtue of its geographic isolation and relative inaccessibility, the memorial seeks to repress the unfound bodies that resist its enclosure. Situated at the far end of Canal Street, bordered by the Jewish and Firemen's Cemeteries, the Katrina Memorial is estranged from typical New Orleans tourist destinations in the French Quarter and Garden District. The site is similarly distanced from the devastated lower wards and the spectacle of their ravaged homes. Embedding the "forgotten" and "unknown" remains of Katrina decedents within the eye of an architecturally inscribed hurricane serves to effectively quarantine them. The space for mourning these unknown casualties is consigned to a specified, bordered location on the outskirts of town. The memorial itself seems to have already been forgotten. My visit, at noon on a Tuesday in April, found the grounds chained and padlocked, prohibiting entry. The site was entirely silent, devoid of visitors or even pedestrian street traffic. Cloistered behind imposing wrought-iron gates, the only remaining

¹⁴ "Sign of Katrina Fatigue? Memorial Delayed."

relics of Charity Hospital Cemetery, the memorial enacts the containment of the dead and the exclusion of the living (Figure 3).



Figure 3: The Katrina Memorial. April 2010. Photograph by the author. The gates are all that remain of this section of the original Charity Hospital Cemetery.

Within the context of contemporary American culture, many large-scale memorialization projects invite collective repression and historical revision through a process Marita Sturken has termed “architectural reenactment,” which reconstructs aspects of trauma within structural design.¹⁵ The Katrina Memorial utilizes strategies of reenactment to produce a form of cultural amnesia. It inscribes the hurricane into the cultural landscape, evoking a form of repetition that does not seek to remember those lost, but to repress their memory through immersion in the scale of the event, rather than the loss itself. This nostalgia for the event (evident through the

¹⁵ Marita Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Durham: Duke UP, 2007), 9. Sturken’s use of this term is in relation to the Ground Zero Memorial, “Reflecting Absence.”

recreation of formal aspects of the trauma within the memorial structure) is a pathological response that constitutes, in Jacques Derrida's words, "the madness of an amnesiac fidelity, of a forgetful hypermnesia."¹⁶ The Katrina Memorial functions as a site of amnesiac projection that attempts to infinitely and permanently duplicate the event so that the psyche does not have to. This architectural repetition compulsion seeks to obliterate the specificity of loss, by virtue of its obsession with scale and with quantifying and containing the dead. Their bodies are embedded within memorials that perform hyper-national functions of historical reclamation and revision.

Hurricane Katrina catalyzed a nationally-televised disaster centered on generational, racial inequity. The spectacle of Katrina broadcast, all too briefly, the faces of those who remain fundamentally forgotten and invisible in our political and cultural landscape. In the wake of their exposure, dominant cultural mechanisms of erasure and amnesia, including memorialization strategies of containment and enclosure, were invoked to return these citizens to their designated peripheral spaces. And yet, as Freud insists, the repressed have infinite and fantastic methods of resurrection.¹⁷ Their legacy remains inscribed in search and rescue graffiti scrawled not only on abandoned houses. These strange, hieroglyphic markings are preserved as memorials on many homes otherwise restored to their original grandeur. They stand as statements of silent resilience, insisting that Katrina's ghosts remain defiantly in the face of the nation that left them behind.

In contrast to this localized aesthetic of preservation as a celebration of survival, the Katrina Memorial engages in an architectural whitewashing of the generational history of poverty in New Orleans. Simon Stow argues that the Bush administration's response to Hurricane Katrina, particularly the President's flawed public invocation of the "second line" tradition in jazz funerals, recalls Greek conceptions of democratic forgetting and ritualized mourning practices as devices for containing elements of civil unrest and "problematic remembering."¹⁸ Chief among these amnesiac devices was "whitewashing," the recovering, for the purposes of revision, the surface of an official tablet bearing condemnations or

¹⁶ Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 66.

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, "Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia," 1911, trans A. Strachey and J. Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 12, ed. J. Strachey, (London: Hogarth, 1958), 67-68.

¹⁸ Simon Stow, "Do You Know What it Means to Miss New Orleans? George Bush, the Jazz Funeral, and the Politics of Memory," *Theory and Event* 12.2 (2009), 6.

grievances deemed threatening to the *polis*. According to Stow, whitewashing constituted “a process that captured the way in which, for the Greeks, to erase meant to destroy by additional covering.”¹⁹ The Katrina Memorial juxtaposes whitewashing techniques of revision with psychoanalytic strategies of traumatic “flooding” to induce a collective dissociative experience in visitors—an experience that, in its fixation on the horrific grandeur of trauma, forgets to remember.



Figure 4. This search and rescue code is preserved on a Garden District home. Photograph by the author.

¹⁹ Stow, 16.

The Katrina Memorial operates on the geographic periphery of the disaster tourism narrative prevalent in post-Katrina New Orleans. Katrina tourism targets disaster consumers similar to those Sturken terms “tourists of history”: passive subjects who locate their historical/political status via their relationship to “consumerism, media images, souvenirs, popular culture, and museum and architectural reenactments . . . a form of tourism that has as its goal a cathartic ‘experience’ of history.”²⁰ As Anna Hartnell has demonstrated, the aftermath of Katrina shifted New Orleans tourist destinations to include the damaged lower wards, but the underlying mechanism of amnesiac appropriation is an acceleration of “pre-Katrina trends”: “Like the commodification of black New Orleans that arguably formed the centerpiece of the city’s tourist industry before the storm, Katrina tourism can be read as a process of forgetting.”²¹ As participants in this narrative of historical consumption, “disaster tourists” board the “Katrina bus,” a vehicle for voyeuristic exploration of the storm-ravaged lower wards. Upon the tour’s conclusion, visitors are returned to the relatively pristine French Quarter, unscathed by disturbing interactions with survivors of the storm and its aftermath who are, in most cases, eerily absent.²² The Katrina Memorial functions as an integral yet inaccessible extension of this disaster tourism narrative: beyond a visual survey of the hurricane’s aftermath, the memorial is shaped as the virtual *experience* of disaster. Its problematic remains are effectively contained within a burial ground historically assigned to the unknown dead on the city’s outer fringes.

The Katrina Memorial offers a compelling example of the architecture of traumatic inscription as a failure of incorporative mourning, recalling Freud’s assertion that melancholia “behaves like an open wound” that seeks to fill itself entirely with absence.²³ For Freud, melancholic incorporation constituted a failure to mourn. Rather than productively “working through” loss, the subject absorbs the loss itself, creating an intrinsic homage to trauma that lives within the survivor. Melancholia then incorporates the lost object, establishing a permanent attachment to loss within the subject. Derrida speaks more favorably of this melancholic refusal when he

²⁰ Sturken, 9.

²¹ Anna Hartnell, “Katrina Tourism and a Tale of Two Cities: Visualizing Race and Class in New Orleans,” *American Quarterly* 61.3 (2009), 724.

²² Hartnell, 723-725.

²³ See Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” *On Metapsychology*, ed. Angela Richards (New York: Penguin, 1991), 262.

theorizes the ethical impossibility and infinity of mourning. For Derrida, in order to remain faithful to the alterity of the absent other, interiorization must remain both impossible and incomplete. This “unbearable paradox of fidelity” results from “another organization of space and of visibility, of the gazing and the gazed upon.”²⁴ In Derrida’s understanding, the necessary failure of interiorization is related not to the limits of a specific *enclosure*, but rather to the drastic revision of “space and visibility”: “a geometry of gazes” that reduces the dead to a series of “images.”²⁵ In keeping with Freud’s theory of rapaciously consumptive melancholia, Maria Torok and Nicholas Abraham’s conception of “incorporation” also constitutes a failure to mourn successfully. For Abraham and Torok, “internalization,” the primary supportive mechanism behind mourning processes, is broken into two subsets: “introjection,” the process of symbolically absorbing the other in normative or “successful” mourning, and “incorporation,” the fantastic wound of melancholia in which the totality of the loss remains unrealizable and the other is encrypted within the psyche.²⁶ The Katrina Memorial enacts a form of *failed* incorporation, establishing a site of perpetual detachment in which the other is permanently encrypted *without*, that is, *outside* of, the subject. The “foreign body” is not “lodged within the subject,” but enclosed forever in its foreignness, entirely other but also entirely inaccessible.²⁷ Rather than a dismissal of the full significance of the loss, failed incorporation in this instance takes the form of hyper-memorialization—a bizarre fixation on the event itself, rather than the lost object. As Lawrence Johnson explains, “incorporation produces the gap in the psyche which Abraham and Torok have called the crypt, a place where the lost object is to be *kept alive* within the ego.”²⁸ I propose that failed incorporation, in this instance, produces a place outside the subject where the lost object is *kept dead*, and externalized.

This external encryption is heightened by the memorial’s problematic interment of Katrina decedents in the place of an existing cemetery, necessitating the disruption (and at times removal) of the

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2001), 159.

²⁵ Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, 159.

²⁶ See Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, “Mourning or Melancholia: Introjection *versus* Incorporation” in *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, ed. and trans. Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago: UP of Chicago, 1994), 125-139.

²⁷ Abraham and Torok, 174.

²⁸ Johnson, Lawrence, “Tracing Calculation [*Calque Calcul*] Between Nicolas Abraham and Jacques Derrida,” *PMC* 10.3 (2000), 2.

bodies already housed there. The site is located on land donated by Louisiana State University, which originally housed the Charity Hospital Cemetery, a repository for the remains of centuries of New Orleans' poorest citizens in unmarked graves. During topsoil removal and land clearing, human bone fragments were unearthed, cataloged, and relocated by onsite archeologists.²⁹ The placement of the Katrina Memorial, which commemorates those who died as a result of large-scale governmental failure and neglect, on the site of a charity cemetery enacts an uncanny symmetry. The displacement of the Charity Hospital dead to create space for the memorial strangely mirrors the Katrina diaspora, and continues to categorize the dead into those who are worthy or unworthy of memorialization. The site enacts an architectural whitewashing, erasing the buried history of racial injustice in New Orleans to memorialize a so-called natural disaster. The Katrina Memorial inscribes the image of a hurricane on top of centuries of unmarked graves, paving over the anonymous burial ground of poverty with a monument to disaster.

Traces of unburied anxiety resonate at sites of traumatic rupture, which exceed the absorptive capacity of the mind and the earth. At the Katrina Memorial, the absent presence of the unknown dead is contained within an architecture of (en)closure. The memorial attempts to localize the process of mourning. Its gates and fences impose finite boundaries upon the traumas endured by the bodies encrypted within the structure. Through its insistence on exteriority and finality, this architecture of (en)closure constitutes a failure of incorporative mourning. According to Abraham and Torok, instances of failed mourning generate linguistic barriers to representation known as crypts, in which the ego incorporates object-loss. The cryptophoric subject is rendered mute in relation to this loss: to speak of it would destroy the illusion of integration. For the crypt-bearer, to utter any word that alludes to the loss would be a catastrophic acknowledgement that the object is not alive within, but dead, without. Conversely, the Katrina Memorial, as a monument of failed incorporation, permanently inscribes the traumatic event *into* the cultural landscape, keeping the dead externalized. Yet this process of encryption is neither final nor failsafe. As Johnson argues, the telling silences that orbit crypts eventually betray their existence through "cryptonymic secretions":

²⁹ "Sign of Katrina Fatigue? Memorial Delayed." While there has been no academic analysis of the memorial construction to date, the dislocation of the Charity Hospital graves has been significantly under-reported in press coverage of the memorial.

The crypt operates . . . like a blind spot within the ego, filtering away any words, phrases, representations, or actions that might give away the secret locked in the crypt. . . . [T]he term ‘secretion’ refers both to the process of concealment and to the separation and excretion of internal matter. The crypt continually gives itself away by being conspicuous in failing to provide any evidence of its existence. It secretes itself in an enclave that refuses to admit to an exterior realm, yet its blockages produce a language that manifests on the surface, thereby revealing to the outside world the gaps that inhere within.³⁰

The memorial seeks to externally encrypt the unknown casualties of Katrina; it insists on the finality of their containment. The architectural inscription of the hurricane and enclosure of the site behind spiked metal fencing attests to the structural desire to barricade the hurricane and its casualties. The Charity Hospital gates allude to the encrypted secrets of the unclaimed and unknown bodies contained within, and the legacy of their abandonment.

The engraving of a symbolic representation of the traumatic event upon the landscape invites correlations with conceptions of “flooding” in trauma theory and psychotherapeutic practice. Rouse, the memorial’s conceptual designer, is a practicing psychiatrist—it is therefore possible that elements of psychoanalytic theory may have influenced the structural design. As a symptom of post-traumatic stress, flooding is reminiscent of the seepage associated with Johnson’s understanding of “cryptonymic secretions.”³¹ When a traumatic event has not been effectively processed by the psyche, remnants of the trauma may unexpectedly “leak” or “flood” from spaces of (unsuccessful) psychological containment. “Emotional flooding of trauma survivors involves expressive leakage of minimally processed affective experience. Because trauma-related feelings are intense, they tend to leak out in ways that survivors experience as unintended, unpredictable, or incomprehensible.”³²

³⁰ “Cryptonymic Secretions: On the Kindness of Strangers,” *Mourning and its Hospitalities / after . . .* Unpublished forthcoming collection, cited with author’s permission.

³¹ Lawrence Johnson, “Cryptonymic Secretions: On the Kindness of Strangers,” *Mourning and its Hospitalities / after . . .* Unpublished forthcoming collection, cited with author’s permission.

³² Eileen Kennedy-Moore and Jeanne C. Watson, *Expressing Emotion: Myths, Realities, and Therapeutic Strategies* (New York Guilford Press, 1999), 241.

Conversely, the term “flooding” has also been used in the treatment of phobias and anxiety. Direct therapeutic exposure, also known as flooding, is defined as “repeated or extended exposure, either in reality or in fantasy, to objectively harmless, but feared, stimuli for the purpose of reducing negative affect.”³³ Flooding strategies have at times been negatively associated with more extreme forms of implosive therapy, which engages frightening psychodynamic cues in an effort to enhance anxiety arousal, intended to foster “rapid extinction” of the phobia. Research has indicated that such “implosive” triggers are not only “ineffective” but also, in many instances, “contra-therapeutic” and re-traumatizing.³⁴ The wounding effects of triggering traumatic memories recall Freudian notions of the cyclical return of repression, which manifests in the tendency of many traumatized individuals to seek “compulsive re-exposure . . . to situations reminiscent of the trauma.”³⁵ While Freud suggested that the goal of repetition is to “gain mastery” over the trauma, clinical experience shows that repetition often causes further suffering.³⁶ The reclamation of the formal structure of the traumatic event for the purposes of memorialization sits firmly within the realms of a repetition compulsion. While visitors wander toward the eye of the hurricane, and the tombs it parallels, the structure recalls the entrapment of the storm’s aftermath. This architectural flooding strategy is aimed not at alleviating suffering in survivors, but at cultivating historical forgetting in disaster tourists and virtual witnesses by virtue of an inscription of the event so traumatically provocative that it forgets to remember anything other than itself.

Within the framework of post-traumatic aftermath, as Cathy Caruth explains, “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event.”³⁷ In the space of hyper-memorialization, the act of mourning is eclipsed by the spectacle of the event. This possessive preference for the event en masse subverts bereavement processes by virtue of its incessant fascination with the reenactment of trauma. Through architectural preservation and cultivation of traumatic repetition, the Katrina Memorial ensures that participants remain

³³ Patrick A. Boudewyns and Robert H. Shipley, *Flooding and Implosive Therapy: Direct Therapeutic Exposure in Clinical Practice* (New York: Plenum Press, 1983), 3.

³⁴ Larry Michelson, “Flooding,” *Dictionary of Behaviour Therapy Techniques*, eds. Alan S. Bellack and Michel Hersen (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985), 130.

³⁵ Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane, and Lars Weisaeth. *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society* (New York: Guilford Press, 1996), 493.

³⁶ van der Kolk et al., 493.

³⁷ Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 4.

situated not in an ongoing grief process, but in an infinitely replicated traumatic event. In this instance, memorial culture remains fixed within the repetition compulsion; the memorial is designed to produce and invite new reverberations as visitors arrive and depart. Speaking of post-traumatic hallucinations or flashes, Caruth argues against defining traumatic aftermath purely through links with the event:

The pathology cannot be defined either by the event itself . . . nor can it be defined in terms of a distortion of the event, achieving its haunting power as a result of distorting personal significances attached to it. The pathology consists, rather, solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it.³⁸

In terms of an evocative pathological response, the memorial figuration of trauma hinges on a “distortion of the event” rather than the “personal significances” attached to it. Through inscription and narration, the memorial speaks with a singular voice, drowning out the potential distortions of “personal significances”—the ghosts of lost objects. These ghosts are silenced not only from a societal refusal to fully acknowledge the significance of their deaths, but also from an insistence on the absolute significance of the event, rather than the individuals directly affected by it. In its fixation on external (en)closure, the Katrina Memorial denies the hospitality of incorporative mourning. The use of the term (en)closure in this context has connotations not only with containing the dead, but also with the memorialists’ search for “closure,” for a finite end to the process of mourning. In post-traumatic contexts, the externalization operating within the architecture of failed mourning prevalent at the Katrina Memorial can be conceived as a collective dissociative experience. According to Bessel van der Kolk et al., in post-traumatic conditions, “the memory of trauma is not integrated and accepted as a part of one’s personal past; instead, it comes to exist independently of previous schemata (i.e., it is dissociated).”³⁹ Dissociation functions as a psychological form of externalization—operating around a

³⁸ Caruth, 4.

³⁹ van der Kolk et al., 496.

refusal or incapacity to integrate a significant trauma. The Katrina Memorial, in its insistence that the traumatic event exists *independently* of all that preceded or followed it, attempts to create and contain a collective dissociative experience.

Above all, the Katrina Memorial attempts to localize and categorize the identity of the unknown and, if this is not possible, to encase it, symbolically or literally, within the finality of a tomb. In Derrida's words, "what the crypt commemorates, as the incorporated object's 'monument' or 'tomb,' is not the object itself, but its exclusion."⁴⁰ In this instance, the excluded objects are the absent bodies—those who remain undiscovered, abandoned, or ignored. As Henry A. Giroux writes, "cadavers have a way of insinuating themselves on consciousness, demanding answers to questions that aren't often asked."⁴¹ In New Orleans, it is also the knowledge of unburied bodies—those that drifted away or came to rest on street corners and sidewalks—and the detached observation of them *from the beginning* as live bodies, including the visibility of their abandonment and subsequent deaths, that must be encrypted. The labyrinth is the chosen form because it enables the closure tourists to wander *as if* they had endured the traumatic event. They are allowed to participate *in absentia* of the dead, to enact some virtual mourning, perhaps even virtual rescue and recovery, complete with the deluded finality that the bodies are safely contained within literal or symbolic tombs. The function of the site as crypt is to encase, enclose, and contain absent bodies. The memorial operates within the delusion that the unknown dead have been interred, that there is a finality to the process of mourning them.

"FAILING WELL": DIASPORIC MOURNING IN JANA NAPOLI'S FLOODWALL

The infinite multiplicity of trauma as a global phenomenon necessitates a discourse on the hospitality of mourning strangers—persons often defined according to categories of distance and difference. The ethical imperative behind this dialogue cannot be ignored. As long as certain casualties are privileged over expendable

⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida, "Fors: The English Words of Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok," trans. Barbara Johnson, in *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, by Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, trans. Nicholas Rand (Minneapolis: UP of Minnesota, 1986), xvii.

⁴¹ Henry A. Giroux. "Reading Hurricane Katrina: Race, Class, and the Biopolitics of Disposability," *College Literature* 33.3 (2006), 174.

others, the necessity of disaster (be it preemptive war or the escalation in so-called natural disasters) can be collectively rationalized as unavoidable. In order to begin the work of mourning the unknown it is necessary to move beyond a figuration of mourning as bordered by the known (personalized, localized), towards an understanding of the blank face of grief: a god-shaped hole capable of absorbing anyone. It is not until we are able to approach the work of mourning those who are faceless, forgotten, or unnamable, that we can collectively cease to categorize the dead as tragic or expendable, legitimate or illegitimate, familiar or other. This cessation of ownership is an integral approach toward the threshold at which we can contemplate mourning on a global scale, as an ecological act, existing beyond the individual, beyond even the human.

The Katrina Memorial's enclosure of the unknown dead within a structural recreation of the traumatic event that claimed their lives recalls Judith Butler's discussion of the appropriation of particular forms of mourning for political and national purposes. This requisition is in stark contrast to the denial and denigration of other forms of mourning, those that exist outside the parameters of preferred functional bereavements that are utilized in the "working through" of nationalist agendas:

Certain forms of grief become nationally recognized and amplified, whereas other losses become unthinkable and ungrievable. . . . A national melancholia, understood as a disavowed mourning, follows upon the erasure from public representation of the names, images, and narratives of those the U.S. has killed. On the other hand, the U.S.'s own losses are consecrated in public obituaries that constitute so many acts of nation-building.⁴²

The Katrina Memorial contains bodies that interrupt dominant cultural narratives of patriotism and privilege—casualties that testify, rather, to systemic governmental failure and neglect. Beyond this discussion of the categorization of deaths in terms of grievability is the question of how the public segregation of those deemed ungrievable constitutes a failure in the hospitality of mourning. The structure displaces the anonymous Charity Hospital dead who

⁴² Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), xv.

originally inhabited the site, even as it seeks to permanently entomb the “forgotten” and “unknown” remains of Hurricane Katrina.

In the context of hospitable mourning, Derrida offers an understanding of haunting as visitation: the ghost as guest, the haunted as host. “The spectre *appears* to present itself during a visitation It (re)pays us a visit, since it returns to see us and . . . translates well the recurrence or returning, the frequency of a visitation.”⁴³ Despite the reciprocity implicit in this representation of haunting, it is not entirely hospitable, because it is not entirely without imposition. The visit is, by nature, an imposition on the host, no matter how willing, for, as Derrida explains, haunting inevitably invokes anxiety:

If such a conjuration seems welcoming and hospitable, since it calls forth the dead . . . it is never free of anxiety. This anxiety in the face of the ghost is properly revolutionary. If death weighs on the living brain of the living . . . it must then have some spectral density. To weigh is also to charge, tax, impose, indebt, accuse, assign, enjoin. And the more life there is, the graver the specter of the other becomes, the heavier its imposition. And the more the living have to answer for it. To answer for the dead, to respond to the dead.⁴⁴

Perhaps, then, the relative success or failure of mourning depends on how one responds to the weight of this “spectral density,” how one responds to the dead, and the anxiety their visit produces. In the Derridian sense, there can be no truly successful mourning, since mourning never really ends. This question of anxiety speaks to the paradox of mourning: to engage in normative, functional bereavement that moves beyond attachment to the lost object constitutes a failure of hospitality toward the dead, it necessitates their expulsion. Mourning, for Derrida, is an impossible command; the “law of mourning” demands that “in order to succeed, it would have to *fail*, to fail *well*.”⁴⁵ The incorporation of the other, which Freud originally conceptualized as a failure of mourning, is itself an act of

⁴³ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 101.

⁴⁴ Derrida, *Spectres*, 109.

⁴⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires for Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava, and Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia UP, 1989), 144.

hospitality, a preparation for spectral visitation. Nevertheless, Derrida insists that the ghost, while existing within us, is simultaneously entirely removed from us, “an interiorization of what can never be interiorized.”⁴⁶ The failure of normative mourning (as “working through” loss) then becomes an act of refusal, rejecting the productivity of grief, refusing to complete the “work” of mourning. The Katrina Memorial constitutes a failure not only of incorporative but also of hospitable mourning: the enclosed structure quarantines the dead and excludes the living.

In contrast to the architectural enclosure of the Katrina Memorial, Jana Napoli has created a transient site of mourning that inhabits the territory of memorialization while preserving a sense of reverence for the unknown. *Floodwall*, Napoli’s site-specific sculptural installation, is composed of 710 household drawers salvaged from street-side debris following Hurricane Katrina. Wandering the vacant streets of her drowned city, Napoli instinctively began collecting and cataloging discarded drawers: “I wanted to take this intimate and homely detritus out of this sodden world.”⁴⁷ In collaboration with artist Rondell Crier and oral historian Tatiana Clay, Napoli has constructed an interactive digital archive that seeks to identify the drawers’ original owners and share their stories, which form an integral part of every exhibit.⁴⁸ *Floodwall* has been constructed in three varying incarnations: the vertical or “wall configuration,” which stands as a “monument of immeasurable loss,” the horizontal or “tombstone” configuration, which functions as a “memorial and sentinel of the past,” and the “enclosed or room” configuration, which “envelops the spectator in . . . the unutterable loneliness of deep mourning.”⁴⁹ Napoli’s installations hinge on their reconstructive portability. Her drawers allude to losses that cannot be internalized—absences we nevertheless carry with us, which

⁴⁶ Pascale-Anne Brault. “To Reckon with the Dead: Jacques Derrida’s Politics of Mourning,” Editor’s Introduction, *The Work of Mourning*, by Jacques Derrida (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001), 11.

⁴⁷ Jana Napoli, “Artist’s Statement,” http://www.floodwall.org/artist_statement_napoli.html. (Accessed February 2010).

⁴⁸ As each drawer was collected, Napoli recorded the address where it was retrieved. As *Floodwall* began to take shape, not only as a traveling sculptural installation, but also as cultural phenomenon reflective of the reconstructive capacity the city of New Orleans, Napoli enlisted the help of artist Rondell Crier and oral historian Tatiana Clay, who searched for surviving owners, friends, or relatives who could share stories associated with these cultural artifacts. Their stories form a component of *Floodwall* installations and will eventually be incorporated into the website. For a sample of this digital archive, see: http://www.floodwall.org/drawers_stories.html. (Accessed February 2010).

⁴⁹ Jana Napoli, “Artist’s Statement.”

surround and contain us in some fundamental way. By virtue of their vacancy, Napoli's drawers invite empathetic projection, memorializing the absent bodies of the unknown by situating the "tomb" in miniature: the empty drawer. The "room configuration" speaks to the "envelop[ing]" hospitality of an interior while remaining essentially external. It seeks to enclose the living, rather than the dead, in the impenetrable silence of mourning.

Napoli has exhibited widely across the United States and Europe. In January 2007, *Floodwall* occupied the Liberty Street Bridge of the World Financial Center. Against a backdrop view of the raw excavation of Ground Zero, the drawers stood, in Napoli's words, "like empty luggage without their passengers and flowing like a levee broken in places."⁵⁰

In contrast to the Katrina Memorial, *Floodwall* figures the empty drawer/vacant tomb not as public crypt but as symbol and signifier of the otherness of the dead, who remain nameless and tombless, and thus, in Derrida's words, "all the more sublime."⁵¹ Napoli's work involves an acknowledgment of the "blank spaces" that exist in the face of mourning.⁵² Standing upright, empty of their contents, the drawers act as uncanny reminders of New Orleans's cemeteries:

The light glints off the veneer fronts and you think of a graveyard of marble slabs with only a few words to explain the wonder of flesh. Something says, look on, Visitor, for once we were full of life like you.

Then you notice the space between the drawers. This is a useless wall you think. It cannot hold anything back. . . . Ghosts pass through the gaps in the drawers and coldly pass through bystanders. Ghosts looking for the city of New Orleans and for the treasures these drawers once contained.⁵³

⁵⁰ Jana Napoli, "Artist's Statement."

⁵¹ Derrida, *Mémoires*, 26.

⁵² Interview with Jana Napoli, September 2008.

⁵³ Terry Lee Park, "From New Orleans to Ground Zero," *Floodwall Exhibition Catalog* (Whirlwind Creative: 2007), 3.



Figure 5: *Floodwall*, Liberty Street Bridge Exhibit. © Jana Napoli. Reproduced with permission.

The startling emptiness of *Floodwall's* drawers conjures, in Derrida's words, an "intrinsic exteriority" that invites projection, remaining estranged from the spectator while evoking an innate sense of familiarity.⁵⁴ Napoli's empty drawers enact a phantom limb

⁵⁴ Jacques Derrida, *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 16.

tangibility that is felt most acutely in its absence, a literal embodiment of Derrida's "vacant centre."⁵⁵ *Floodwall* attempts the dissolution of an egocentric perspective in mourning. The installation preserves the otherness of haunting by obliterating, at least temporarily, the need for interiorization through the provision of an *external* site for the mourning of the anonymous dead. *Floodwall* invites Katrina's ghosts to inhabit the "blank spaces" of their absence via the startling hollowness of the drawers. This reciprocal habitation allows the viewer to imagine one's own belongings in the drawer, one's own body in the tomb.



Figure 6. *Floodwall*, Liberty Street Bridge Exhibit. © Jana Napoli. Reproduced with permission.

⁵⁵ Jacques Derrida, *On Touching*, 16.

Floodwall acts as an exterior but empty tomb, infinitely hospitable in its patient vacancy. This crypt is contained neither within the body nor the psyche (at least not entirely). The unknown dead are reverentially invited to occupy an external artifact. The distinction between the “success” of this (paradoxical) external site of incorporative mourning and the failed encryption of the Katrina Memorial hinges on its conceptions of transience and reverence: a quiet insistence on the *portability of ghosts*. A series of hollow tombs are repetitively constructed and deconstructed. In contrast, the enclosure and localization of the Katrina Memorial insists that the space of mourning is designated and confined. *Floodwall* refigures exteriorization as a form of mourning that “fails well” in its refusal to enclose the other, establishing instead portable altars that enact the hospitality of incorporation, providing a perpetual home for diasporic ghosts.

FIGURES

Fig. 1: Artist’s rendering of Katrina Memorial, © Matthews International, reproduced with permission.

Fig. 2: The Katrina Memorial. April 2010, photograph by the author.

Fig. 3: The Katrina Memorial. April 2010, photograph by the author. The gates are all that remain of this section of the original Charity Hospital Cemetery.

Fig. 4: Search and rescue code preserved on a Garden District home, photograph by the author.

Figs. 5-6: Floodwall, Liberty Street Bridge Exhibit, © Jana Napoli, reproduced with permission.