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Beyond The Storm, Beyond The Spill: Moral Willing In Post-Katrina & Post-BP Oil Spill Plaquemines Parish As Narrative Re- Envisioning

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Methodology

My research is based around the lived reality of insecurity as experienced by residents of Plaquemines parish, Louisiana, in the environment left by hurricane Katrina, as well as the recent BP/Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Both of these crises have left their scars on both the landscape and the community who call it home. As such I have conducted ethnographic participant observation and unstructured interviews amongst the residents of this parish, particularly in the towns of Buras (where I reside and am a member of the local volunteer fire department), Empire, and Port Sulphur (in both cases where I have been attending Catholic Mass at St. Ann's and St. Patrick's respectively). Ethnographic participant observation and unstructured interviews are ideal methods when one wishes to study normal, day-to-day life, while reducing the number of preconceptions and influence a researcher might bring with him to the field. These methods fully immerse the researcher in the community he is studying and, as a result, it becomes possible to begin to acquire something of the perspective of a resident of southern Plaquemines and to understand their perspective and choices in terms of what it means to live in such a hazardous part of the United States.

Background

In *Moral Willing as Narrative Re-Envisioning* Cheryl Mattingly sets out a rich and concise framework by which Anthropologists might utilise a conception of willing (i.e. an act of will), not in terms of measurable actions, but instead as situating oneself in a wider process, whereby one re-imagines one's sense of self in terms of a new community-based narrative. She focuses primarily on moral based willing, where she lays out four key features which distinguish this type of willing from previous models which focussed on action; 1. Refocusing attention forms a better basis to discuss moral willing than discrete decision making. 2. Internal reorientation is as crucial as outward action when discussing the 'doing' of moral willing. 3. A narrative rather than atomistic concept of action is needed in such activity. 4. 'A concept of moral willing cannot be disconnected from a notion of self' and this self is both social (created in community) and narrative (2010, p.55).

The example she provides to explain this process is a discussion of an African American mother who had to deal with her young son receiving serious burns to his face, due to the neglect on the part of his cousin, who was at that moment responsible for his care. She had to make many moral choices with regard to her relationships with her now disfigured son, her niece and her sister, and Mattingly describes these not only in terms of a series of certain discrete decisions which the mother made but mainly, and more importantly, as a re-orientation whereby she came to view and experience the world in a new way. Her personal crisis was thus resolved by coming to terms gradually with this event from a position of ever increasing internal moral strength. A clear example of this is her decision not to become bitter or angry with regard to her son's condition or at the cause of it. It would not have been possible for her to come to this

position through a single discrete decision, but rather as a lengthy process, which involved her entire community helping her. According to Mattingly's research the mother in question now believes herself to be a better person as a result of this process of willing and, while it is beyond the scope of this paper to assess the validity of this statement, this example proves a solid foundation from which to base further inquiry.

The experience of the residents of Plaquemines parish is understandable through this lens of moral willing. Most members of this community lost not only every personal belonging they owned, but also every familiar physical reference point in their community (shops, schools etc.). Many of those who chose to return to southern Plaquemines have undergone a process of moral willing similar to the one described above, as this article shall go on to show. By using a new ethnographic context; the community of southern Plaquemines, new light can be shone on willing, which is an area often neglected by Anthropologists (Murphy & Throop 2010).

Introduction to Plaquemines Parish

Founded in 1807, Plaquemines is the largest parish in the state of Louisiana encompassing over 2,400 square miles, with 65% of this area comprising water and marshland (in Louisiana counties are known as parishes). The parish hugs both sides of the Mississippi River as it snakes the final 100 miles of its long journey into the Gulf of Mexico. From Belle Chase in the north, to Venice in the south, the most obviously visible parts of parish life largely take place overshadowed by levees on either side, often not more than a mile apart. Residents acknowledge the peculiar layout of their parish and use 'up the road' and 'down the road' as the two most important phrases in orientating oneself in relation to landmarks along this

peninsula. Clark, in his first hand account of the aftermath of hurricane Katrina describes Plaquemines as ‘the only parish in the state that is not on the way to anything but itself’ (2007, p.248). This enigmatic, slightly insular, outlook has maintained a strong rural lifestyle based less around fixed rules and regulation and more around traditional values and wide circles of acquaintances.

The state of Louisiana is one of the poorest and most unequal states in America, with high crime rate, and low educational attainment (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). The number of high school and college graduates in Plaquemines is substantially below state averages, however, pre-hurricane Katrina the parish did not experience higher than average economic hardship. Certainly Plaquemines was poor, but the large fishing and oil industries present in the parish ensured that the need for unskilled and semi-skilled labour was fairly plentiful and unemployment was not the dominant social problem, as can be seen in other lower income areas of the United States. Furthermore, the strong family orientated community spirit of the parish ensured that the most vulnerable within the community were cared for through informal social networks of subsistence (whereby those able to fish and hunt would share their catch with friends and neighbours). Although almost exclusively the domain of men, this subsistence is a treasured part of life in Plaquemines and fishing plays a part in almost every branch of life here. As a man in the parish, if you yourself are not a professional fisherman then some of your neighbours and friends almost certainly will be. Regardless of your profession, however, almost everyone in the parish takes advantage of the bountiful marshes and bayous that surround the parish and which play a large part in making Louisiana the source of one third of the shrimp and oyster crop in the United States (Barcott 2010, p.62).

This is not to claim that the parish exists in some form of rural utopia. The community generally maintains strong traditional divisions in the roles of men and women (with the latter largely expected to fulfil the role of a traditional housewife), as well as strong informal segregation between the different racial groups of the parish being moderately widespread. These attitudes being particularly prevalent (though not universal nor exclusive) amongst the older generations. The area has a recent history of strong segregationist politics such as the controversial district attorney Leander Perez, whose anti-integrationist policies dominated parish politics during the middle decades of the 20th century (Jeansonne, 1995). Although these days are officially over, there is still little progress or desire to make the parish either more integrated or cosmopolitan among a portion of its residents. It is important to note, however, that this has not manifested as widespread proliferation of hate groups or racially stimulated violence as has occurred in other parts of America in recent years (Johnson 2011). It is beyond the scope of this article to explore the nuanced difference and relationship between the less common racism and more common segregation that is found here. In addition to the above divisions, the parish is becoming increasingly divided into two separate communities, with some in 'southern' Plaquemines (roughly corresponding the area worst effected by hurricane Katrina) feeling increasingly isolated from those living in 'north' Plaquemines centred around the town of Belle Chasse. There is a perception amongst those in southern Plaquemines that they are becoming sidelined with regard to political debates affecting the future of the parish, and many believe there are plans to abandon the area entirely to provide better protection from hurricanes for New Orleans. According to some, this division was symbolically reinforced with the building of the new flood gates

being constructed just south of Belle Chasse (WWLTV, 2011). Although this plan is officially primarily aimed at protecting New Orleans from storm surges entering the local canal networks, some residents of southern Plaquemines refer to it as the ‘Belle Chasse Wall’ or even ‘The New Berlin Wall’ and see it as cementing their belief that the southern part of the parish is being sacrificed to allow investment in the protection of the north. This has been further compounded by the parish government’s perceived reluctance to relocate back to the official seat of the parish in Point à la Hache from their temporary residence in Belle Chasse.

On August 29th, 2005, this way of life was dealt a devastating blow with the arrival of hurricane Katrina (usually referred to as simply ‘the Storm’), which made landfall near Buras. The effect of this disaster has been well documented, and both the human and economic costs frequently enter the public consciousness, alongside regular calls for greater funding for prevention systems and relief efforts (D.E.S.A., 2008). Hurricane Katrina struck with the strength of a category 5, including 120mph winds, massive rainfall and flooding, and a storm surge of over 20ft. This combined with a ferocity which decimated almost the entirety of southern Plaquemines parish and the towns of Point à la Hache, Port Sulphur, Buras, Empire, Davant, Boothville and Venice amongst others were almost entirely obliterated. However, unlike many residents of urban New Orleans, the residents of Plaquemines were well practiced at evacuation and of a population of almost 27,000 there were only 4 fatalities (Longman, 2008). The culture of the area also helped with this as, while New Orleans officials battled with official procedures laid down in Washington D.C., the then parish President Benny Rousselle marshalled every local school bus and simply tossed the

keys to whichever adult present had the largest number of family members crammed into the bus. He simply told them to ‘drive north and drive safe’ (Cooper & Block 2006, p.249). When the local residents began to return from temporary refuges as far away as Texas and Virginia, however, they found an almost unrecognisable landscape which according to some eye-witness accounts had literally disappeared under the Gulf during the height of ‘the Storm’ (Cooper & Block 2006, p.129). Local insurance firms were completely unable to meet the influx of claims and many people found their insurance policies worthless. Others faced legal battles where the insurance companies attempted to claim that certain packages did not cover the holders for this type of damage. Those with insurance were barred from claiming government compensation, and many of my respondents felt that they would have been better off had they not claimed their insurance and gone to the government instead. The response of FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) was almost universally derided and the trailers provided for people returning to the area have become a watchword for poor design and unreliability. Local people were, and are, well aware that to a certain extent the devastation of the parish was caused (or at least magnified) by the massive erosion of the coastline of Louisiana, which has occurred at an ever increasing rate over the last half century, propagated in large part by oil exploration. To give perspective to this it is worth noting that there are over 7,000 licenses to drill offshore in the Gulf of Mexico, while Alaska has 675 and California has only 50 (Bourne 2010, p.44). One of my interviewees went as far as to say ‘Katrina didn’t hit us, she went over us and kept on going’ and there is a certain amount of truth to that statement. Local people know that ultimately the future of southern Plaquemines rests on investment in systems to re-balance this coastal erosion and renew

the local wetland ecosystem. While some scientists have made predictions of a 'Cajun Atlantis' the residents of southern Plaquemines are left with doubts about their future and hope that investment will be forthcoming (Heerden & Bryan 2006, p.10). This needed investment may be slow in arriving, however, as across the entire Gulf of Mexico fishing (while culturally important) is only worth \$0.7bn per annum to the local economy, while oil is worth a far larger \$62.7bn (Bourne 2010, p.53).

As people began to return to the parish and rebuild their lives, often with little or no help from insurance agencies or government bodies, they were dealt another blow. In April 2010 an explosion on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico killed 11 people and caused thousands of gallons of unrefined oil to spill into the Gulf of Mexico, polluting the waters and bayous of Plaquemines parish and devastating the fishing industry once again (BBC News, 2011a). The compensation battle with BP and other parties is ongoing (Symington, 2010), however, what is clear is that BP was under prepared for an environmental disaster of this magnitude (BBC News, 2010, Vergano & Koch, 2011). Although the impact of 'the Spill' (as it is often referred) is unclear, with some scientists claiming a speedy recovery by 2012 (BBC News, 2011c), while others warn of serious long-term damage (BBC News, 2011b). What is clear is that this was an unwelcome set-back to a community that was only beginning to recover from Katrina and where there remained a 20% reduction in population in the parish between 2000 and 2010, as shown by the US Census (U.S. Census Bureau 2000, 2010). It is worth noting that this drop in population was also felt in other parts of southern Louisiana, particularly in New Orleans where the population dropped by a third (BBC News, 2011d). In summation, the recovery of this community after the devastation of Hurricane

Katrina – which was already slower than many other parts of the Gulf Coast – has experienced a major set-back due to the BP oil spill.

Moral Willing as Narrative Re-Imagining

How then does this community continually survive such crises and what prevents the local population from simply giving up and joining their friends in other parts of Louisiana and further afield who have chosen to make a new part of America their home? By examining Mattingly's four criteria for moral willing this article shall offer an introduction to this process in relation to south Plaquemines parish.

Refocusing Attention

When discussing the experience of how a member of southern Plaquemines overcame the crisis of hurricane Katrina (and to a lesser extent the BP oil spill) a model of re-orientation is more useful than one of direct action. With this said it is important to note that there are instances where a direct action model is more appropriate, most important in this is the decision to actually return to southern Plaquemines and choose to continue to make it home. Many former members of the community decided to remain in the locale to where they fled 'the Storm' rather than return, however, most did decide to return and from then on they faced a constant struggle of will to deal with the lived reality of what they experienced.

The emotional impact of what these residents experienced should not be underestimated; most people in Plaquemines today proudly call themselves 'born n raised' but often not only they, but their parents and their grandparents were also born and raised in the Parish. Families came to live in close proximity to each other with

houses and property being passed down through families for generations. Indeed, some families lived in the same place for so long that the street they lived on took on the family name (Longman 2008 p.112). When they returned however, the landscape was unrecognisable, almost every man-made structure was destroyed and everything they had owned was scattered across many square miles. One of my interviewees laughed while he recounted missing the turn off to his property on his first journey back after ‘the Storm’ and having to double back when he realised his mistake; the Acadian house in which he had lived for decades had been utterly destroyed along with every other landmark in the neighbourhood.

Later in the same interview, however, his smile dropped and the emotion of this experience overcame him for a few minutes. He was discussing why he had chosen to come back, and his answer was simply ‘this is ma home’. This response has been repeated across dozens of conversations with local people and its simplicity belies a deep process of re-imagining. Home, for the people of southern Plaquemines, has become symbolic of a deep struggle for cultural survival and they are proud of their role in this on-going process. The various steps on the road to recovery; evacuation, ‘refugee’, return, temporary accommodation etc. have not been experienced as separate discrete choices but as a continual process from destruction to an imagined future of a return to normality. In his excellent catalogue of messages painted on walls in the immediate aftermath of Katrina in New Orleans artist Richard Misrach shows a wide range of emotional response from anger and despair to simple practicality, but the most interesting theme present is one of rebirth (2010). Whether conceptualised in simple terms; ‘We will rebuild’, or as part of the larger politics of the region ‘the South will rise again’ the visual display of a re-orientation away from passive victim to active

re-builder is clear. This liminality and process of re-connection with the land that was theirs is reminiscent of many refugee experiences, though it is beyond the scope of this article to bring theorists such as the Liisa Malkki (1995) to bear on this phenomenon.

Internal Re-orientation

The process by which Mattingly's respondent prevented feelings of anger and bitterness to overcome her is connected to a long-term process of changing herself and to envision the world differently (2010, p.65). She goes on to say that willing here 'involves a change of heart' and 'overt, discrete acts of will are just a sporadic manifestation of this transformation' (Mattingly 2010, p.65).

In the case of southern Plaquemines it is easy to see how bitterness and despair might easily overcome someone though this is not the way locals of my acquaintance experienced life. On a hunting trip I was part of one man states that he did have moments of despair initially but that he simply had to stay positive and move on. On another occasion a local oyster fisherman quips he had to 'get better or get bitter'. This experience of internal re-orientation is perhaps best observed in the local religious practitioners on whom the community at times such as these will lean on heavily. One local Pastor described returning to the parish to find his church in ruins with debris carpeting the entire area. His father (who had accompanied him) looked about and, deflated, stated he had no idea where they would even begin to put the place back in order, the Pastor simply looked at the debris under his feet and said 'well a' guess I'll start right here'. In another conversation, this time with local Catholics, they described their initial fear that the Arch-Diocese would choose to close down the local churches of southern Plaquemines, and it was only through massive effort on the part of

their local Priest and certain other individuals that two of the Catholic churches successfully re-opened. These discrete acts, such as the Pastor picking up the rubble under his feet, or the Catholic Priest refusing to allow his ruined church to be abandoned reflect an internal process whereby they have accepted the hardship of their current reality and begin the long process of re-building not only their churches and other physical structures but also their selves.

One of the reasons why the recent BP oil spill was so challenging on the community of southern Plaquemines (and something the members of the media visiting the area failed to report) is that it interrupted this on-going process of internal recovery. When describing the oil spill local residents (particularly fishermen) tend not to discuss it as an isolated event, but rather something connected with the slow regeneration after 'the Storm'. Many individuals who had only recently been able to replace their destroyed boats were unable to use them for fishing. While BP employed a large number of fishermen in clean-up operations and has offered limited financial compensation for damages done, the emotional stress of being prevented from engaging in the embodied normality of working as fishermen only a matter of years after they began the process of recovery was very great. This emotional stress was compounded by the loss of their subsistence lifestyle, with local fishermen estimating that as much as 5% of their catch was used to feed their families and (perhaps more importantly) their extended families and the less fortunate members of their community. While this might not sound like a large amount to a layperson one must remember that the yearly catch of a professional fisherman is many, many tons of seafood. Many fishermen take the time to give the occasional bag of oysters or shrimp to elderly or very poor members of the community in order help sustain them. This process reinforced

the community healing process of the area and was a major loss to the area when ‘the Spill’ prevented it from occurring.

Narrative Concept of Action

In Philipp Meyer’s *American Rust* a post-industrial town is shown slowly decaying due to unemployment and the decline of the community (2009). The picture painted is fairly bleak. Southern Plaquemines is also an American community undergoing a crisis of economics but the response here has been far more positive. A huge part of this is the assumption that things in the parish can be made better (along with a view of how this will occur), if not quite to the extent they were before ‘the Storm’, then nonetheless markedly improved from the situation at present. The personal narratives of the residents here, as well as the community narratives of the various towns, allow many people in the parish to look to the future with hope. The story of the 2007 state victory of the South Plaquemines High School Hurricanes (the school’s American football team) is an example of this. Longman’s *The Hurricanes* (2008) covers this story in detail, as we follow the merger of the three high schools of southern Plaquemines into one school. The football team of this school is named the Hurricanes by the students now thrown together by this disaster, and the book follows their journey to become state champions just two years after ‘the Storm’ decimated their communities. For many (particularly the young players) this victory served as a vindication of their decision to return to the parish and invest emotionally and financially in an area that continues to have an uncertain future.

Interestingly, this merging and unity which has helped many students overcome their own personal crisis has in fact been hurtful to the recovery to some of the older members of the society. This

phenomenon is one which Mattingly does not discuss and is perhaps of more relevance to community based recovery from a large event of this kind, as opposed to individual recovery from a personal event. This is particularly true of the town of Buras, where ‘the Storm’ made landfall and the destruction was almost total. One of the buildings which did survive was Buras High School and when visiting the parish soon after the hurricane Joshua Clark details finding rooms on the upper floors almost untouched by damage (2007). The local fire chief and other volunteers offered the fire engine’s powerful hoses to clean the building and make it habitable once again, but instead the local school board and FEMA decided to demolish the building and merge Buras High with the other schools in the area on the site of what was formally Port Sulphur High School. This was a serious blow to many alumni of the school who returned to the area and felt that the school should have been saved and re-opened. They believed that a community such as Buras needed a high school of its own in order to breathe life and youth back into a town which was once a prosperous middle class community. The only direct action they are able to take on the matter is to express their dismay at the decision, but there is no doubt that their own internal narratives of rebuilding have been adversely affected by what they see as a setback to their community. With this said, however, when questioned, parish government officials were adamant that the damage to the school was such that saving the building would have been impossible.

Moral Willing and the Self

Mattingly describes how her respondent experienced a total altering to her sense of being in response to her son’s accident (2010, p.67). For her, the process by which she came to terms with her son’s

injuries has changed her outlook on life and the way she reacts to events and situations. She claims she is now a better and less judgemental person as a result.

This is, perhaps, a second area where the experience of southern Plaquemines diverges slightly for Mattingly's work, as few of my respondents would frame their re-action to 'the Storm' in this manner. The difference in context is crucial here, as in Mattingly's example a single person overcame a personal crisis with the help of her wider community, while in Plaquemines many personal crises occurred simultaneously to a community collectively. This has resulted with an outward projection whereby the collective actively seeks to change the world (by re-building their parish), rather than experiencing the events of the world changing them (as the mother in Mattingly's research had to). This manifests in the community with every new building built or former neighbours return being seen as a step towards communal recovery and the area being 'put back the way it should be'.

Despite this, many people in southern Plaquemines have indeed undergone similar changes and re-evaluations but perhaps most interestingly are those who came to the area to undertake aid work there and chose to remain and make their lives in the parish. While discussing this process with a couple who co-ordinate Christian volunteers in re-building efforts the wife tells me how she received a 'calling' to do these works and in so doing her life's priorities shifted along with her goals and she decided to leave her life in the north east of the United States to better focus on her work on the Gulf. This response when faced with the crisis unfolding as a result of 'the Storm' clearly shows an altering of self when faced with an unfolding narrative.

Conclusion

This article has sought to fill gaps in knowledge in both the ethnography of the post-Katrina and post-oil spill Gulf Coast, and in the anthropological study of the will.

Firstly, even a cursory review of the literature published around the impact of Hurricane Katrina would show a disproportionate focus on the experience of residents of the city of New Orleans. While to a certain extent this is understandable – New Orleans is a large, famous city and one of the most important cultural cores of the entire American South – it does skew any evaluation of Katrina’s impact as a whole. The devastation left in ‘the Storm’s’ wake stretches across southern Louisiana, Mississippi and beyond, and by only researching one city we lose sight of both the regional effects and local effects in other areas. By conducting ethnography in Plaquemines, insight can be given to the experience of this crisis in a rural setting with a very different cultural context to its urban neighbour to the north. Additionally, the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is a very recent catastrophe, and the majority of published material with a focus on the experience of the people living in the region has been authored by journalists for broadsheet newspapers. By using an anthropological perspective it is possible to look at the deeper processes at work with regard to this oil spill and examine it within the cultural context of the region and the historical context of Hurricane Katrina.

Secondly, anthropology as a discipline has often neglected the importance of the will in relation to the experience of daily life and in particular the experience of crisis and insecurity. While Cheryl Mattingly has sought to bridge this gap with her theories of narrative re-envisioning, her focus was on an individual woman overcoming a personal crisis embedded within a supportive community.

Plaquemines parish offers a very different context and thus an opportunity to develop this theory and extending its usefulness. By examining a region where almost every individual has undergone a personal crisis and is embedded in a community decimated by two major disasters, willing (and Mattingly's theories) can be studied in a fresh context which allows for richer insight and the development of theoretical models.

As a general conclusion southern Plaquemines parish has undergone two major crises over the past five years. First, hurricane Katrina devastated the community destroying houses and businesses as well as scattering and destroying the possessions of those who live there. The destruction of personal property was nearly absolute, and the recovery effort (already slower than many other parts of the Gulf Coast) has been hampered significantly by the second major crisis in the region; the BP oil spill. While the population of the area has dropped, it is far from abandoned, and most people from lower Plaquemines chose to return to the region to begin to re-build their lives. When faced with constant reminders of the destruction of 'the Storm' the residents here have established a process of moral re-orientation and narrative re-envisioning to overcome the despair and bitterness they might otherwise have faced. Such a process is not based around several discrete decisions but instead involves a long term process of gradual recovery. Certainly this process manifests certain discrete choices, the most important of these is the decision to return to the parish in the first place, but the overall process lies deeper than these measurable actions. Using the theory set out by Cheryl Mattingly to analyse both written accounts of the aftermath of 'the Storm' and my own ethnographic research, it can be seen that southern Plaquemines parish is engaging in narrative re-imagining at

a personal and community level in order to overcome the crises they have recently experienced.

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