

# Introduction

Sharon O'Dair, University of Alabama

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## Abstract

The Introduction to this special issue of *Borrowers and Lenders* describes its origins in a conference entitled "Shakespeareans in the Tempest: Lives and Afterlives of Katrina," sponsored by the Hudson Strode Program at the University of Alabama in September 2007.

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On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall as a strong Category 3 storm. Passing east of New Orleans, Katrina maintained hurricane strength almost until it reached Meridian, Mississippi, some 175 miles inland. Katrina was the costliest hurricane in U.S. history, as well as the third deadliest, killing 1500 people. It was also the third most intense, with a pressure of 920 millibars at landfall. The storm's surge — reportedly the most extensive and the highest in U.S. history — flattened a series of coastal towns in Mississippi, as well as several in Alabama, and led to fifty-three levee breaches in the New Orleans metro area, including large breaches in the city's Industrial and 17th Street Canals, which left eighty percent of the city flooded.

Tuscaloosa, Alabama, where I live, is ninety miles northeast of Meridian, Mississippi. In Tuscaloosa, the storm produced damaging winds and heavy rain; at my house we lost power early on the evening of August 29 and didn't regain it until September 1, by which time I was in England; like Susannah Monta, one of the contributors to this cluster of essays, I had a conference to attend in the United Kingdom. When I awoke on August 30, I found our neighborhood a mess. Old oak trees had tumbled onto houses, crushing many; streets were impassable; electric wires were tangled seemingly everywhere. Three hundred miles from New Orleans and two hundred and fifty from the Mississippi gulf coast, we had to dig out. I saw my first video of — and really, heard my first news about — the devastation and chaos in New Orleans on the evening of the 31st at the Atlanta airport, as I was waiting to board a flight to Gatwick. You may know the bar and grill there, located around the corner from the duty-free in Terminal E; it is now a Chili's or a TGIF, but at the time it was independent and had a bank of TV screens — perhaps as many as six — filling a large portion of the back wall. Most of the screens were tuned to CNN, and I felt my face become glued to them. Other travelers had seen these images before, had heard details about the

flooding in New Orleans, and only occasionally looked up from their burgers and beers, but for me the images and the voices were news.

Almost seven months after Katrina, I made my way, with a friend, to the city. I'd seen a hundred beach homes obliterated on Dauphin Island, Alabama and knew the hurricane had cut the island in two. I'd seen shrimp boats upended and homes and businesses gutted or crushed across the Mississippi Sound in Bayou La Batre, Alabama. But the scope and scale of the damage in New Orleans and in coastal Mississippi — crushed, gutted, bulldozed buildings — was difficult to process, much less to describe. Like several of the contributors to this cluster, I felt my words — words I know how to manipulate well enough to be put into print — to be inadequate descriptors for what I was taking in through my senses. Around Biloxi, driving west on Interstate 10, I noticed a series of huge billboards, which normally advertise the happenings at the casinos on the coast — buffets and loose slots, the O'Jays and Margaret Cho. They had been twisted into shapes resembling solar energy panels, directed at the sky. Things got weird near Slidell, and then, especially so, in New Orleans East, a modest suburb some miles east of downtown New Orleans. The place was deserted: malls were closed, the parking lots empty. Sam's Club gutted. Apartment complexes and suburban housing developments, all abandoned, with units or homes slightly crushed or leaning precariously in an awkward direction. Some roofs, inexplicably, appeared to have been struck by an enormous fist, leaving a jagged hole and us wondering how this could have happened. One apartment complex, adjacent to the freeway, sported an advertising banner that said, "Move in today! Almost perfect living."

Mile after mile of this, just from the freeway. As we approached the city, we could see from above blue tarps on the roofs of the houses below — far too many blue tarps, although it was impossible to gauge a percentage. Early for check-in at our hotel, we went directly to the Lakeview district, a severely flooded upper-middle class neighborhood. On the ground, so to speak, the same vista in New Orleans as in the suburbs: strip malls empty, businesses abandoned, and then block after block after block, mile after mile after mile of homes in the same state. At every corner, mass-produced and hand-lettered signs offered construction service: roofing, gutting, plumbing, bulldozing. But no traffic, comparatively speaking. Streets had been scraped like a glacier by bulldozers and showed only bits of stuff — a marble here, mardi gras beads there, a safety pin, a doll's head. But then, too, on the curb, lots of stuff, household stuff, from the gutted houses, piled up and waiting to be taken away. One house in Lakeview, gutted, retained only its chandelier. From the not-yet-gutted houses bulged chairs, sofas, tables, and mattresses. These houses jumbled into view, their angles all off — floors buckled up, ceilings toppled low.

In the impoverished Lower Ninth Ward were different, but comparable sights. Neighborhood groups posted signs, too, including ones announcing "we're coming back" or "we're staying," but these were overwhelmed in number by ones asking where Bell South was or demanding that the city "save our neighborhood . . . no bulldozing." More ominously, someone wished to find footage of the nearby canal being purposefully breached. In Lakeview, streets had been scraped and much of the large debris removed — trees off of houses and refrigerators and sofas out of them, cars off the streets — but in the Lower Ninth, crushed houses remained on the ground, massive trees lay on the houses they had cut in two, and cars were everywhere, some crushed, some embedded in houses, some on concrete blocks with their tires removed. Debris also was everywhere. Construction crews worked here, too, including earnest students on spring break, breaking the silence, but unlike in Lakeview, other sounds broke it, too — spooky sounds of doors creaking in the wind or sheet metal warbling. Absurdly, a cock crowed. The sounds took one by surprise, an aural reminder of the ghostliness one saw all around.

We had heard from others that in the French Quarter, the Central Business District, and the Garden District, life was almost normal. With this judgment, I could not concur. I could drive in the Quarter — easily! Restoration, it is true, had moved more quickly in the Quarter and in the Garden District than in Lakeview or the Lower Ninth, so that along with the dust and dirt, one saw in these areas startlingly bright, newly painted cottages, hotels, and shops. Along Bourbon Street, which was nearly empty, a few people gamely kept up the scene, trying to seem drunk and happy. The Ritz-Carlton, the Fairmont Hotel, Brennan's, Mr. B's, and Le Madeleine all were closed. The Fairmont, site of the 2004 meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America, never reopened. Bacco, one restaurant in the Brennan's group that was open, advertised a "spring special" of three appetizers and one glass of wine for twenty-five bucks. And, "by popular demand," a return of the Katrina special: three glasses of wine and one appetizer for twenty-five bucks.

Easy to see why the latter would be popular: people were stressed, depressed, maybe even a bit mad. Shopkeepers on Royal stood around and chatted it up with each other, since few customers wandered by. Those who did, like us, found the staff to be nice but also desperate — that you'd buy something, anything, or perhaps just talk to them. At the same time, they were bossy and impatient. One woman, from whom we bought T-shirts, contradicted herself in the time she processed our purchases, babbling first that "I've got to get out of here; it's crazy living here" and then that "there's nowhere else like New Orleans." Another confided that "it's awful now; it was awful before Katrina." For us, encounters were awkward; Katrina was everywhere on these people's minds, and in their conversations, but low, low, low . . . quiet.

Later that summer, I ran into Catherine Loomis at a conference. Displaced from her tenured position at the University of New Orleans, Loomis was about to begin a two-year stint as a visiting professor at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. We chatted, wine glasses in hand, and I told her how stunned I was by what I'd seen that spring in New Orleans. She smiled, nodded knowingly, and offered some bits of the story that she would later tell at "Shakespeareans in the Tempest: Lives and Afterlives of Katrina," the symposium held in September 2007 at the University of Alabama and sponsored by the Hudson Strode Program in Renaissance Studies. After returning from the conference, I prepared for classes to begin, and as the first anniversary of Katrina's landfall approached, Catherine's story — her knowledge of the event — surfaced again and again in my mind. I began to wonder what other Shakespeareans experienced in Katrina's wake, and how those experiences affected their professional lives, their sense of themselves as researchers or pedagogues. I thought about putting together a symposium on the topic, but I wondered, too, about the propriety of such a gathering: would my displaced or otherwise "battle weary" colleagues find such a proposal offensive on the face of it? As it turned out, only one of the displaced colleagues I located refused to participate; he had lost everything in the flood, and some of the symposium participants hypothesized that the events of August 2005 were still too fresh to analyze. But maybe the events were too fresh for anyone, and I worried that the presentations might be too personal, or worse still, only personal. I worried, too, and mostly, that the papers would unrelentingly cast Shakespeare as a redeemer, would offer versions of the conversion narrative so familiar to us in stories of how Shakespeare works wonders in prisons or inner city high schools. My worries were unnecessary: as readers will discover, the essays are personal, even emotional at times, but they also are very much academic, bringing to light four significant intellectual problems that concern us all, including the value of Shakespeare, or art, as redeemer.

First is the status of historical evidence: What counts as evidence? Does witnessing? Do photographs? Does narrative? Whose narrative? Are narratives of persons inside the event more compelling than those of persons outside? What counts as data? Can we trust the data given to us by people on the street? By reporters? By government officials? Can familiar or typical research tools access this event, since so much is still unknown — and perhaps unknowable — about it?

Second are the limits of narrative: How does one process raw experience into narrative? This was my problem, too, in trying to describe what I had seen in New Orleans in the spring of 2006, a version of which I have incorporated into this introduction. And when one finishes a narrative, has one implied a closure unjustifiable in face of the facts? What happens when language fails, either literally or figuratively?

Third is the value of art: Faced with the collapse of structure and order, is art valuable or irrelevant? Is art a way to recapture order? Perhaps. Clare Moncrief, to whom we are grateful for the images you see throughout the cluster, reveals that in the aftermath, work itself made the difference — not the content of that work, just getting up and doing something every day. For students at LSU (Louisiana State University), similarly, the classroom became a refuge, a place where order might be obtained or rebuilt. That was its value, according to Malcolm Richardson, not what was being studied in that space. Further, does it trivialize Katrina to read the storm and its aftermath through, say, the work of writers who have been dead for hundreds of years? As Susannah Monta wonders in her contribution to this cluster, does reading Katrina through Shakespeare quite literally render the phenomenon academic?

Fourth is the value of professional identity: one of our contributors found that his expertise was useless on the LSU campus in the immediate aftermath of the storm. Several of our contributors acknowledged that writing about their experience of Katrina pushed them out of their professional comfort zones, in which research, analysis, and logic reign. But so, too, and in vastly more significant ways, did the experience of Katrina itself, and Richelle Munkoff's crisis of faith in her professional identity is recounted in smaller ways in almost all of the essays.

The papers that follow reveal a picture of Katrina's effects that moves outward in time and space from the event. Framing these examples of personal narrative and personal criticism are scholarly essays by William Boelhower and Oliver Hennessey. Boelhower's "Owning the Weather: Reading *The Tempest* after Hurricane Katrina" sets the stage nicely for the essays to follow by imagining Prospero as an eco-terrorist, "a clandestine magician-climatologist who, if we stop to think of it, has totally militarized the island's ecosystem." Prospero isn't interested in the island's physical beauties; he employs "various climatic elements" of it "as ecological weapons to further his private plans." Boelhower acknowledges that "the idea of casting Prospero as a terrorist may seem like a wild charge," but also reminds us that "when and where we engage with a work of art is always crucial to our interpretation of it." Reading *The Tempest* post-Katrina and from the perspective of those living in southern Louisiana illuminates the play's meaning in new ways: "if Prospero deserves the label of terrorist for the way in which he manipulates the island's ecosystem throughout the play simply to cow his adversaries, it is because of the very nature of terrorism as we have come to know it in our time."

Catherine Loomis offers a strong narrative about her experience during and in the days following the storm. Loomis stayed in the city and found herself stranded. After six days, she was able that night to signal with a flashlight a Coast Guard helicopter, whose crew rescued her as looters moved up her street. By the time Loomis was rescued, her colleague at Tulane and the

artistic director of Tulane's Shakespeare Theater, Clare Moncrief, was in Lafayette, Louisiana, beginning to realize that rather than a week or so, her family's evacuation was going to last months. She worried that the playing spaces, as well as the financial and archival records of the theater company, might well be lost permanently and that reassembling the acting company itself might be impossible. Also by the time Loomis was rescued, Susannah Monta was boarding a plane, despite serious misgivings, for Henry VIII's luxurious palace of Hampton Court to offer an invited response to a keynote address on Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, a play whose subtitle is the improbably appropriate "All is True." Perhaps because of this conjunction, she writes, "the play gave me language that began to shape my perceptions of the hurricane and its aftermath. I had to process the hurricane through and with the play; my schedule demanded it, my training determined it." But the play, the training, and being in the U.K. led Monta to recognize in a new way the problem of perspective on major historical events, the distorting violence that arises from shaping history out of conflicting memories.

Malcolm Richardson and Richelle Munkhoff take the experience of Katrina into the months that followed and in Munkhoff's case, into the years that followed. Richardson documents teaching the sophomore British Literature survey at LSU in the fall semester of 2005, a pedagogical experience like no other in his distinguished career, since so much on campus was topsy-turvy. With thousands of refugees in town, and many of them the parents of students on campus, Richardson's students found that "roles suddenly shifted. With befuddled parents living in hotels and apartments in god-knows-where, the students suddenly became the stable family members, going off to class and continuing their part-time jobs at the pizza joint or Psychology Department." Baton Rouge itself felt schizophrenic: "Half the people in town seem suspended in time, the other half frantic and dashing around." Munkhoff offers a chronicle and analysis of Katrina that focuses on recovery and on what still needs to be recovered, for, indeed, the "aftermath" has a long reach, both temporally and spatially. This experience — of being severed from order, from what structures one's life — is neither logical nor linear. One does not endure or make sense of it in a neat pattern, with a beginning, middle, and end, which is part of what makes the experience so discomfiting to the professional academic.

This point — articulating the experience of being severed from order and structure, and then, of ever so slowly reestablishing both — is what all of the essays aim to articulate, including Hennessey's "A Serious Kind of Laughter: Shakespeare's Grief and Mardi Gras 2006," which closes this cluster on Hurricane Katrina. Like Boelhower's, Hennessey's essay demonstrates that readings emerge from a particular place and time, even from a particular traumatic event. Hennessey begins his essay by suggesting that in the aftermath of the hurricane, the function of Mardi Gras in New

Orleans was to restore order, assert continuity, offer a "balm for the city's fractured collective identity [and] solace for its grieving citizens." Mardi Gras 2006 reveals that "collective festive play may also constitute ritualized performances of grief that appear grossly incongruent with contemporary bourgeois norms." From this insight, usually neglected by critics who see in carnival a binary between order and disorder, Hennessey offers a compelling reading of Shakespeare's most popular play: *I Henry IV*. Noting that Shakespeare might well have been writing the play in the aftermath of his own personal trauma, the death of his son, Hennessey asks, "is it too much of a stretch to see in *I Henry IV* a jazz funeral for Hamnet?" An expatiation of grief in carnivalistic excess and parody?

I have returned to New Orleans many times since my first post-Katrina visit in the spring of 2006, always enjoying this wonderful and unique American city and doing my best to contribute to the local economy. But always I include a short drive through Lakeview or, more usually, the Lower Ninth Ward, often on my way out of town. It is an odd commitment, really, since I do and can do little about what I see or don't see while I am there. But this sort of witnessing is, I think, an attempt to keep myself from reducing Katrina to a slogan, as has happened, apparently, to many in the country. For many, Katrina no longer signifies billions of dollars lost, and hundreds of thousands of people displaced from their homes and livelihoods. Rather Katrina now signals the moment, whenever it arrives, that crystallizes for the public that, as Richardson puts it in his essay, we are "dealing with people who are not quite up to the job assigned them by virtue of their positions." A "Katrina moment" signals a given politician's weakness, ineptitude, or failure to understand the popular will; it is a moment a politician hopes to avoid. Counteracting the reductive flow of the public imaginary doubtless is as futile as counteracting the flow of water through broken levees, but this cluster of essays is offered as an attempt to do just that. We hope you will enjoy them, think about the experiences and insights offered by them, and engage in your own effort of witnessing and remembrance.

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