

The Waters: The Aftermath of Many Hurricanes

written by Guest Contributor | February 27, 2020



[Featured Image: Lonnie Holley Creating Sculpture titled *The Aftermath of Many Hurricanes*, photo by Reagan Petty, Duke Center for Documentary Studies, September 12, 2019]

On a Tuesday morning, I sat with artist Lonnie Holley on a low brick wall in the middle of UNC's campus. We had an hour together that morning, and it felt like we were on borrowed time. In three days, Hurricane Florence would strike the coast of North Carolina, just a two-hour shot to the East from where we sat. Chapel Hill was expecting floods, and if the weather lived up to our expectations, this would cut Holley's stay short. That Tuesday was sunny, but the impending storm loomed over our conversations. Holley told me that was kept awake the night before by news reports that estimated the damage that would occur on the coastline. It seemed apocalyptic. As we sat on the brick wall, students passed by, but Holley's pre-occupation with the imminent disaster was clear. He encouraged me to imagine the effects of water on the coast, his eyes seemingly focused on a distant vision. Think about the lower level of the coastline that is going to be affected with the nine-foot surge, on top of the feet or inches of water that have already been coming in. That means new floods." The brick wall where we sat was on the edge of an enclosure filled with mulch and plants. "That means things from that edge of this containment are now going to be washed completely out of their container, and they're going to end up all the way over to that wall," he said with a gesture that swept from one side of the enclosure to the other.

Lonnie Holley was familiar with the effects that water can have on materials. Holley and his longtime manager, Matt Arnett, told me a story about their visit to the shore of Dead Horse Bay, a body of water that lies between the Gerritsen Inlet and the Rockaway Inlet in Brooklyn. This site held a sickening mixture of the city's decades-old waste and the remains of horse carcasses from a former rendering plant. Holley described the grotesque scene created by the movement of the water. "It looked rough. It looked like all of this garbage and trash had been buried, and now the water had washed in and washed out, washed in and washed out..." This process of uncovering, washing

away and washing up, left what Matt called the daily “new offerings of stuff.” *Stuff* is Lonnie Holley’s bread and butter, his *raison d’être*. For Lonnie Holley, *stuff* is much more than the building blocks of his sculptural assemblages. It is the impetus for stories. It signifies transformation and restoration. For Holley, it even represents his personal autobiography. Which is why Dead Horse Bay was a revelatory place for Holley, and like our Tuesday morning meeting, the coming waters created a countdown. On the shore, there were horse bones, glass bottles, leather shoe parts, a wealth of materials, but Holley and Matt were at the mercy of the tides. He described Holley’s desperation as he scrambled to collect trash, garbage, and debris before the tidewater engulfed the trove. Matt compared his urgency to “a five-year old on Christmas morning.” The water was threatening his enterprise, but the accumulation of materials owed its existence to that same water. Unable to leave in time to beat the tide, the pair ended up trudging through knee-high waters back to the other side of the shore, the water carrying garbage and animal remains, and Lonnie Holley carrying his treasures.

On Wednesday, campus operations were suspended mid-day, giving students time to evacuate before the floodwaters made their way in. I arranged to visit a friend in Johnson City, Tennessee, about 200 miles to the west, where Florence would have little effect on the weather. I drove toward the mountains as rain started to dot my windshield. I thought about the coastal residents, urgently collecting their most valuable things before the water washed them away, trying to beat the clock. I imagined the stuff left behind, floating on the top of the water or being engulfed by the surge, shoes, bottles, umbrellas, pizza boxes. I envisioned the water upending old roots, sweeping away new houses, and leaving mountains of debris in the aftermath. This mixture of old things uncovered and new things destroyed would tell the unspeakable story. This stuff would be the evidence of those September waters.



Reagan Petty is a freelance writer from Raleigh, NC. She received her MA in Folklore from UNC-Chapel Hill, where she worked with Southern artists. Her writing has been presented at the American Folklore Society National Meeting and the Southeastern Conference in Aesthetics and has been published in the Concordia Undergraduate Journal of Art History.