

Brief Encounters with the Taos Institute

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This month we welcome Duane Bidwell, a member of the Taos Institute Board of Directors, as he reflects on ...

Bodies, Floods, and Alternative Stories



By Duane Bidwell

As I write, words and images from Houston saturate my social-media feed. They join similar reports (and pleas) from Chennai, Freetown, Mumbai and other cities devastated by floods. And now, we see how hurricane Irma has just barreled through the Caribbean islands and Florida. Everywhere water reshapes the world.

To our knowledge, Taos colleagues and friends in the affected areas remain safe. They are beginning to see the effects of the floods ripple through their social and professional networks, families, psyches, and bodies.

In the midst of these unfolding disasters—rising water, flooded streets, never-ending rain—how can social construction be useful?

It's not a question I can or should answer as an outsider to these events. But I begin to glimpse possibilities when I describe what I see.

I see people in Houston and elsewhere using social media to challenge totalizing stories of death and disaster, material loss and emerging risks. They are using words and photographs (and strong wifi) to tell their own stories, and in the process of constructing an alternative account of the floods and their primary effect on people: Neighbor helping neighbor. Strangers using their boats to bring people to safety. Friends housing evacuated friends in a kind of perpetual summer-camp ethos.

Many of these accounts emphasize the irrelevance of race, class, political party, sexual orientation, and national origin in the shared experience of the deadly power of water.

One of the most eloquent contributors to this emerging story is Lacey M. Johnson, an English professor at Rice University in Houston who evacuated when her neighborhood was threatened by the controlled release of flood waters to benefit other parts of the city. In a recent Facebook post, Lacey writes:

Water destroys what it touches: carves canyons out of deserts, swallows people, ice, whole cities and continents. It also destroys the trivial things we spend our lives worshipping: our houses, our streets, our pride, our temples to bigotry and greed. I have heard now a story of a man who had escaped his flooding neighborhood, only to row back in his kayak to save one more person or one more thing, and capsized in the current. He was missing all night and in the morning they found him holding on to a tree. A teenager was swept away in the current of

the bayou and caught the grate of a bridge and held on there for dear life until rescuers found her in the morning. An infant was taken from her mother by the current and the current offered that brand new life back to the churning sea.

But water also washes, gives life, makes new. The water has destroyed this city — there's no two ways about it — but the outpouring of love I have witnessed here among neighbors and strangers and coming to us from all over the world, is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.

These emerging stories emphasize the coordination of bodies, resources, and values to preserve life, witness pain, share humor, and work diligently to ensure no one faces the floods—or the recovery—in isolation. There is a concentrated effort—unplanned, spontaneous, and perhaps unintentional—to embody interrelationship. Many photographs I see capture a moment of connection—one hand reaching another, one body shielding and comforting someone.

I'm struck by how these stories emphasize physicality, focusing on “what bodies do” and “what bodies experience” in the midst of tragedy. They describe behaviors; privilege the language of touch, taste, smell, hearing, and vision; and attend to the effects of interaction.

Too often, social constructionist thought and practice privileges language. This makes sense; language is a primary social tool. But it's only one way of connecting to each other and creating shared meaning.

Reflecting on these alternative, embodied stories from Houston and elsewhere, I start to wonder: Do we attend adequately to the embodied ways that meaning is constructed prior to being voiced through words? Experience—of our bodies, through our bodies, of other bodies—remains central to social construction. It precedes and shapes language, and it's shaped by language as well.

The flood waters remind me of that, reshaping the landscape of construction from where I stand.