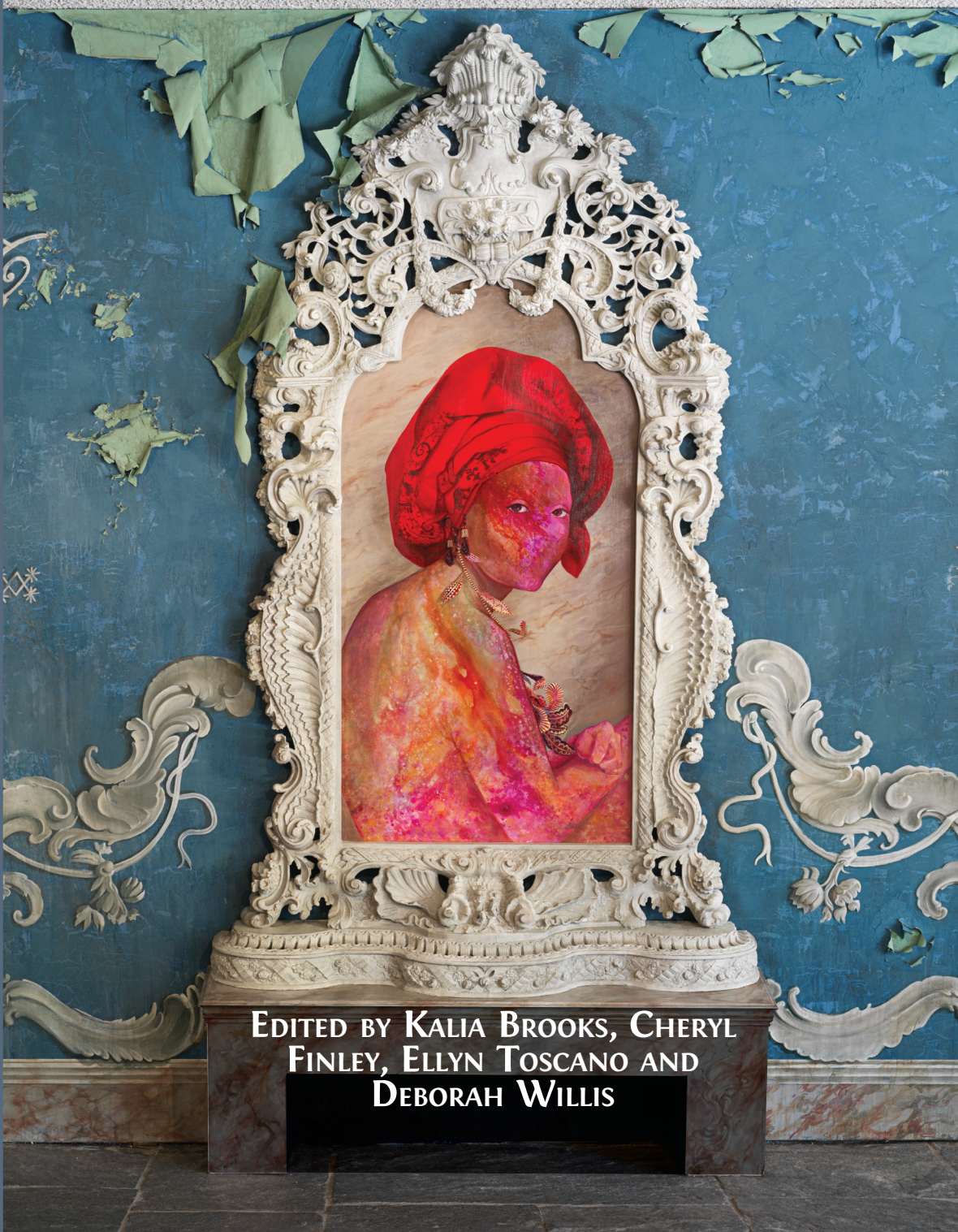
WOMEN AND MIGRATION(S) II



EDITED BY KALIA BROOKS, CHERYL FINLEY, ELLYN TOSCANO AND DEBORAH WILLIS

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17. Radically Sustained Care

Chandra McCormick's Katrina Displacement as a Mother and an Artist

Hannah Ryan

An idea weaves through the Women and Migration series—a state of being, a component of identity—much as it weaves through our lives, minds, memories, bodies, and souls: motherhood. How does motherhood define one's experience of migration and its permutations? Based on dialogues with New Orleans photographer Chandra McCormick, this essay explores how motherhood informed every stage of her displacement during Hurricane Katrina and its wretched aftermath.[1]

In August of 2005, Katrina struck the Gulf Coast and became one of the worst disasters in the history of the United States. The Mississippi Gulf Outlet, a channel constructed to support the growing shipping industry, took the place of and ruined the wetlands that protected the city, allowing for a massive storm surge, funneling the water straight in, rather than dissipating it, as the wetlands would have done. The Army Corps of Engineers acknowledged that the levees would not protect the city from storms higher than Category 2, but took no action. Further, the areas most vulnerable were those occupied by African American communities, like the Lower Ninth Ward. While the hurricane caused wind damage and minor water

1 This material is derived from an interview between the author and Chandra McCormick on 29 July 2020.

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damage in the city, within a day the levees failed and the city flooded, causing unthinkable devastation. Today scholars agree that Katrina was *not* simply a natural disaster, but a catastrophe wrought by the exploitation of natural resources, corruption, neglect, and systemic racism. Over 2,000 people died, 700 were considered missing, and over one million were displaced from their homes, many never to return.[2] These overlapping losses irrevocably altered one of the world's most unique cities, one with a remarkable retention of African cultural traditions. The city, and the rural spaces surrounding it, have unwaveringly remained McCormick's subjects through it all.

In 1978, nineteen-year-old McCormick sought out twenty-two-year-old photographer and fellow Ninth Ward resident Keith Calhoun to take her portrait. She expressed such sincere interest in the process that he invited her to learn more in the darkroom. Soon she was his mentee, then assistant, and by 1980, she was a photojournalist. They married, had two sons, and have spent the last forty-three years as partners in life and work. Together, they have steadfastly documented Black life in the Lower Ninth Ward, generating an incredibly vast and important body of work. Deborah Willis has recently written, "The couple's photographs are not passive—they are active. They animate and record. They enlarge and make visible life in this city. They attest to notions of public consciousness [...] Love and respect of community motivate them to tell visual stories about their beloved birthplace."[3]

Dedicated to social justice, they have focused on key themes of labor, agricultural work, the prison industrial complex, Black familial joy, the rich culture and music of their city, and most recently, protests against police brutality and the many ways the COVID-19 pandemic is again changing the city, once again disproportionately impacting its Black residents. They are almost always addressed and discussed as a duo, one inextricable from the other. But in the spirit of The Women and Migration Working Group, I take the opportunity here to center

2 Vincanne Adams, *Markets of Sorrow, Labors of Faith: New Orleans in the Wake of Katrina* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), pp. 22–24.

3 Deborah Willis, 'Foreword', in *Louisiana Medley: Photographs by Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick*, ed. by Kathryn E. Delmez (Nashville, TN: Frist Center for the Visual Arts, 2018), p. 8.

McCormick and her longstanding commitment to capturing moments of loving intimacy between mothers and children, interwoven with the story of her displacement.

Fig. 1 Keith Calhoun, *Abstract* (*Portrait of Chandra McCormick*), 1988 and 2010.

This is a portrait that Calhoun took of McCormick early in their partnership. The original negative, along with the vast majority of their lives' work, was damaged when the levees a few blocks from their home and studio failed, the second floor blown away and eight feet of water flooding the first. In a process I shall describe, in recent years McCormick and Calhoun have been mining this altered archive, reprinting images with eerily beautiful results.[4] In this case, the damage has resulted in jewel tones alighting the surface, while an extra layer of delicate patterns covers her dress, a dress that she loved because it belonged to her mother. Her steady gaze imbued with warm confidence, she touches her camera, which she believes is more powerful than any weapon.

4 These works are the focus of an exhibition I curated at St. Olaf College's Flaten Museum of Art in 2020, "We No Longer Consider Them Damaged: The Abstract Photographs of Chandra McCormick and Keith Calhoun." The exhibition can be viewed online here: https://wp.stolaf.edu/flaten/we-no-longer-consider-them-damaged/.

Fig. 2 Chandra McCormick, *Oaklawn Plantation, Franklin, Louisiana*, 1987.

Regardless of shooting location, McCormick finds mothers and children. When I commented on her lovingly intimate images of motherhood, McCormick replied, "I love to see the nurturing. There are families who are living in poverty, but that nurturing is always there." In this image, a young mother on the Oaklawn Plantation sits on the porch while four children cannot seem to get close enough to her.

Fig. 3 Chandra McCormick, *Untitled* (from *The Sugar Cane* series), 1987.

In this second image from *The Sugar Cane* series, a mother tends to two children, holding one and minding another with her eyes. Watching, paying attention—these actions are central to mothering. "I'm watching

you." "I see you." "Watch out." These are the words we use to assure our children we are paying attention to them.

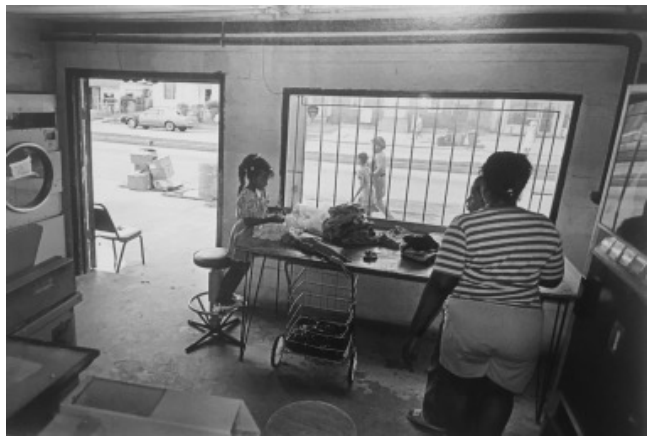

Fig. 4 Chandra McCormick, *Helping Mama Fold Clothes, Lower Ninth Ward*, 1992.

Back in the city, McCormick captures a little girl helping her mother fold clothes, the mother teaching and the daughter helping. In simple tasks, how do we pass down generational knowledge? This piece demonstrates McCormick's brilliant use of framing: the girl is framed by the dark trim, while another pairing of mother and daughter pass by on the sidewalk, framed by the window.

Fig. 5 Chandra McCormick, *Family, Uptown New Orleans*, 1984.

I asked McCormick how mothering is unique in her community. She reflected, "Well, at one time, lots of people were your mother. Miss Doreen next door. Miss Audrey across the street. Miss Maggie around the corner. Because parents allowed their children to be disciplined and monitored by others—it was different, and I guess that comes down to a level of respect."

When McCormick was eight years old she barely survived Hurricane Betsy, which struck New Orleans in 1965. She says, "It was really horrific, especially for me because I almost drowned, and [then] when Katrina was coming, my youngest son Malik was [almost] eight years old. And, so it was kind of like a reaction from me—it kind of felt the same."

As Katrina barreled into the Gulf, McCormick watched on as people from other low-lying wards were instructed to evacuate, and wondered why that wasn't the case in the Lower Ninth. She and Calhoun drove around and told their neighbors to leave, especially those who hadn't been acquainted with Betsy. While some said they planned to leave, others had decided to ride it out. She told them, "It doesn't look too good and y'all should get out of here because there is a lot of water that's going to come, a seventy-five-foot surge." She recalls, "Some stayed because they wanted to, but a lot stayed because they didn't have the means to get out."

McCormick steadies herself to share her journey.

> We planned to leave that Saturday morning and I was going to take my mom, our two kids, Keith and I, and my niece, who was going to school in New York and had come down to visit and got caught up in the hurricane. So we told her to follow us, and we all went to Texas at the last minute. I told my mom to pack up her insurance information, her medicine, five days of clothing, and I did the same for my kids. When I went to pick her up, my brother said, "I'm taking her with me." So I asked her if she wanted to go to Florida with my brother or to Texas with us, and she decided to go with him to Florida.
>
> So we left. It took us nineteen hours to get to Texas. On the road, it was so sad... because I saw people on bicycles trying to get out of town. And you know, the traffic was gridlock, so some people got out of their cabs and they were walking with their suitcases. At first I thought they were on their way to the airport, but every gas station was loaded with cars that were out of gas and the gas stations had run out as well.
>
> It was just crazy, so Keith said, "We gotta get out of this traffic, and we're going to take the river road." The authorities were trying to make

> everyone stay on the interstate but it was gridlocked. So Keith took a little cut and got back to the levee, and we just stepped on the gas and rode until some of them stepped out on the road and told us we had to go back on the interstate. But we did gain a lot of miles by doing that. It took us nineteen hours to get to Texas.

En route, McCormick called a young woman from their community darkroom to check on her. The woman reported that her mother had come to pick her up and had taken her back home to Houston. In surprise, McCormick said she was also heading to Houston and the young woman asked if they had anywhere to stay.

> I said, we don't know anyone in Houston. We're just going to go and see if we can find a place. She said, well my mom and dad live in Houston and they have a house. You can go [stay] there because they have a back house. I said, I have my family which is four and I have three other people. And she said it doesn't matter. Everybody come.

After a few days, the hosts connected with other friends who owned properties in Houston. They asked McCormick what she wanted for her family. She replied, "I want a house." Her family had never lived in an apartment, and her children needed space. The man told her that he and his wife were living alone in a five-bedroom house and invited them to move in.

> And we did. We stayed with Dave for about four weeks while I was looking for a place.

McCormick's maternal labor of research led them to a home in a subdivision in Spring, a suburb of Houston, where they remained for two and a half years.

She says, "We went to Spring because we were looking for the best school district for our kids. Spring is in North-West Houston. And most everybody else that I knew went to the East side." As people fled Katrina they went to resource centers to find housing, and frequently ended up in dilapidated apartment complexes, many rampant with mold. McCormick learned that she needed to watch out.

Where they gained better housing and education, they lost a sense of familial community. From Spring, she lamented, "We miss the people

the most, just the feeling of a neighborhood. It was a more close-knit community there. Here you have cars. In New Orleans, you had people."[5]

Suburban Houston paled in comparison to the vibrant life of the Lower Ninth Ward, where they enjoyed chatting with friends and family outside and strolling along the levee. McCormick missed the emphasis on culture, and that extended to her children's education. Their new school was under 15% Black and lacked enrichments they had worked hard to establish for their children. McCormick says, "We [had been] so active in school and [through] so many programs; we had so much going on, but when [we were displaced] I couldn't put all that back together." She explains sadly, "All the things we were trying to strive for and the programs he was in, all of that was diminished."

Fig. 6 Chandra McCormick, *Mother and Child in Houston Convention Center*, 2005.

They connected with family and friends exiled in Houston, visiting the George Brown Convention Center to take photographs and conduct interviews. Here, a displaced mother curls around her infant protectively in one of hundreds of beds in the convention center.

For five years, McCormick and Calhoun rebuilt their home and studio while she managed their younger son Malik's education, which was bungled by bureaucratic missteps, a lack of resources, the firing of

5 Allan Turner, "New Orleans Photographers Make New Start Here", *Houston Chronicle*, 27 December 2005, https://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/article/New-Orleans-photographers-make-new-start-here-1919290.php.

their certified teachers, and the influx of untrained educators through Teach for America. These inexperienced teachers were unfamiliar with the community and regularly called the police on students. Back in New Orleans she was free to work, while her mother and Keith's mother enjoyed spending time with their grandsons.

It was Malik, then a young child, who insisted that they keep the damaged negatives, saying *try freezing them*. And we have this son of artists to thank for the ensuing images, for the rescue of this critical archive that now has new life.

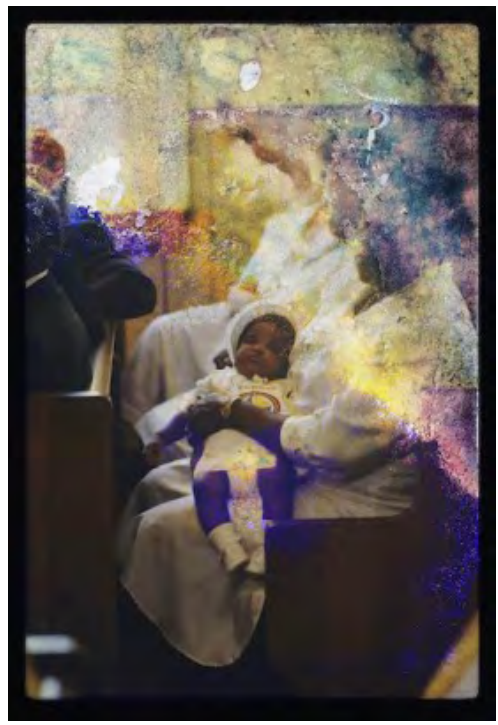

Fig. 7 Keith Calhoun, *Mother and Child*, 1988 and 2010.

Here, a mother tenderly cradles her snoozing child in church, the image itself cared for over time. Mold encroached across the picture plane, and froze just before it reached the vulnerable baby, as if this brilliant act of saving the image has saved the future itself. Dealing in tenderness can be an act of bold resistance; McCormick and Calhoun strategically capture scenes of love among Black parents and their children as a tool

to subvert dominant, pervasive stereotypes that simply do not reflect the relationships that surround them.

Fig. 8 Chandra McCormick, *Daydreaming in City Park*, 1989 and 2015.

Here, boys play in a wooded park, while the mother watches on, holding everything, as we do. "Chandra," I say, "you're taking unthinkable damage and making beautiful images, even this week. It seems like… radically sustained care. You keep caring for these images over and over again. How does that translate to your experience of motherhood, continuing to care and care?"

She calls to Malik, who is working on a project in her studio. She and I are talking on FaceTime. My mother watches my children downstairs.

She thinks a bit and says, "Yes, it does, because it's the same: you care for your family, and your things, and take care of them, that's the same loving care that I put into my work too. Because I wouldn't have it if I didn't. Early on, before the hurricane, we talked about preserving our work. We would archivally sleeve our work. Those sleeves are what saved that work. If they hadn't been in there everything would have been washed away." It was this early belief in themselves, that they were chronicling their community crucially from within and that they would amass a critical archive of Black life, that ultimately saved the work. How are foresight, self-assurance, and steadfast dedication central to care? How is paying attention central to love?

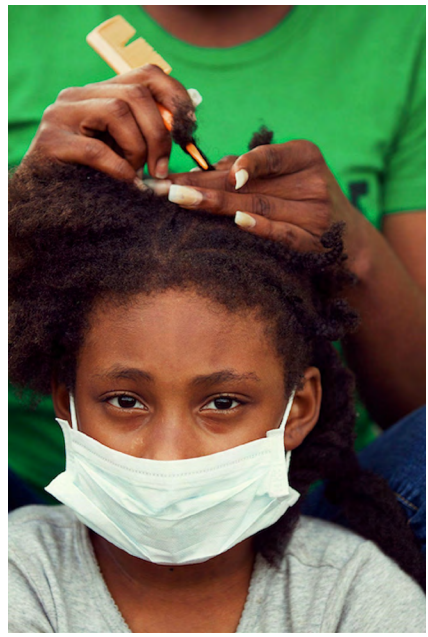

Fig. 9 Chandra McCormick, *Mother Combing Hair*, 2020.

McCormick and Calhoun have recently turned their lenses toward the changes wrought by the pandemic. Despite the city evolving again, she pays continued attention to the affective labor and love of mothering, the small but meaningful actions, the fleeting but intentional gazes, that amount to motherhood. When considered all together, McCormick's longstanding devotion to maternal affection signals radically sustained care, as an artist and a mother.

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