

ARK HIVE

Ark Hive is a broadly conceived, interrelational meditation on human and other-than-human social-cultural realities within place, focused on southern Louisiana, documented in the midst of spiraling ecological and social devastation. At once personal--a memoir, this book is also an incredibly open and inclusive matrix of interwoven contemporaneous and historical forces. In an email to me, Marthe stated that the C.D. Wright quote that serves as an epigraph was the impetus of *Ark Hive*: *However briefly I find myself in a strange place, I am intent on locating myself; where I came from at this point is portable; I carry it with me.* Marthe worked on the text and graphics that make up this book while living in Lafayette for eleven years with her family, “a period stretching from Hurricane Lily through most of Governor Bobby Jindal’s tenure as governor”--is how she expressed the timeline.

As if documented in an all-weather geological field notebook in plein air, within elemental concern and total ecological bearing, *Ark Hive* touches upon geologic and biospheric transformation as well as the social and cultural changes that occur simultaneously to a place, a home, a region: an ecosystem of living presences. “A piece of land is always a form of collectively living a territory, a form of inhabiting it, caring for it and protecting it as if the body itself were its extension.”¹ Marthe categorizes the book as a memoir of South Louisiana--the *of* and *about* that sustains and destabilizes the residents of this region including she and her family and the region itself, an integral point in the web of life. The nucleus of the book is Louisiana, a parcel of land and a brimming ecology that continues to carry a name demarcated by French colonial settlers who took possession of the lower Mississippi region, naming it after their sovereign, Louis XIV, King of France who reigned from 1643 to 1715. The text and graphics telescopes and focuses, bringing in wideranged and micro detail. Central to the narrative is an acknowledgement of the colonial-settler legacy of the decimation of Indigenous people and appropriation of their homelands. *Ark Hive* is as much a book about resilience as Louisiana continues to be home for Native Americans including the Akakapa, the Opelousas, the Caddo, the Natchitoches, the Chitimacha, the Choctaw, the Houma, the Natchez, the Taensa and Avoyel, and the Tunica, as well as the indigenous communities who were driven into Louisiana after the Europeans arrived including the Alabama, the Biloxi, the Konsati and Coushatta, and the Ofo. With rebellious anti-imperial energy that speaks truth to power, Marthe traces the history of slaves and slavers, connecting the racist present to the racist past, placing white supremacy under scrutiny in all its guises. Louisiana, until 2018, held the dubious distinction of incarcerating more people than any other state (in the country that holds the record for imprisoning more of its population than any other nation on earth), racial disparity running rampant, blatant racial targeting² in for-profit prisons. *Ark Hive* is a record of the potent legacy of freedom fighters--civil rights activists past and present whose contributions have changed the

¹ Liasons, *In The Name of The People*, p. 47

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<http://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/color-of-justice-racial-and-ethnic-disparity-in-state-prisons/#III.The.Scale.of.Disparity>

way national and community life is imagined. Black Lives Matter activist Bree Newsome's courageous act of taking down a Confederate flag from the South Carolina statehouse grounds is an impetus for the removal of all Confederate monuments in New Orleans.

Historical and real-time human affairs are everpresently situated within ecological reality: flora, fauna, mineral, water, earth, air. The Mississippi courses through, as do the many waterways of the region. Spillover, run-off, absorption; pathways and circulatory routes within ecosystem, economic zone and the cultural imagination.

“palimpsestic language and history--

damp, bird-foot, opossum, batture

a translation, articulating experience

one into an(other)

placeMound

Builders, slavers, French

colony the wet

whispers its own arguments

over my skin, irrefutable

Topos the relation between

local particulars and

human inhabitants

a world defined by language

Teche Arcady Natchez

Pontchartrain Tangipahoa

its surfaces collaborate

hybrid, synthetic³

The title of this epic work is composed of two words that reverberate when placed side by side: ark and hive. Together they sound out 'archive'. Historically, archives are highly safeguarded collections of documents deemed by a power elite to be of value and essential in the continuance and furtherance of their dominance and myths of superiority. Marthe performs a reckoning with archive. She opens up points in the archive that have systematically diminished

³ ARK HIVE, p. 30.

and or erased the importance and impact of gender, race and class as well as ecological presence. Indigenous living history takes precedence over colonial mythmaking and obfuscation. With a hive mind, she accumulated and assembled experiential data from diversified sources that give rise to a holism. Complex multiplicity is consequential. References tangle, binding together the missing importance of persons occluded from the record. The ark, a floating vessel, is the vehicle that echoes the mobility of the facts of persons' lives held down, misidentified and mistaken. The hive is her metaphor for communal responsiveness and interaction. We hear the polyphonous effect of myriad voicings. Life proliferates within the *Ark Hive*. Marthe, the poet, citizen, activist (she was a passionate feminist allied with LGBTQ rights and advocate for environmental and racial justice) is always among others, always keenly focused on the concerns and demands that make justice possible. "Voices of the morning/how long it takes the easy dispensation of the kitchen/blue boat bayou"⁴

Contemplating the role of the female archivist steering the ark through and eventually out of his-story is so satisfying. It seems the case that the catastrophe that is capitalism, that has been the reason for unending war and exploitation and has excited forth global climate change is the accelerant that demolishes history--its history of ownership. The narcissism of history (its stories and glorifications of profiteering, exploitation and appropriation) is its own worst enemy. Marthe, with mature knowledge of earthly vulnerability, guided her senses through stages of demise and at every turn, found ways to recuperate meaning, validity and a generosity of connectivity through one-on-one and communal action. A major paradigm shift is initiated just by the fact that *Ark Hive* is an emphatically inclusive document. She has included the rich floral community within the body of this work, thus bringing the equity of attention to the living, breathing sentience of 80 percent of the Earth's biomass: plants.⁵ Plants have existed at the bottom of a psychic hierarchy. Their instrumentalization has systematically backgrounded plants as passive and inert beings not worthy of consideration or care. It is a blatant assertion, and still rings true, that flora continues to be gendered female, and therefore deemed less important on the hierarchy of life forms in Western cultures. Flora slips out of human consciousness and an especially major oversight takes place in the Genesis flood narrative when "God instructs Noah to collect specimens of living creatures, which will be able to repopulate the Earth once the flood has receded. In the context of this rescue job, however, plants are not designated as living beings. Therefore, not a single individual from the world's three hundred thousand flowering plant species is taken onto the ark."⁶ The ark is said to have been fabricated out of gopher wood, another name for cypress. The majority of Southern Louisiana's sprawling cypress swamps were clear cut nearly a century ago to make for burgeoning human development, and the practice of razing swamps of stands of cypress continues, their trunks ground down into wood chips, and other disposable products.

⁴ IBID, p. 124.

⁵ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/humans-make-110000th-earths-biomass-180969141/>

⁶ Matthew Hall, *Plants as People, A Philosophical Botany*, Suny Press, 2011, p. 59.

Marthe rectifies the ontological split that exists between plants, animals and humans in the Western, Judeo-Christian tradition. Plants are given major consideration in this work. Plants are understood as conscious, active, self-directed, sentient, communicative, interactive: able to act collectively and autonomously, have feelings, have familial connections, experience dying and death and also thriving. *Ark Hive* advocates for human-floral relationships that are ecologically appropriate, ethical and take into consideration the personhood of plants. *Ark Hive* abounds in plant presences dialogically storying the book. Plant intelligence is keen, “with thousands of meristems, a plant has potentially thousands of ‘brain units’”. It is proposed by advocates of plant neurobiology that plants integrate sensory information and make decisions based upon communications between a multiple of plant tissues such as the root, meristems, internal meristems, and the vascular tissues.”⁷

Ark Hive processes grief through the intertwined realms of the aesthetic, the ethical, and the political as they play out across bodies (human and non-human) in both mundane and extraordinary ways. Grieving passes through many stages as an active process of the acknowledgement of sorrow and loss. “Time eddies here, past, present, and future turning about one another in complicated whorls.” p. 138. Within the moving objects of attention that make these poems there is an expression of the continual shouldering of grief, and also a commitment to easing the grief of others.” Marthe experienced the 2010 Deepwater Horizon catastrophe while living in Louisiana. The Deepwater Horizon oil spill is recognized as the worst oil spill in U.S. history. “By the time the well was capped on July 15, 2010 (87 days later), an estimated 3.19 million barrels of oil had leaked into the Gulf. In the case of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, clean-up workers treated the oil with over 1.4 million gallons of various chemical dispersants.”⁸ For microscopic animals living in the Gulf, even worse than the toxic oil released during the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster may be the very oil dispersants used to clean it up, a new study finds.”⁹ Coursing throughout are other intersecting catastrophes and the disproportional effects they have on communities of color and those disenfranchised economically and for other reasons.

Documented are the shifting balances of an ecosystem in her vicinity experiencing ruination. Marthe understood the Deepwater Horizon event as a yet another disaster, compounding precarity, contingency, and crisis. These actualities are organized in a way that the micro informs the macro and vice versa, as do the geologic and historic past and the momentary present. Southern Louisiana signals what human engineered ecological collapse looks like in our present moment. The US has already been stripped of half of its wetlands since Europeans arrived and Louisiana, which accounts for a bulk of these losses, is on course to lose all of its wetland within two more centuries, according to the US Geological Survey¹⁰ “The southern coast of Louisiana in the United States is among the fastest-disappearing areas in the world.

⁷ Matthew Hall, *Plants as People, A Philosophical Botany*, Suny Press, 2011, p. 148.

⁸ <https://ocean.si.edu/conservation/pollution/gulf-oil-spill>

⁹ <https://www.mnn.com/earth-matters/wilderness-resources/stories/dispersant-makes-oil-52-times-more-toxic>

¹⁰ <https://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/la-wetlands/>

This has largely resulted from human mismanagement of the coast. At one time, the land was added to when spring floods from the Mississippi River added sediment and stimulated marsh growth; the land is now shrinking. There are multiple causes. Artificial levees block spring flood water that would bring fresh water and sediment to marshes. Swamps have been extensively logged, leaving canals and ditches that allow saline water to move inland. Canals dug for the oil and gas industry also allow storms to move sea water inland, where it damages swamps and marshes. Rising sea waters have exacerbated the problem. Some researchers estimate that the state is losing a land mass equivalent to 30 football fields every day.¹¹ The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration had to remap the nearby Plaquemines Parish and in doing so removed thirty one place names.¹² Dramatic and subtle changes are presently taking place. Tracing the trajectory of these changes involves diligence, a fearlessness to look at difficulty and a willingness to share the findings, however unsettling they may be.

Ark Hive offers textual contemplation that can be unraveled and parsed over a long duration. It beckons a unhurried focus and calibrated sensitivity toward shifting assemblages that open up an understanding of the complexity of ongoingness of sentient consciousness. Listening for silences, for the voices that have been silenced Reed represents the occlusions with variegated form and tone opening up for representation the meanings that that had been foreclosed. Innumerable voices proliferate their orientations, unspool the logics of the map and points of reference grow into another. Responsive to the range of contingencies that terrestrial life involves this text is a breathing chronicle of interwoven tangibility--relevancy. Living with edges and uncertainty Marthe demonstrates becoming fluid to find open possibility, extending generously in all ways human animals are capable of through acts of language and experientially as citizen-activist-teacher-lover-mother-friend-witness.

¹¹ <https://geog.ucsb.edu/louisianas-coastal-landmarks-are-being-wiped-off-the-map/#>

¹² Elizabeth Rush, *Rising: Dispatches From the New American Shore*, Milkweed Editions, 2018, p. 28