A Re-Vision of the Record

The Demands of Reading Josh Neufeld's A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge

—Anthony Dyer Hoefer

The images coming out after Hurricane Katrina now haunt southern, U.S. and even global visual cultural, altering collective memories and creating new, or at least newly visible, open wounds.... What do we want from pictures of the city, its people and places? What do these pictures "want" from us?

—Katherine R. Henninger, Ordering the Facade

No other artform gives so much to its audience while asking so much from them as well.

—Scott McCloud, Understanding Comics

Near the end of the graphic novel A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge, the author/artist Josh Neufeld recreates an image that was seared into the public consciousness in the fall of 2005: an overhead shot that approximates the vantage point of a cable news helicopter looking down on a crowd of thousands gathered at the doors of New Orleans's Ernest L. Morial Convention Center. This image, like so many that have come to speak for the event, overwhelms its viewer with its sheer scope: nothing in it is easily quantifiable, and so the viewer can only understand the size of the crowd as "many," just as they can only know that the suffering is great, and the chaos, insurmountable. The image tells nothing of a particular event: gone are its individual textures, and the individual identities and stories of the people in that crowd have been effaced.

However, A.D. refuses to submit to either the sort of generalization offered by the perspective this image recreates or to its inverse, the easy, coherent narratives of tragedy or triumph—both of which dominated news coverage of the storm and subsequent flood. Neufeld's image evokes the August heat
by using only red and gold tones. Amid this scheme, a single un-colored figure stands out in the crowd: Denise, described in the cover text as a “Sixth-generation New Orleanian poet, singer, and kickboxer with a master’s degree in guidance and counseling,” and one of six people whose experiences are chronicled in A.D. At once recalling both news coverage of the flood and the Where’s Waldo? series, Neufeld confronts his audience with the delicate, difficult interprettive work the aftermath of Katrina requires. Quickly, the perspective swoops from that aerial vantage point down into the crowd, to provide a sense of its claustrophobia; that image is promptly juxtaposed with a close-up of Denise—cramped into a mass of thousands of others, yet overwhelmed by a sense of isolation and abandonment. Here, Neufeld seeks out an appropriate balance between the particular and the general: the sheer scope of the suffering and destruction threatens to overwhelm and even betray the particular experiences of individuals. Conversely, the pathos of an individual witness’s testimony might reduce the magnitude of the event, remove it from its historical context, or diminish the political momentum necessary for action.

Based on interviews Neufeld conducted with six New Orleanians, A.D. is an episodic oral history of the storm, from evacuation to flood to exile; the online publication SMITH Magazine presented it in regular installments between January 2007 and August 2008; a year later—in time for the fourth anniversary of Katrina’s landfall—Pantheon Books released an expanded edition of A.D. The comic does not bring to the traumatic experiences of its subjects the same sort of aesthetic innovation of Art Speigelman’s Maus and In the Shadow of No Towers; instead, it adopts an unadorned, relatively conventional aesthetic that mimics the simplicity of the oral history form. Nonetheless, A.D. demands much of its readers—if not in form, then in the ethics of reading. Neufeld’s multimedia, multimodal graphic oral history of the Great Deluge

- challenges the visual record of a highly mediated event, moving between the iconic and general to the unfamiliar and particular;
- challenges claims to objective representation of reality/experience of trauma and suffering on this scale;
- and, through the inclusion of hyperlinks, discussion threads, and podcasted interviews with its subjects, encourages the audience to move out from the text to begin the difficult work of making some meaning from the event.
Katherine Henninger asks, “what do” photographs of post-Katrina New Orleans “want’ from us?” The answer is, *interpretation*. I contend that Neufeld foregrounds this *want* of interpretation—that it seeks to resolve the ethical contradiction between the impulse to bear witness to these events and the problems of representing the suffering of others by prompting the audience to take on the responsibility of making meaning from that suffering and, in its online form, provides opportunities to engage the world beyond the text.

The result is a work with a profound pedagogical impulse, which nonetheless avoids the pitfalls of pedantry or cliche—obstacles that are, as Henninger notes, difficult to avoid in the highly contested, overdetermined rhetorical ground of the United States South and, more specifically, of post-Katrina New Orleans. The New Orleans of the popular imagination exists as a sort of sensory overload—a heightened reality of jazz, cocktails and Creole cooking, subtropical heat, and brilliant sights of parades and second-lines—that obscures New Orleans’s complicated history. In the days following the flood, the veneer was torn away; unfortunately, representations of the destruction wrought by the flood did not provide entry into that complexity and instead, as some critics have argued, forced the event into equally reductive scripts of black suffering and southern abjection. *A.D.* does not obviously engage in these sorts of ideological debates; nor does it directly address the myriad causes and consequences of the suffering it depicts—the peculiar genealogy of New Orleans, the history of African American suffering that was recalled and exposed by the flood, or the continuing disavowal of the decay facing the nation’s urban infrastructure.

However, these matters are not absent: Rather than confronting that problem head on, and thus sacrificing the coherence of conventional narrative, *A.D.* subtly exposes the contingency of any representation of the storm, and, in its online form, invites the reader to investigate these issues, to learn more about the city and the storm, and even to interact with its characters—all in order to wrestle with the meaning of the flood and its aftermath. And while the reader may never fulfill these obligations, *A.D.* furthers the critical discussion of how the suffering of others might be ethically represented and read—particularly when the representation necessarily engages such deeply contested discourses as race and region. Those ethics demand the reader participate in the ongoing, labor-intensive processes of researching, listening, and revising the record of the event.
A.D. emerged from the twinned impulses to take on the near-destruction of the city felt by both writer-artist Josh Neufeld, whose credits include Harvey Pekar’s *American Splendor*, and Larry Smith, the founder and editor of *SMITH Magazine*, an online journal devoted to personal narratives. *SMITH* had previously serialized *Shooting War*, Anthony Lappé and Dan Goldman’s graphic novel take on the war on terror, and Smith believed that something similar might be done “about the environment or Katrina” (Brophy-Warren). His attention was drawn to Neufeld, whose volunteer work in Biloxi following the storm had inspired a blog and subsequently a self-published memoir, *Katrina Came Calling*. “Having been in New York when the towers fell, I remember that overwhelming feeling of helplessness and displaced anger,” Neufeld told the *New York Times* (Gustines). “When Katrina hit, I saw what was happening, and I realized that I, as a single person, could somehow help.”

The result of their collaboration was a fascinating text: a web-based work of graphic reportage and oral history that presents the event through six intertwined narratives collected from six different New Orleanians. Originally, *SMITH* presented *A.D.* in a series of thirteen chapters, posted as Neufeld completed them over a twenty-month period. The distinctions between these chapters remain evident in the published book through transitions of color (each chapter is two-toned, dominated by two shades of a single color); rather than listing chapters, however, the book edition is divided into five parts: a Prologue (which offers a wordless overview of the event, from landfall to flood), “The City” (which presents the days leading up to the flood), “The Flood,” “The Diaspora,” and the greatly expanded conclusion, “The Return.”

*A.D.* offers little in the way of obvious visual innovation or experimentation: its visual style is clear, concise, and relatively unsurprising—that is to say, realistic but not photorealistic. Colors evoke particular emotional content: gold for the “halcyon” days before the storm, a foreboding purple as the storm looms, a sickly green as the water stagnates a deep red for the searing late August heat, exacerbated by a position on a sweltering rooftop or amid the masses crowded at a shelter (“Pulp Secret”).

Throughout these episodes, Neufeld recreates the Katrina stories of six New Orleanians. Crucially, none of these characters adhere to the stereotypes that populate popular representations of the city: *A.D.* offers no voodoo
priestesses, drag queens, jazz musicians, southern belles, Cajun shrimpers, drug dealers, or corrupt politicians. Instead, these six people were carefully chosen to both represent different New Orleans neighborhoods and, more importantly, to suggest the wide varieties of Katrina-experiences. The characters, in order of their appearance, are:

- Leo, a white 20-something comic book collector, editor of the independent newspaper, *AntiGravity*, and resident of the hipster section of Mid City. Leo evacuates with his girlfriend Michelle.
- The Doctor (Brobson Lutz), a bon vivant, aficionado of all things New Orleans, and a veteran of many storms. The comic's other major white character, the Doctor rides out the storm among friends, dogs, and good wine in his French Quarter apartment.
- Kwame, an African American high school senior in suburban New Orleans East and the son of a minister. He evacuates with his family, and he ultimately finishes high school in California, while his parents return to rebuild their church. As he was a minor at the time of the comic's original publication, he is called "Kevin" in the online edition.
- Abbas (originally "Hamid" and drawn without a mustache in the web-comic), the Iranian-born proprietor of an Uptown grocery store who rides out the flood waters atop a shed in the rear of his store with his friend Mansell. Abbas remains behind to protect the successful business he has built in his adopted community.
- Denise, in many ways, the dominant figure in the text. An African American sixth-generation New Orleanian, she holds a master's degree in guidance and counseling, and lives with her mother, her niece Cydney, and Cydney's daughter Rhae in a small apartment above a boxing club in the economically blighted Central City area.

The six major figures are diverse in every possible way: in terms of geography, race, age, class, and sexual orientation. Furthermore, the differences in their narratives suggest the dramatically different ways in which New Orleanians experienced the storm and flood: Leo and Michelle evacuate but subsequently return to rebuild their lives; Kwame evacuates with his family, but, due to the destruction of the school system, is forced to relocate and finish high school in California; the Doctor stays throughout the storm and flood, but suffers little or no damage to his personal property and works to restore some sense of normalcy to his community; Abbas and Mansell
remain to protect their property, but ultimately need to be rescued; Denise evacuates to one of the shelters of last resort and finds herself caught up in the Kafka-esque, post-Katrina bureaucracy of recovery.

This episodic, multiple-narrative structure only hints at the vast possibility of Katrina-experiences. Just as critically, Neufeld takes steps to ensure that the text does not posit these six narratives as wholly representative of the event: each character encounters other people, whose stories are suggested by the text and can be imagined by the audience. For instance, two days after the storm makes landfall, Abbas and Mansell meet two men in a fishing boat, who patrol the flooded streets for stranded residents (97). They offer assistance, but Abbas and Mansell choose to stay behind; in the final image offered of these men, the audience sees them, from Abbas's and Mansell's approximate perspective, drive off into the distance, and can only wonder what happens to them. That image is recalled, to even more dramatic effect, in an illustration that represents something Denise witnessed the following day (1 September 2005) from a balcony at the hospital to which she has evacuated. Denise and her niece Cydney watch as a man wades through chest-deep floodwaters, towing a motor-less johnboat that holds his sick wife and infant child. The hospital is in the midst of being evacuated by National Guardsmen, and the family is turned away. In a full-page panel that follows, Cydney and Denise (and, from their position, the audience) watch the anonymous family as they move out of view. Whatever heroic or tragic events follow, the audience cannot know.

These episodes, like others in the text, remind the audience that hundreds, if not thousands, of survivor narratives remain untold. Thus, nothing about the narratives of A.D. is closed, and this openness is matched by the web-based original publication's thrust to move beyond the text itself. Through the inclusion of hyperlinks, the web comic compels the reader to move outward—to investigate a wide variety of online Katrina resources, including simulations, archived news reports, YouTube videos of flood waters, and even the final, independent report on the levee breaches issued by the National Science Foundation and a team from UC-Berkeley. This impulse to educate the audience about the flood is matched by the web-text's effort to teach readers about the vibrant community and culture of New Orleans—a culture that transcends the experiences of tourists on Bourbon Street. Among the links offered by SMITH's edition of A.D. are those to a recipe for the Doctor's favorite cocktail, the Sazerac; to AntiGravity, the magazine that Leo edits; and to the MySpace page of One Man Machine, a musician who performs at an AntiGravity party. Furthermore, podcast interviews with the
Doctor and Leo and a comment function/message board allow readers to interact with each other, the author, and the characters. I will return to these web functions and resources, but for now, their sum total is indicative of the profound pedagogical drive of the text: its mission is not simply to narrate, but to provide a vehicle through which the audience can access an impressive amount of information about New Orleans. These links are not simply web-based footnotes; rather, they are part of a broader strategy to compel the reader to more actively and critically approach the public record and the popular memory of post-Katrina New Orleans—a strategy also evident in the text’s engagement with the photographic archive of the event.

Challenging the Visual Archive of Post-Katrina New Orleans

Given the scriptural precedent for flood narratives, it is fitting that A.D. begins as it does—cosmically, biblically, with a wide, wordless image of the earth. The Prologue continues without characters, dialogue, or much narration—just brief dates and place names; the perspective from above zooms in tighter, first onto the Gulf of Mexico and then onto an aerial image of the city of New Orleans. Closer-in images follow, depicting a bird’s-eye view of life on Bourbon Street, in Jackson Square, and in a neighborhood that lies perilously close to a canal. The representations of New Orleans are matched by similarly bucolic depictions of Biloxi, Mississippi. The serene distance of these aerial images is quickly disrupted by the return to a view from beyond the atmosphere and to an image of a storm moving into and then through the Gulf of Mexico; dates mark the charge of Katrina toward New Orleans, and flashes to a jammed interstate, all lanes headed away from the city, and of crowds gathering at the Superdome remind us of what happened. Stunning visions of the storm’s arrival, the ravages of its winds, and the breaching of the levees come next and ultimately give way to a drawing of a body, floaing facedown in the flooded streets and finally, a double-page spread of the flooded city, both on Tuesday, August 30—the day after the storm.

The Prologue is stunning in its silence—in the inevitability of the destruction and in the author’s refusal to use language to articulate its meaning. That discomfiting quiet is possible because the Prologue does not need to offer the audience any information they do not already possess; A.D. depends on the assumption that the audience is familiar, not only with the events, but with specific images and types of images used to portray them. Indeed, in response to a reader comment on the online edition of the prologue, Neufeld
wrote that he was “using a lot of photographic reference for this project—especially for the prologue. About half the images are directly from photos, while the others use photos as a resource.” The majority of these images approximate either satellite shots of swirling clouds or video and photographs captured from helicopters hovering safely above the city. Certainly, these images offer the utility of panorama—Neufeld can portray the scope of the destruction more easily from above. However, this visual strategy has an added benefit: it immediately locates the narratives that follow within the context of what much of the audience has already seen.

And so, while A.D.’s aesthetic is not characterized by the obvious innovation or the postmodern manipulation of visual convention that can be attributed to other notable nonfiction graphic narratives, it is nonetheless visually fascinating: like Spiegelman’s work or Ho Che Anderson’s graphic autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr., A.D. seeks to visually represent events that are already highly visually mediated; in doing so, it recalls, recreates, and revises images that have become part of the public consciousness. The Prologue begins this process—not just locating its story in an historical context, but also by demanding that its readers reconsider the images that may have been presented as documents of facts. As Susan Sontag and others have noted, photographs seem to inspire an impulse to accept them as complete and total representations of reality. Even in a moment in which electronic media is our “surround,” writes Sontag, events become “real” for “those who [are] elsewhere, following it as news” once we apprehend them through photographs (21). “[T]he photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form for memorizing it,” Sontag writes. “The photograph is like a quotation, or a maxim or proverb. Each of us mentally stocks hundreds of photographs, subject to instant recall” (22). Unfortunately, this process too often leads us to deny the subjectivity of photographs and to accept them as “crude,” but nonetheless objective, “statement[s] of fact addressed to the eye,” as Sontag notes that Virginia Woolf did (26). Consequently, the images offered by mass media displace the event itself, and the representation becomes indistinguishable from the original.

Sontag’s observation about our mental stock of images applies to the public understanding of both New Orleans itself and to its flooding in 2005. The city persists through its visual representations within the historical and popular culture imaginary: from the various stage and screen productions of Streetcar Named Desire to the images of Mardi Gras revelry supplied by the city’s tourism industry to grainy video of Bourbon Street debauchery available on programs like COPS and on seamy products like Girls Gone
Wild, New Orleans has been and remains spectacularly specular. The archive of these images in the public discourse, however, was deeply unsettled by the images broadcast from New Orleans and published in newspapers and magazines across the globe in the days following Katrina. “The familiar tourist images of old New Orleans—tied up in the blackness of another era—allowed a disavowal of the racism that elsewhere was writ large across our television screens,” writes Tara McPherson (331–32); McPherson contends that, prior to deluge, popular representations of New Orleans have “celebrated diversity when it adds flavor to tourist attractions” and to the spectacle of public celebrations like Mardi Gras, public places like Preservation Hall, and public memorials like Louis Armstrong Park, but “remain blind to government policies that put those attractions (not to mention the largely poor, black workers that built and sustained them) at risk” (332). For generations, according to Judith Jackson Fossett, the city has existed in the popular imagination as “the Big Easy”—good food, good sex, good times, a place that care forgot, a tourist paradise (327); this “tourist veneer” not only conceals the inequality within the city—it also displaces the manifold ways in which the rest of the nation is implicated in the despair that persists here in this hub of national and global commerce.

As the images poured forth from the flooded city, however, that “tourist veneer” was ripped away. As Fossett writes, “The whole cloth of racial, socioeconomic, and color caste, as well as post-1945 geographic segregation . . . could be seen” (326). These revelations were so stunning that many had trouble making sense of what they suddenly saw. “The scenes were at once familiar and unfamiliar,” noted journalist David Halberstam in Vanity Fair (385). The American public is accustomed to broadcast footage of hurricanes, as well as images of horrific destruction. Likewise, an audience is familiar with the narrative arcs to which television news attaches such images: “First, there are the tragedy and the tears; then, in time, the redemption, the rejuvenation, and the gratitude.” Despite this familiarity, Halberstam—who earned his fame as a reporter in Vietnam—found the images of the flooded city particularly disconcerting:

It was unfamiliar as well, because when the damage is this catastrophic, the people so helpless, the government so weak and clumsy, we expect it to take place somewhere else—on the coast of Sri Lanka or Bangladesh, for instance—somewhere distant and poor. We do not expect to see so many fellow Americans overwhelmed, unable to help themselves and unable to escape the disaster. We do not expect to see our government
so impotent and indifferent that it is completely paralyzed at the most critical moment. We do not expect to see the story play out so slowly and the cavalry arrive so late.

Was this really us? Was this really an American city coming apart—or drowning—as we watched? Were all these poor people, whose lives were broken, and some of whom looted their own city, really Americans? Aren’t we better than this? Aren’t we different? (385)

Halberstam was hardly alone; according to the historian David Brinkley, “Commentators kept asking: Is this America? Analogies were made to Third World countries” (204). In particular, Brinkley cites CNN anchor Anderson Cooper’s assessment that “Walking through the rubble, it feels like Sri Lanka, Sarajevo, somewhere else, not here, not home, not America” (204).

Unfortunately, while these images unsettled the façade that had previously concealed the deep social problems plaguing the city (and, indeed, the nation), the public reckoning with this newfound knowledge was deeply troubling: too often, the images put forth too easily fit other familiar archives of images—archives that positioned New Orleans, a majority-black city in the deepest part of the U.S. South, as inexorably different from the rest of the nation. Rather than seeing the history of “post-1945 geographic segregation” in the U.S., as Fossett does, these commentators saw something abject, foreign, and inexorably Other—a notion of the region that, as Leigh Anne Duck notes, proved critical to the broader discourses of nation and national identity throughout the twentieth century (7). As Anna Brickhouse notes, the “rotting bodies and sick or starving survivors” of “what the news continually characterized as an incomprehensibly ‘Third-World’ scene” allowed viewers to disavow any connection to the events they witnessed—and, I would add, any complicity with the suffering depicted (1100). Other explanations of the images emphasized racial difference rather than national identity, locating the images in the context of an archive of the broadest stereotypes of blackness. Consider the uncomfortable description of the scene by Cooper’s CNN colleague Wolf Blitzer: “You simply get chills every time you see those poor individuals . . . so many of these people, almost all of them that we see, are so poor, and they’re so black” (Brinkley 203–4).

In the months and years since, the visual rhetoric of post-Katrina has proven to be highly contested. Certainly, the images upon which Blitzer commented and that the cable news audience witnessed were overwhelmingly images of black people, many of whom were poor. The critical questions, then, really deal with the consequences and the authenticity of these representations. While reviewing a photo essay by New Orleans Times-Picayune
photographer Ted Jackson (presented on the website “Nieman Reports,” a component of Harvard’s Nieman Foundation for Journalism), I noticed two comments near the bottom of the page. Writing on 8 March 2009, “Aurora” asks for permission to use some of the photos for “an essay on Hurrican [sic] Katrina as a reflection of the reality of race and class in America”; in November, “Bruce Tuttle” responds, “Oh lawdy, oh lawdy! Have mercy on mah soul! This papuh is a true inspiration to me and mah children.”

Various cultural and literary scholars have sought to make sense of the emergent visual rhetoric of post-Katrina New Orleans. Lloyd Pratt notes “the eerie similarity of those images of massed African Americans lined up along railroad tracks to descriptions of the post-Emancipation South,” and that Ted Jackson’s photograph of “a distraught African-American woman in a posture of supplicating prayer beneath the headline, “Help Us, Please,” would be “better consigned to the archives of nineteenth-century abolitionism” (264). Fossett contends that, in the mass media coverage of the flood, black residents “go mostly unheard,” the “voices or homemade signs entreat[ing] briefly on news cameras panning across the squalor of those left behind” (326).

However, it is not helpful or even possible to reject the photographic and media archive of post-Katrina New Orleans. As Katherine Henninger writes, “If the photographs of Katrina’s aftermath represent very real bodies in a very real, very damaged place, they represent even more how quickly one facade built of cultured visions can give way to another. There is danger in this, but also power” (185). The power noted by Henninger surges throughout A.D.: while a photograph might obscure its own artifice as an historical record, a panel from a graphic novel is more obviously a product of artistic creation. And when a photographic image from the public archive of Katrina is recreated by A.D., the juxtaposition of the two reveals the artifice of both. Thus, by appropriating that archive and reconfiguring it to tell these divergent and unexpected narratives, the comic demands that the audience bring an intense critical gaze to bear on both Neufeld’s text and the broader visual archive upon which it is based.

While A.D.’s engagement of a general visual Katrina archive is more obvious in the prologue “The Storm,” recreated and revised photographs are woven into the main narratives of the text—none more notable than Neufeld’s depiction of the horrific days Denise spent waiting for help at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center in the city’s Central Business District. A photograph by the Times-Picayune’s Brett Duke on 1 September 2005, presents a wide-angle image of dozens of people, crammed on the sidewalk outside the Convention Center (see figure 13.1). That photograph shares
topic, perspective, and composition with this image from A.D., a depiction of Denise’s mother, niece, and granddaughter in the same general location (see figure 13.2; 136). Since the months following the storm, Duke’s photograph has been available at the Times-Picayune’s Katrina archive, found at its website, NOLA.com; a cursory viewing of this archive alongside A.D. suggests that it proved to be a great resource for Neufeld as he created the comic.

More striking similarities are evident in other, more gut-wrenching images. One of the most horrific moments of A.D. occurs at the Convention Center, when Denise watches a conflict emerge over a bottle of water. The dispute is filled with macho-bravado, but culminates in a revelation of total vulnerability and fear, as one of the men in the dispute collapses and begs for help for his baby (see figure 13.3: 140-41). That image clearly draws inspiration, down to the man's jersey and shorts, from a Ted Jackson photograph from the Times-Picayune (see figure 13.4). The differences between the two images are just as important. To begin, the dead woman behind the father is absent from Neufeld's image; in fact, in the chronology of A.D., the woman, Miss Williams, does not die until the following day (152).

The photographs of that frail corpse, a blanket draped across it, were reprinted frequently in the weeks that followed; Neufeld's re-creation of it is no less stirring. By locating Miss Williams's death elsewhere, Neufeld posits a chronology distinct from that suggested by Jackson's photograph: these events are not simultaneous, even if they appear that way in the photo. This revision reminds the audience of the subjectivity of both the narrative of A.D. and of the photograph: both have unique, particular perspectives (in the case of the photo, Ted Jackson; in the case of the comic image, Neufeld and his proxy, Denise), and neither can claim to present the total or complete meaning of the event. Finally, both Neufeld's depictions of the father and baby and of Miss Williams's death occur in front of blank backgrounds; indeed, the father and baby are the only figures in that image. The consequence: these individuals and their stories are given primacy; their experiences constitute unique and particular narratives of suffering and injustice, and they demand our individual attention.

The demand Neufeld places on the audience is the demand of interpretation. While the urgency and ethical obligation here is particular to his subject, similar demands are placed by all graphic narratives, according to comics artist and theorist Scott McCloud. "No other artform gives so much to its audience while asking so much from them as well," he has famously contended (92). In McCloud's description of the phenomenon he calls "closure," the sequence of various images to articulate a coherent narrative is more dependent on a form of self-aware audience participation and interpretation than either film or prose; in order for graphic narrative to work, the reader has to make the cognitive leap from the time and space represented in one panel to the next, and then onward. Thus, a viewer might, like Woolf, consider a photograph—or even video footage—to be unmediated representation of a real moment in time and, consequently, remain unaware of
the process of interpreting or reading that image. Comics, on the other hand, remind an audience that their images represent only an artist’s rendering of an idea or moment. The conventions of composition and representation in comics (motion lines, thought and dialogue balloons, sound effects, the transition across the “gutter” from one image to the next) are not mimetic, but figurative; as Hilary Chute notes, “a[n] awareness of the limits of representation . . . is integrated into comics through its framed, self-conscious, bimodal form” (457). Consequently, the comics reader should have a heightened awareness of his or her duties of interpretation.

The expectation of interpretation is a powerful tool for comics artists, particularly those creating nonfiction texts that address historical events. Through “its manifest handling of its own artifice, its attention to its seams,” graphic narrative unsettles the familiarity, if not banality, of imagery that has become commonplace. Most famously, Art Spiegelman’s Maus and In the Shadow of No Towers trouble the familiar media representations of two highly mediated events—the Holocaust and the attacks of September 11, 2001—in stylistically radical manners. In his King: A Comics Biography of Martin Luther King Jr., Ho Che Anderson appropriates extant visual archives in even more dramatic ways—recreating unseen but nonetheless famous moments in a noir-ish black and white, painting other moments in abstracted watercolors, and inserting collages of reproduced archival news photographs. Through this expressionist and varied use of images, “King simultaneously borrows from and disrupts photography’s presumed optical truths and claims to objectivity,” writes Michael A. Chaney (180); “Anderson’s artistry bankrupts assumptions regarding photographic objectivity, the constitutive ‘past-ness’ of history, and the separation of copy from original” (188).

Because the responsibilities of interpretation are foregrounded, A.D., like King, fosters a critical reading of the public memory of visually mediated historical events. It is insufficient to merely destabilize the truth claims, however. Instead, A.D. also posits strategies for ethical representations and ethical readings of such images—strategies that, among other things, balance the scale and scope of destruction with the need to consider the particular and individual forms of suffering and trauma. Consider, for instance, an image taken from a helicopter that depicts the crowds pouring out of the Convention Center. The photograph is composed to emphasize a series of parallel lines: the power lines, the red stripe and the lettering on the building, the base of its facade, the division between sidewalk and street, and the median. The crowd is hemmed in between the line of the building and the line of the street. The result is an image that emphasizes the sheer size of the
crowd and the idea that they have been abandoned and yet still effectively trapped by the civic institutions of their city.

Certainly, these ideas—people crammed together, nowhere to go—are critical to making sense of the consequences of the government inaction and the awful experience of the victims. However, in representing that reality, this image effaces both the authorial effort of composition and the individuality of each of these people: they are part of a nearly inhuman mass, a chaotic group of helpless, deteriorating bodies difficult to identify with. In contrast, the “Where’s Waldo” image of Denise balances the needs to tell both stories (see figure 13.5). Its composition is fairly consistent; the perspective is a near approximation, and the parallel lines remain constant. The crowd appears even larger in Neufeld's image, but among them, one figure stands out: Denise is colored white, unlike the yellow-shaded crowd around her, and also unlike the others, she has a voice. While she alone has a voice in this story, the image presents her, not as special, but as one among thousands. Just as the six-part narrative structure of the book suggests the multitude of Katrina experiences, so too does this illustration. Though the audience is privy to Denise's experience, it cannot access the experience of the others. However, it is critical that we are at least reminded that their stories exist and deserve our listening, and that we know that whatever truth is offered by
this image, it is provisional and in need of further consideration. Here, the truth of this moment is not self-evident, but rather, myriad and difficult to grasp. Denise’s confusion becomes the audience’s: how do we begin to make sense of the crowd? For Denise, no sufficient response exists—she must simply find her way through the crowd to her family. For the reader, however, the image implies an appropriate response: thousands of other stories, similar and still distinct from Denise’s, exist in the frame, and the audience is compelled to seek them out and listen whenever the opportunity arises.

Trauma, Image, and Interpretation

Alone, a challenge to photorealism and the objectivity of the archive of Katrina-related images would be an insufficient response to the events A.D. chronicles; however, it is a necessary step in the effort to adequately and ethically bear witness to the stories of these six individuals. In this respect, A.D. belongs alongside Maus, In the Shadow of No Towers, Marjane Satrapi’s Persepolis, and Joe Sacco’s Palestine—works that, Hilary Chute writes, “explore the conflicted boundaries of what can be said and what be shown at the intersection of collective histories and life stories” (459). Jeff Adams has noted that what he calls “the image text” (“graphic novels, comic books, illustrated texts”) has emerged contemporaneously and not coincidentally alongside “a pedagogic impulse, a desire to recount and relay traumatic incidents from the past for a contemporary audience” (35). In particular, A.D. suggests that the comics form is uniquely suited to bearing witness to the tragedies and traumas of the Information Age—horrible, highly mediated events that audiences around the globe can witness or even experience through photographs, television, newspapers, and the Internet. Unbounded by the requirements of realism, the confines of language, or the expectations of objectivity, comics like these can offer the coherent articulations necessary to respond to individual and historical traumas without sacrificing the ambiguity, dislocation, and confusion fundamental to these experiences.

In contrast to works like Maus and King, A.D.’s aesthetic is largely conventional and straightforward, but it is not without figurative moments. Consider, for instance, Neufeld’s representation of Leo’s realization that his home and all of his belongings are underwater. While A.D. in many ways fits within the genres of oral history and nonfiction narrative, it shares with other comics the capacity for visual metaphor and representing subjective reality. The prior page relatively realistically portrays Leo seeing an Internet
image of his neighborhood (115); his expression indicates his despair. Here, however, is a representation of his internal response to the loss of his comic book collection. In terms of the sort of loss and suffering chronicled elsewhere in the text, this experience may not strike the reader as significant; A.D., however, is careful not to categorize or rank the losses suffered by its characters. This image depicts the trauma of Leo’s realization in a way that might not otherwise be clear: though he is safely in Houston, he feels that some element of himself remains with the now-destroyed collection. These comics are touchstones and represent some crucial facet of him—whether the work of collecting them, the influences they had upon him, or perhaps other memories connected to them. Leo is hardly alone in this experience: a deep investment in one’s home and physical belongings is natural, and its loss provokes existential angst. Again, if, in another form, Leo were to suggest that the loss of his beloved comic books was tragic, his audience might reasonably respond with little sympathy and see little to mourn in the midst of other suffering; a similar reaction might be elicited from a photograph of a pulpy mass of waterlogged back-issues of Amazing Spider-Man. Here, however, the psychological reality of the experience is made apparent.

This panel recalls what Gillian Whitlock terms the “boxes of grief” in Spiegelman’s In the Shadow of No Towers (969). Interestingly, McCloud’s criticism and theorization of comics shares much in common with the ongoing work of trauma studies; the preeminent concern of both critical discourses is the construction of coherent narrative from disparate fragments. The comics reader, as McCloud notes, is conditioned to make the interpretive leaps across the gutter, linking the action of one panel to the next. Our own experience of reality requires the same process of “closure,” he contends: “our senses can only reveal a world that is fragmented and incomplete. Our perception of ‘reality’ is an act of faith, based on mere fragments” (62). In our daily experience of reality, that act of faith is all but invisible—as close to reflex as a cognitive process can be.

Traumatic experiences like those undergone by the characters in A.D., however, disrupt the process of closure and thus, the sense of coherent, objective reality. “Trauma is itself a shattering experience that disrupts or even threatens to destroy experience in the sense of an integrated or at least visibly articulated life,” writes Dominick LaCapra; “There is a sense in which trauma is an out-of-context experience that upsets expectations and unsettles one's very understanding of existing contexts” (117). For LaCapra and other trauma theorists, “existing contexts” can include familiar narratives and even language itself. Thus, even an experienced writer like David
Halberstam can struggle to articulate the traumatic experiences of Katrina and the flood, which exposed the contingent, fictive nature of conventional narratives of national identity: his question, “Was this really us?”, becomes the existential, “Who are we, really?”

Neufeld’s image of the father, pleading for help, prompts a similar response from the reader: who are we who allowed this to happen? It is an image, and a reaction, that disrupts any familiar discourse of community or nation. Other, similarly unsettling images occur during Denise’s time at the Convention Center; for instance, Neufeld illustrates the terror felt by the abandoned crowd in a horrifying image of crowded, apparently disembodied heads (150–51). The sweating and terrified faces, the eeriness of these seemingly disembodied heads and disembodied voices, and the confined, askew frame, combine to evoke feelings of claustrophobia, vertigo, and terror—a combination of emotions that transcends language.

Traumatic experience like the one represented in this image has a crippling effect on its victims long after the actual event has occurred. Victims are paralyzed, endlessly reliving an experience that cannot be assimilated into coherent narrative. In order to move forward, the victim must “work through” the experience—that is, integrate it into a coherent narrative that reduces neither its magnitude nor its complexity. The articulation must not do a disservice to the experience or the victim by delimiting it in any way, but it must also provide something coherent enough to allow for the victim to move forward. While the therapeutic models for analyzing and working through trauma pertain specifically to individual victims, theorists like LaCapra (a historian by training) apply them to broad historical, cultural, and social events. In the cases of historical or global traumas, societies suffer collectively from an inability to assimilate traumatic experiences and must work to understand what occurred so that they can move forward and ultimately take action in response. The process of working through traumatic experience does not require or even promise “total redemption of the past or healing its traumatic wounds,” according to LaCapra. Instead, “we can work to change the causes of this cause, insofar as they are social, economic, and political and thereby attempt to prevent its recurrence as well as enable forms of renewal” (119).

Trauma theorists like LaCapra and Cathy Caruth suggest that new, experimental, and often non-linear forms are necessary to do this—forms that have little concern with realism and mimesis and are thus better suited to articulate the repetitious, chaotic experience of trauma. The existing archive of Katrina images proves ill-suited to these needs as long as
the images remain embedded in the familiar media narratives noted by Halberstam—"the tragedy and the tears; then, in time, the redemption, the rejuvenation, and the gratitude" (385). In its revision of the archive, A.D. liberates the images from that context. While Neufeld's text offers a fairly linear, chronological narrative—the dates and times are often noted, allowing the reader to keep track of how events in different parts of the city relate—the comics form foregrounds the subjectivity and mediation of its narrative: the text presents real stories of actual individuals, but places the burden of interpretation on the audience.

Denise's experiences at the Convention Center and her effort to recover her life are among the text's most powerful representations of traumatic events and experiences. The episode at the Convention Center concludes when the rage she has expressed throughout the book finally gives way to resignation and despair (153). Though thousands of other people have crowded onto the narrow sidewalks outside the Convention Center, each panel shows only one adult member of Denise's family. The blank space behind them isolates them from the other citizens of New Orleans and the other members of their de facto community outside the facility; the gutters divide them from their own family members, suggesting the profoundness of their isolation. Though each woman is among thousands, and though she is with the people to whom she is closest, each experience this moment alone. The baby offers a wordless cry—perhaps the most appropriate response—while Denise vacantly states that "They are trying to kill us all," revealing the cause of her alienation (153). From her perspective, the body politic has been irrevocably sundered; the majority have abandoned this minority and left them for dead.

This sense of alienation from others is characteristic of traumatic events: perhaps the victim believes that she alone knows the horrific truth that any sense of coherent experience is a pleasant fiction, and now can no longer stand to be around those who cannot see it too; or perhaps the trauma victim's sense of self is so shattered that he can no longer put forward a coherent self to interact with others. In Denise's case, the aftermath of the storm is horrible: she despises her new life, but cannot see any meaning in the old one. From a new "Habitat for Humanity" home in Baton Rouge a year after the storm, she reports, "I fucking hate it here, but I'm afraid I would hate it in New Orleans more—and I don't want to hate the only place I ever considered home" (176). She continues, "This isn't my life. This is the life of someone I wouldn't even want to shake hands with" (177). In order to fully reckon with the meaning of the near-destruction of New Orleans, the
audience must wrestle with these ambiguous and challenging emotions—her anger, abjection, and self-loathing.

Though the stakes are higher, the process of working-through Denise must undergo to move forward (and she does, returning to New Orleans to work as a counselor for victims of domestic abuse) is not unlike the interpretive work required of reading a graphic narrative: both processes require one to take disparate, disconnecting elements to constitute something coherent. In both instances, the reader and the victim must make cognitive leaps of faith in order to make some sense of what has happened. In neither case is the aim to express objective truth, but rather, a contingent, provisional, usable articulation of reality. “Narrative,” LaCapra writes, “at best helps one not to change the past through a dubious rewriting of history but to work through posttraumatic symptoms in the present in a manner that opens possible futures” (121–22).

The effort to open those futures requires one to negotiate a contradiction: a coherent narrative is necessary to understand the event and respond, but that coherence can be tainted—and perhaps, harmful—if a “dubious rewriting of history” too easily assigns blame on a scapegoat or if it provides its audience with a sense of catharsis that forestalls necessary action. In the latter case, a survivor narrative can, with the best of intentions, allow an audience to so immediately identify with the character(s) that its members believe that they have suffered and ultimately conquered this traumatic experience alongside the figures from the narrative. In this case, the text may restore a sense that all is well, long before this is the case.

*Neufeld’s* negotiates this contradiction, as it has throughout, by foregrounding its own artifice. The text bears witness to the events of the flood as well as its psychological consequences, but it does not seek to provide its audience with a virtual experience of the storm and flood. In the final two sections, “The Diaspora” and “The Return” (presented together as a consolidated and reduced Epilogue in the web comic), Josh Neufeld conducts follow-up telephone interviews with the six subjects at various intervals—first, a year and a half later, and then again in February 2008. The artist draws himself as he asks questions, and then illustrates the events that the subjects narrate in response. The voices are theirs, and the audience is unmistakably cast into Neufeld’s perspective as an interviewer, an outsider listening to their stories. The people, whom we have come to know as characters in a story, now address us in their own voices, and the reader, like Neufeld, is obligated to tease some coherent meaning out of the disparate narratives.
Opening New Futures Online: Interactivity, Multimodal Functionality, and Bearing Witness to the Stories Beyond the Text

The pedagogical impulse of *A.D.* is predicated on a particular ethics of reading in which critical engagement and sophisticated interpretive work are demanded of the audience. If new futures are to be opened, however, it will be not just because the book offers insight into this trauma—both individual and national—but because the understanding it provides propels the reader to continue to struggle to make sense of the event and even to take action in response. The illustration of the father in the jersey, holding his infant and begging for help, emphasizes the necessity of an ethical response: with no one else in the image, the reader becomes his audience; we, the audience, become the “you” in “You gotta help me.” Likewise, Denise calls out to the audience for help in her most desperate moment (146). Denise's head moves out of the panel, as if she is abandoning the two-dimensional page for the three-dimensional world of the audience; her gaze is directed at the audience, and thus, so are her questions. Already, the audience has been deeply engaged in the interpretive work necessitated by the medium; now, it has become implicated in the events it depicts. Sadly, the audience hears neither plea until years later—no earlier than late 2008 for the web comic reader and August of 2009 for the reader of the printed edition. Still, through their cries, *A.D.* calls for the audience to do something. How often, though, does what is represented in a book impel action in the world not bound by its covers? Bearing witness alone is positive and perhaps all that we can demand of a narrative work, but the characters in *A.D.* call for more.

Interestingly, the original web-based form of the comic provides some mechanisms for further investigation, discussion, and, potentially, action: through a series of Internet-enabled functions, the text provides opportunities to investigate the genealogy of the flood, to explore stories untold within the frame of the narrative, and—perhaps most interestingly—to develop a community of readers (and characters). In its online form (via SMITH Magazine), *A.D.* propels the reader to the world outside the text, where he or she can, at the very least, continue to participate in the ongoing process of understanding the causes and consequences of the near-destruction of New Orleans and where action might be taken. Many of these functions extend the pedagogical potential of the text. Hyperlinks to Leo’s magazine, the menu at the fabled French Quarter restaurant Galatoire’s, and the Wikipedia entry for Sazerac enrich the audience’s understanding of the unique and vibrant pre-Katrina cultures of New Orleans—a function that not only
establishes setting, but probably more importantly, participates in arguments that cite New Orleans's cultural uniqueness and importance as justification for large national investment in the rebuilding process. Similarly, links to news items, archived updates from the National Weather Service, and to a computer simulation of the levee breaches connect the events of the comic to the broader chronology of the flood. In addition, podacast interviews with Lutz, Hamid/Abbas, Leo, and Denise supplement the reader's understanding of these individuals and of the city.

But in terms of the processes of bearing witness and working through traumatic experiences, the comment function is among the most compelling elements of A.D. Nothing about the particular application should strike the reader as particularly novel; indeed, one finds similar comment functions following nearly every blog posting or news article published online. In the context of work of documentary art, the comments played out in a surprising way: the readers could not only offer their reactions, but in fact, engage with the author and even the subjects of the text. And given the serial form in which A.D. first appeared, readers could even offer editorial decisions. For instance, in response to events in Chapter 1 of the web-comic, blogger Cade Roux offered a mild correction: “I hate to be a nitpicker, but NO ONE was thinking about this storm coming to New Orleans until Friday. All the projections were Tampa and then Florida panhandle and then Alabama. It wasn't until Friday evening that the projections changed to New Orleans.” Neufeld not only answered Roux's comment, but corrected the inaccuracy: “I feel it's pretty important to get the details right, so in the spirit of the constantly updateable www-world we live in, I've made changes to a couple of panels.” Neufeld was not alone in offering explanations: when readers objected to the presence of a New England Patriots poster on the wall of Leo's apartment in Chapter 2, the real Leo felt compelled to explain that, though the poster was in fact in his apartment before the storm, his primary allegiance was to the hometown Saints. While these quibbles may, to paraphrase Roux, seem “nitpicky,” the particular textures of the places and events depicted here matter greatly to those who see what they have lost recreated.

More compelling conversations developed through the comments. In response to events in the third chapter of the web-comic, “Amy,” a registered nurse from New Orleans, expresses deep concern over the depiction of the treatment Denise and her family received at Memorial Hospital: Denise's mother, a surgical tech at Memorial, had been promised a room for her family, but a doctor or administrator tells her that rooms have been reserved
from the families of RNs, whose presence is more critical. The real Denise responds, and a fascinating conversation develops. Amy, too, was "kicked out" of a promised private room at her hospital, and each believes that race informed their particular experiences: Denise notes that all the staff that were asked to move to a common space (including her mother and family) were black, and Amy believes that her whiteness expedited her evacuation from the city a few days after the storm. The conversation is a rare thing in American political discourse: an organic and relatively un-self-conscious discussion about the ways in which race informs our experience.

Concerns about race emerge elsewhere in the comments section; particularly notable is a conversation between Neufeld, Denise, and comics artist Dean Haspiel. In Chapter 5 ("Katrina Comes Calling") of the webcomic, much of the early morning landfall of the storm is presented through the experiences of Denise, who has decided to ride out the storm alone in her Central City apartment. As the hurricane sweeps through town, her building begins to sway, and she becomes terrified. In the final panel, she cries out, "I'm gonna die in this bitch! Damn!" This dialogue concerned comics artist Dean Haspiel, who wrote that the line "felt forced and took me out of the drama. I could almost hear the gangsta drum beats behind her 'rap' and wondered if she really blurted that line when she was alone and scared with her cat in the confines of her compromised position?" (sic). A few hours later, Denise responded:

Dean,

That woman is me, and that is exactly what I was thinking at that moment and for many, many moments during the hurricane. I was terrified, and that was my expression of terror, not false bravado.

And maybe, just maybe, rap music reflects the very real language of a very real people. Because, frankly, I talked like that before I ever heard a rap record.

Haspiel responds awkwardly, attempting to establish his rap bonafides and thus, one supposes, the authenticity and expertise necessary to make such statements. "Fair enough," he writes. "I grew up on the origins of hip-hop in the upper west side of Manhattan and I cherish the music. Just ask Josh." He continues, arguing that, even in this sort of work, the artist-writer has the obligation to edit "certain facts" that might take the audience "OUT of the drama."
While Haspiel's impulse for self-defense is off-putting (really, it is just a step away from "I have plenty of black friends"), his thesis deserves consideration: what is the artist's obligation when an event succumbs to the easy but limited confines of a familiar script or even reinforces a pernicious stereotype? If nothing else, Haspiel seems to argue, that stereotype seems to be an artistic shortcut—a momentary weakness that reduces the power and complexity of the narrative. Denise's response is equally salient, and far more direct: that's the way it happened. And Neufeld, in his response, agrees: "Certainly, as I was writing the scene, I wouldn't have had the Denise character say what she did... I realize that it may take some readers 'out of the story,' but at least in this case, I think it is more important to tell what really happened."

Their discussion is fascinating, because it echoes the concerns about photographs of black New Orleanians articulated by Lloyd Pratt and Judith Jackson Fossett, and because it yields some insight into A.D.'s sublimated engagement with race and other political concerns. Wolf Blitzer's description about the masses at the Superdome—"so poor, and... so black"—has been almost-universally derided, but it is worth considering why it poses such an affront. What is untrue about it? Did it not accurately describe many of the folks gathered there? Is it troubling because it reduces the more complex reality of who suffered because of the flood? Or because it links "poor" and "black" in a way that resonates with a rhetoric of southern paternalism that we have not yet gotten past? Or perhaps, because it renders the event and its victims as something hopelessly, inexorably Other—reinforcing the people on the screen as a special category, distinct from a not-poor, not-black, not-southern, not-New Orleanian American identity? In the case of Katrina, discussions of race are particularly problematic, posing a set of questions less about why we react a certain way than about how we move forward: should one minimize race in order to dispel notions this was only a story of black suffering or to challenge the conflation of blackness, poverty, and victimization? Or does that strategy get in the way of a coherent narrative necessary for political action—that is to say, does it reduce the political urgency to address the very real concerns of social inequality that disproportionately affects African Americans and that inform the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina? The answers do not come easily, as Blitzer's misstep and Haspiel's awkward assertion of authenticity attest: our discourses of racial and national identity are messy things, and even when we tread very carefully and speak with the best of intentions, our limitations catch up with us.
I would not suggest that _A.D._ offers any answers to these difficult questions; indeed, Neufeld seems to avoid such missteps by hardly mentioning issues of race or ethnicity. However, this is not a cop-out, but in fact a far more complex and potentially successful strategy for working through the particular challenges of this topic. Certainly, the diversity of the city is reflected in the selection of characters, but the specific ways in which identity (whether figured in terms of class, race, gender, sexuality, or religious affiliation) informed the particular Katrina-experiences of these individuals are never directly addressed. These concerns, however, are made present through a variety of cues that give these characters shape. Such cues might be as simple as names (Abbas/Hamid is, for instance, an Iranian immigrant). Others are not as obvious to readers without specific knowledge of the city: when we first meet Denise, she wears a sweatshirt emblazoned with “Xavier University”—a reference to the New Orleans-based institution, which is the nation’s only Roman Catholic historically black university. Similarly, each character’s affiliation to his or her particular neighborhood provides contextual clues about race and class: Kevin/Kwame is from New Orleans East, a suburban community that was, prior to the storm, a haven for the city’s black middle and upper middle classes, while Denise’s neighborhood—Central City—was among the city’s most impoverished. This willingness to let the evidence of identity and position emerge through the narrative, rather than explicitly detailing it, implicitly recognizes the complexities of race and ethnicity—and of class within race: Kwame’s story—evacuated to a much better high school in Berkeley, then onto a college at an elite institution in Ohio—has little in common with Denise’s experience, but it is no less authentic or authentically black. And while Abbas’s ethnicity seems to have no impact on the textures of their particular Katrina story, Neufeld does not succumb to the easy cliché of a hard-working immigrant to tell his story.

_A.D._’s engagement with race is not limited to implicit clues or to the online discussions of its readers; while the text itself does not delve deeply into these topics, the hyperlinks embedded in the webcomic locate the events within the context of race, introducing relevant and even critical information that informs our reading. The most significant example of this can be found in _A.D._’s reference to what has come to be called the “Gretna incident.” On September 1, according to the historian Douglas Brinkley, a group of some two hundred people (whom Brinkley estimates to be about 95-percent black) decided to leave the chaos of the shelters of last resort and walk over the Mississippi River to the neighboring and relatively undamaged town.
of Gretna. Near the midpoint of the bridge (known locally as the Crescent City Connection), the group was turned away at gunpoint—complete with warning shots—by the Gretna police. They were told, Brinkley writes, that "there would be no Superdomes in their city." That was shorthand for the fact that there would be no disorder in Gretna"—an understanding of the status of the city dependent solely on reports in the national news media (470). Brinkley probably could, and should, take this further: whether it was articulated or not, that statement was ultimately shorthand for their aim to ensure that there would be no more black people in Gretna.

This incident is given only a few panels in A.D.; the infuriated group returns to the Convention Center and is met by Denise, who prompts their apparent leader to tell their story. Conversations begin in the crowd, and people begin to offer explanations of their situation that, however, improbable, seem more reasonable than simple neglect: "They won't let us go! We trapped here!" one terrified woman exclaims (149). In response, one man proffers a theory held at one time by some members of New Orleans's African American community and controversially discussed in Spike Lee's documentary, When the Levees Break: "Y'know, I hear they blew up that levee in the Ninth Ward to flood us out!" the man shouts (149).

Both the Gretna incident and the conspiracy theory are fraught with the histories and language of racial strife and oppression. The printed edition of A.D., however, never addresses those implications; the identity of the "they" that "won't let us go" and that "blew up the levee" is never made clear, but by positioning statements of black disenfranchisement so close together, the text recognizes that race informs this moment. More importantly, the hyperlinks of the webcomic allow the reader to further pursue this line of inquiry. Beneath the panels addressing the Gretna episode is a link to a 60 Minutes story about the event by the late Ed Bradley. Likewise, the man's claim about the possible dynamiting on the levee—which might strike the reader as the unlikely assumptions of man in an unbelievable situation—is made more reasonable through a (now inactive) link to a December 2005 report from the NBC Nightly News that investigated the circulation of similar claims within the city's black community. Together, these reports about the ways race influenced individual experiences and interpretations of Katrina and its aftermath provide critical context for the events of the book; once one reads them, the identity of "they" becomes clear, and the horror of the image that follows—a two-page spread focused on the desperate faces of the crowd as they confront the possibility that no one is coming for them—is made more intense (150–51). In this moment, with those reports in mind,
the divide between “they” and “us” is not about where one sits, inside or outside the city, stranded or safe: it is unavoidably racial.

This strategy for addressing race and other concerns has a number of benefits for Neufeld and the reader. In moments like those I described above, the text can focus squarely on generating the emotions of frustration, despair, isolation, and abandonment felt by these characters, rather than diverging into historical complexities that, as Haspiel says, “take” the audience “out of the drama.” These emotions are universalized and thus challenge the “Othering” effect of media representations of the Superdome and Convention Center, of the sort evident in Wolf Blitzer’s “so poor . . . so black” comment. At the same time, the reader can access that context, come to a more complete understanding of the particular experience of these individuals, and begin to construct a genealogy of the event by considering factors Neufeld does not directly address. Ultimately, this approach is not unlike the Where’s Waldo image, in that it balances the particular and the general: Neufeld’s images and narrative emphasize the particularity of these characters, but the links allow the reader to investigate the scale, the causes, and the consequences of the event.

Unfortunately, the additional functionality of the web-based text is no panacea. The conversations in the comment section, for instance, never realize what we can see in retrospect as their potential: instead of discussion of potential action, the comments are most often platitudes for Neufeld’s work; the community created by these discussions is fleeting and offers little additional testimony by victims. Nonetheless, the possibility is dormant within the text, and as long as the webcomic remains active, readers may still interact with each other. Despite its relative novelty and ephemerality, the webcomic form offers great utility for the historical trauma of hurricane Katrina: it bears witness to the event in a way that gives voice to victims without fetishizing their suffering; it challenges the conventional representation of the event, demands an interpretive and engaged reader, and (in the web-form) it provides a vehicle through which an audience can both learn about the event and interact with others in a community of mutual interest. A.D. is thus more than a chronicle of an event; it is a call for action. Action might not be taken in response to this work, but it might come from other writers who find in A.D. new strategies for representing those things that do not easily yield to conventional forms of storytelling.
Notes

1. In response to a commenter on the original web comment, Neufeld wrote that he was "using a lot of photographic reference for this project—especially for the prologue. About half the images are directly from photos, while the others use photos as a resource" (http://www.smithmag.net/afterthedeluge/2007/01/01/prologue-1/).

2. I would argue that these images most immediately recall photographs of black men conscripted by the Mississippi National Guard to work on the levees during the 1927 flood.

3. In the course of teaching A.D., several of my students noted that the woman above and behind the corpse (out of focus, dark T-shirt with red lettering and white oval) bears such a striking resemblance to a woman in Abbas/Hamid's store much earlier (32) that it cannot be a coincidence.

4. According to LaCapra, "working through trauma does not imply the possibility of attaining total integration of the self, including the retrospective feat of putting together seamlessly (for example, through a harmonizing or fetishistic narrative) the riven experience of the past trauma. Any such retrospective 'suturing' would itself by phantasmatic or illusory. Working-through means work on posttraumatic symptoms in order to mitigate the effects of trauma . . . , thereby enabling a more viable articulation of affect and cognition or representation, as well as ethical and sociopolitical agency, in the present and future" (118–19).

5. "Narrative at best helps one not to change the past through a dubious rewriting of history but to work through posttraumatic symptoms in the present in a manner that opens possible futures. It also enables one to recount events and perhaps evoke experience, typically through nonlinear movements that allows trauma to register in language and its hesitations, indirections, pauses, and silences. And particularly, by bearing witness and giving testimony, narrative may help performatively to create openings in existence that did not exist before" (La Capra 121–22).

6. Other examples of works that participate in this argument include Tom Piazza's Why New Orleans Matters, Andrei Codrescu's New Orleans, Mon Amour, and essay collections like Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans? The argument on the other side has been less sustained, but perhaps more pernicious: advocates include engineers (Klaus Jacob, "Time for a Tough Question: Why Rebuild?") and media commentators like Slate's Jack Shafer ("Don't Refloat: The Case Against Rebuilding New Orleans"—playing, I think, the devil's advocate) and former CNN and current Fox News talking head Glenn Beck ("Big Easy a Lost Cause?").

7. Unlike the title figure in Dave Egger's nonfiction work, Zeitoun, who, despite deep connections to the New Orleans Community, finds himself in the custody of Homeland Security operatives after the storm.

Works Cited


