“They probably got us all on the news”:
Personal Narratives and Public Trauma in Post-Katrina New Orleans

DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Although stories and images of suffering during Hurricane Katrina saturated public discourse in 2005, the fundamental failures of communication that characterize this catastrophe remain undertheorized—especially the ease with which some stories have been accepted and others ignored. My dissertation brings together representations of the storm’s darkest moments, narrated by eyewitnesses, then shared in a broad spectrum of genres and rhetorical situations. Examining contexts of production, circulation, and reception, I demonstrate that the ways in which survivors’ personal stories are shared with larger audiences can either confirm or confound stereotypical representations of the narrators’ communities, with material consequences for their immediate aid and ongoing recovery. The approaches that drive my analysis include ethnography of communication and narrative performance, critical discourse analysis, rhetorical analysis of life writing, critical race theory, and critical theories of trauma. This project examines Katrina in a new light, focusing on the representational tactics of survivors and the processes by which their narratives are recognized or rejected. Beyond that, this study contributes to current theoretical understandings about how different communicative contexts and rhetorical situations shape the knowledge that is created about trauma and recovery. Texts conveying the eyewitness accounts of survivors have an obligation to include narrators’ critical engagement with the processes by which their stories are being collected and shared.
This is dedicated to my parents, Craig and Betsy Parker, who helped me begin by teaching me to love reading, who helped me persist by supporting my education, and who helped me finish by telling me, very early on, when it was time to write the last line:

“..and then they saw the Pacific Ocean.”
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Chapter 1: Introduction

In August of 2005, I drove out of New Orleans in the middle of the night, headed for I-59 in my roommate’s rattling truck. Hitched to the truck was a boat, in the boat was a wooden crate, and in the crate were six chickens we had been raising in our backyard. Whenever I think about my hurricane story, the first image I have is of those chickens: it was so preposterous, so out of place, so up-ended to be towing chickens in a boat on a highway. Just shortly before the hurricane landed in Louisiana, our drive landed us in Nashville, where we slept on a friend’s floor. We watched every news broadcast, we called everyone we had left behind; they did not pick up. We cried, we tried to sleep, we watched more. We searched the web for images of our apartment on Freret Street. We waited. Six weeks later we knew our place was flooded; eight weeks later we went in to drag what we could from our mold-infested rooms. The mold fought back, sending my roommate to the hospital with toxicosis, and leaving me with an olfactory memory like a noxious version of Proust’s madeleines. Sixteen weeks later we were back, for better or worse, in a new apartment. Seven years later, I still think about that smell, and those chickens.

In October of 2009, I sat in an airport bar in Chicago, and stared in stunned silence at the stranger next to me as she proclaimed that people in New Orleans had a “victim mentality,” and anyone who had not evacuated for the hurricane or who did not possess the “gumption” to rebuild on their own was “too stupid to live.” First I thought
about sharing with her my own story: all the nuances of evacuation, how I had not wanted to leave but had been persuaded at the last minute, how the truck we left in needed a jump start and we almost changed our minds because of that, how I depended on resources from family and friends outside the city in order to leave. Or I could have attempted to convey the multitude of obstacles to rebuilding without government or humanitarian aid—financial, physical, social, emotional—including the fundamental fear that the city was still not safe to live in. I wanted to explain to her the ways in which she was wrong in believing and perpetuating an image of Katrina survivors as helpless and dependent victims, but eventually I ended up walking away, leaving her mid-sentence, my silent departure the only protest I could muster. I still think about that woman, too, and about the things I could have said to her that might have changed her mind.

Megan Nix, my pre-Katrina roommate and co-owner of the chickens, is a writer. She wrote the following,¹ which expresses this same wordlessness regarding Katrina, the ability to articulate only after the fact, after the wrong questions have been ringing in your head but their askers are far out of earshot. Megan writes:

> Neighbors, strangers, coffee shop workers, writers, friends, mothers, and grocery checkers who find out where I lived ask the same question:

> You were there for the Whole Katrina Thing? What was It like?

> Here’s what I wish I said:

> Imagine the city in which you live. There are plants, surely. A man in his robe with a garden hose, tending to weekend things. A paper on the sidewalk, or a swirl of

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¹ Quoted at length with permission from Megan Nix, from her essay “Swim, Memory.”
pages swimming in the breeze of a rotating high-rise door. There are birds you can name and birds you can’t. Calls you can imitate and songs from trees you never even notice.

Picture your town’s runnings—the water you can control, like the kind in public drinking fountains, and the water you can’t, like your ocean, your lake, your storied river. Imagine where you run, who you talk to you, what it sounds like—the cars, the conversations, the unbridled sound of your society producing its things.

Now take away the birds. Take away the chirping of small children, too. Stop all manmade water and light. Take away all the people.

Put just a few back in. But don’t give them words because they won’t have any for a while. Just letters they keep repeating, like PTSD and MREs. Like conversations have become codes. Take your car. Topple the palm tree onto it, then bring it to a lake. Submerge it. Put it back in your front yard. Wait, not like that. Turn it upside down. Disaster has a ruthless sense of humor.

Spray paint the front of your house [with letters and numbers].

Make sure the color is a screaming red...

Take away the barking dogs. Take away every light bulb you ever installed, and close your door, but do it in daylight because you have never known the paradox of urban darkness, and it’s much darker than the natural kind.

Take a whiff of your left behind things. The plant that was just weeks ago pink is now a crunchy tangle of hair. The mold is a feeling more than a smell. It stops you from even thinking about going down to the basement...
Now cover your whole city in a dusting of white powder. Never ask any questions about where things went or where things are coming from. There aren’t any answers.

Megan’s right; there’s a scarcity of answers in a post-disaster city where everyone’s looking for them. Nor are there ready answers for those people who ask you to explain yourself, your city, your story in the aftermath of an event like Katrina. But there are better ways to frame our questions: ways to elicit the kinds of powerful images that Megan depicts in her eventual response, ways to encourage the kinds of personal narratives that Katrina survivors shared in the Surviving Katrina and Rita in Houston project, in interviews that are the starting point of this dissertation. Reframing the way we talk about disaster is not just about getting good stories; it is about recognizing the strategies that survivors employ as they reconstruct and reflect on what they have endured. For Megan, that means finding a way to describe the startling absence of the ordinary. For me, it is an emphasis on the humorous and the bizarre, like the chickens or the ceramic garden gnome that floated its way onto my flooded front porch. For many of the interviewees in the Surviving Katrina and Rita in Houston project, it means narrating the tragedies they witnessed in a way that foregrounds their own compassion, competence, and faith in the face of neglect, chaos, and extraordinary challenges to personal belief. For other survivors discussed in the following chapters, the rhetorical strategies they employ include, respectively, an emphasis on ambiguity, a distancing from stereotypical categories, and an outspoken awareness about how stories such as these might be circulated and received. Paying attention to these rhetorical strategies is not only

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2 This archive of interviews, conducted with hurricane survivors displaced to Texas, is described in more detail in Chapter 2.
about affording narrators the audience they deserve. My analysis is in part an argument for the study and implementation of survivors’ own theories about how to cope and rebuild; after all, survivors are the experts on their own experiences, and as such, the greatest resource for recovery.³ More broadly, though, I am making a case for what I consider to be more ethical terms for sharing the stories that emerge from disaster.

After I returned to New Orleans back in 2005, I found myself trying to figure out why everyone around me kept telling the same stories; they were obsessed with Katrina, and with describing how they suffered and how they had prevailed. I noticed this trend in my everyday conversations and in local culture; in the classes I took, as a graduate student at Tulane University; and in subsequent years, in the writing courses I taught at Delgado Community College. Now I believe that those narrative responses were in part a show of resistance: New Orleanians were not satisfied with the story as it was being circulated in the national discourse, and so privately, among ourselves as we went back to work and school, we kept repeating, “this is how it really happened to me.” I include myself in this because I also had been telling everyone I knew about the chickens, the gnome, the mold—it was preposterous, it was painful; we kept our sense of humor, we made it. But that is not the kind of story that fits easily into a conversation in the Chicago airport.

Nor are the complex and powerful stories shared in the Surviving Katrina and Rita in Houston Project the kind of stories that get snapped up by publishers, or broadcast

³ Carl Lindahl, co-founder of SKRH, has made this argument repeatedly in conference presentations at American Folklore Society meetings and elsewhere; I agree with his perspective, although it is not my primary focus in this project.
on the news, and understood to represent the generalized experiences of Katrina survivors. The kinds of stories that are easy to share, and that do get widely circulated, are those that confirm the expectations of a broad national and even international audience. Unfortunately, these are not the complicated and particular narrations wherein survivors enact strategies that advance their own recovery and that ought to inform the implementation of larger recovery plans. Rather, they are stories that bear the appearance of the particular—thereby increasing their cultural cache among audiences eager to consume the authentic experiences of others—but they are stories that in actuality reflect dominant narratives about race, class, gender, region, and human response to trauma. The problem with the proliferation of these kinds of stories is that they propagate dangerously limited and stereotypical representations, and these in turn continue to inform responses to disasters such as Katrina.

Throughout the chapters that follow, I compare four sets of non-fiction narratives from Katrina survivors. This comparison reveals that when personal narratives are adapted for public circulation, they become more closely aligned with dominant narratives. In bringing different truth-telling genres together, this comparison also shows that different modes of discourse tend towards different dominant narratives, illustrating how genre expectations influence the adaptation of personal narratives. The order in which the chapters are arranged reflects my choice to use an oral history archive of survivor interviews as my starting point for analysis, in Chapter 2. Because my disciplinary location is in folklore studies, especially its emphasis in recent decades on personal narrative as performance, I am committed to the study of narrative in
communicative contexts. Beginning with a study of personal interviews allows me to identify the interactional mechanisms by which Katrina narratives emerge in a relatively conversational setting. My observations about the contexts in which those narratives are produced then inform the textual and rhetorical analyses in the following chapters. The order of Chapters 3, 4, and 5 represents a progression towards my ultimate claim: texts which most effectively and ethically adapt personal narratives for public circulation are those which include, as part of the text itself, survivors’ critical engagement with processes of narrative production.

Before offering a more detailed discussion of my methodology and an outline of my subsequent chapters, I describe the body of academic literature with which my claims are in conversation, specifically regarding the relationship between personal narrative and experience. The scholars whose work I discuss below investigate this relationship by focusing on different areas, including the qualities projected by narrators, primarily their credibility; the qualities of the narrative itself; namely, its coherence; and the qualities of the experience being narrated. These investigations are complicated further when the experience is traumatic, and still more when that trauma is collective rather than individual. This review of existing work ultimately arrives at a persistent problem: given the ways in which we currently understand personal narrative, experience, and collective trauma, existing models for studying the interaction of these three categories are insufficient. I propose, then, my interdisciplinary methodology for analyzing personal narratives that represent collective traumatic experience, and outline how this approach enables my findings in the case of Hurricane Katrina.
Review of Relevant Literature: Personal Narrative and Traumatic Experience

William Labov writes that “[r]eportable events are almost by definition unusual. They are therefore less credible than nonreportable events. In fact, we might say that the more reportable an event is, the less credible it is. Yet credibility is as essential as reportability for the success of a narrative” (Labov, qtd. in Ochs and Capps 83). With this insightful summation, Labov gets at the crux of a central issue in personal narrative: narrators face a crisis in credibility if they have a story worth telling. Thus, scholarship on the relationship between personal narrative and experience has devoted ample attention to the means by which narrators negotiate this inverse relationship, attempting to convey the extraordinary nature of their experience while maintaining the implicit or explicit claim that “this really happened.” Amy Shuman, for example, points out that “[p]ersonal narratives are often told in conversation and report experiences that the listeners may recognize as having actually occurred, but the incidental form of discourse does not erase the fact that they are narratives… personal narratives, like histories, use conventions to convey the assertion that something happened” (Storytelling 75).

The ways in which credibility is claimed and conferred can range based on a narrative’s communicative context. For example, narrators’ legitimation may stem from

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4 In formulating this argument, Shuman cites Roland Barthes’ work on historical discourse: “Roland Barthes writes, ‘Historical discourse does not follow reality, it only signifies it; it asserts at every moment: this happened, but the meaning conveyed is only that someone is making that assertion’ (1970:154). In personal narratives, it may be easy to overlook the possibility that the form, and not the experiences, dictates the conventions for storyability and tellability. Barthes’ comments expose historical discourse as a discourse with conventions for representing ‘reality,’ and they insist that the devices of historical discourse are no less conventional than the conventions for representing fiction” (Shuman, Storytelling 75).
their relationship to the narrated event, or it may also be a product of their skill as a storyteller. William Labov explains the standards for evaluation of credibility among urban African American adolescents in his 1972 study:

[T]he aesthetic considerations of artistic performance may demand the embellishment or manipulation – if not the sacrifice – of the literal truth in the interests of greater dynamic tension, formal elegance, surprise value, contrast, or other elements that contribute to excellence in performance in this subculture. (“Transformation” 21)

In this case, the storyteller’s performance lends him a credibility that “literal truth” would not provide. In other communicative contexts, convergence with historical truth is the standard for authority in narrative representations. This standard of evaluation tends to be more relevant in public discourse than scholarly work; whereas general audiences might expect historical accuracy,\(^5\) many scholars of narrative tend to agree that, as Tim O’Brien puts it, “story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth” (179). As one such scholar explains, “[t]he truth of stories is not only what was experienced, but equally what becomes experience in the telling and its reception” (Frank 22). The expectations of audiences for publicly circulated stories, however, are important in the context of Katrina, and such audiences are often not as apt to appreciate the emergent, contextual, “story-truth” of personal narratives. Thus, the claims to credibility made both by narrators

\(^5\) Consider, for example, instances in recent years when consumers were outraged by the discovery that a work of “non-fiction” contained fabrications, as in the cases of James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces* and Greg Mortenson’s *Three Cups of Tea*. 
and the publications through which their stories are distributed are important points of my analysis.

In a distinct but closely related process of evaluation, narrative credibility may be subject to cultural expectations based on other prevailing narratives. Amy Shuman writes that “[t]he story that is too unfamiliar, too exotic to be believed, and the story that is too familiar are both subject to suspicion” (*Other* 54). Thus in constructing a story that makes a bid for credibility, the teller must strike the perfect balance of familiarity and exceptionality. This is different from Labov’s claim about the trade-off between credibility and reportability; in Shuman’s explanation, the “familiar” and the “exotic” are not qualities of the event, but rather of the story as it portrays them. In the context of narratives about trauma, this balance becomes even more precarious. Given academic and popular understandings of what trauma entails and how people respond to it, the traumatized individual is often expected to produce a narrative bearing the hallmark “symptoms” associated with survivors of trauma: lapses in memory, compulsive repetition of significant moments or details, perhaps deferral or displacement with respect to particularly upsetting memories, and above all, fragmentation due to the essentially unrepresentable nature of experience. Quite to the contrary, though, many scholars have argued that the function of personal narrative is to create a sense of coherence, which means both that there may be conflicting expectations for a narrative of trauma (coherent or fragmented) and that the goals of narrators may be at odds with the expectations of audiences.
The idea of coherence can mean several things for narratives of experience; it can refer to a quality of the story itself, to the continuity between the experience and the individual presenting it, or to a sense of coherent self that the individual telling the story is trying to construct and portray. Often narrators’ strategies create coherence in all three of these senses simultaneously; for example, many studies of coherence by folklore scholars focus on individual life histories, and the strategies individual narrators use to fashion a meaningful story, life, and self. The works discussed below reflect the scholarly developments regarding narrative coherence that are most relevant to my claims about personal narrative in the context of Katrina. Coherence, as these scholars describe it, is a useful model for understanding narrators’ rhetorical motives and strategies, but ultimately one that does not fully address the challenges inherent in individual narration about collective traumatic experience.

In Charlotte Linde’s 1993 book *Life Stories: Creation of Coherence*, Linde explains that life stories respond to both a psychological and social need for coherence. She offers the following evidence of this phenomenon: “[w]here some new event has happened that we do not know how to form into narrative….We can observe a great deal of confusion and uneasiness until we somehow make the new event fit the ongoing story, or until the story has been changed to accommodate the new event” (Linde 17-18). Linde goes on to explain how coherence is managed at multiple levels of narrative structure: by manipulation of verb tense and evaluative commentary, by demonstration of continuity and causality, and by enlistment of large scale discursive structures such as common sense or lay knowledge of psychoanalysis. This last point is especially indicative of the
challenges that arise when narratives reflect traumatic experience, and when the broader
discursive structures generally relied on for coherence are insufficient or unavailable.

Linde builds on the work of other scholars such as Jeff Todd Titon, who
distinguishes among different genres representing human lives. Titon notes that although
autobiography, oral history, and life history are all concerned with fidelity to historical
fact, “life storytelling is a fiction, a making, an ordered past imposed by a present
personality upon a disordered life” (290). The distinction between life story and
autobiography is one that Linde also makes, noting in her case that “…autobiography
differs from the life story [in] that it is a written, not an oral, form…[I]t constitutes a
literary genre with its own history, its own demands, and its own market” (37). Although
these two and several other scholars have made significant efforts to delineate genres of
self-representation, even across such genres, the tendency to view a coherent life as a
construction persists. For instance, Elizabeth Tonkin characterizes both “life stories and
autobiographies” as works that “create personae, not transparent self-portraits” (57).
Almost a decade prior to Tonkin’s description, James Olney explained the process of
constructing a life story as follows:…neither the autos nor the bios is there in the
beginning, a completed entity, a defined, known self or a history to be had for the taking.
Here is where the act of writing—the third element of autobiography—assumes its true
importance: it is through that act that the self and life…assume a particular shape and
image” (Olney 22). In other words, these scholars view the process of creating a story
that reflects a coherent self as, in varying degrees, also constructing that self. Alessandro
Portelli writes, “[t]o paraphrase Walter Benjamin, the problem is not what is the relation
between life and story; but, rather, what is the place of the story within life” (Portelli 118). The representation of coherence has implications not just for the story and the audience, but for the speaker’s understanding of his or her past, present, and future—making the stakes for coherent narratives especially high in contexts of trauma. Furthermore, in collective contexts, the projection of a coherent persona has implications for the groups to which individual narrators belong.

How, then, do narrators create coherence when the experience they are describing is traumatic, and how is this further complicated when narrators are perceived as representative of a group? Arthur Frank begins to address the first part of this question in his 1995 study of “illness narratives,” The Wounded Storyteller. Frank identifies the challenges posed by illness disrupting a life, and the demand for a narrative explanation of that disruption. He explains that “[t]he illness story is wrecked because its present is not what the past was supposed to lead up to, and the future is scarcely thinkable” (Frank 55). The coherence that may have previously come easily to an ill individual is now more difficult to locate, but its elusiveness often increases the urgency of recreating it. This is in part because, as Frank points out, dominant cultural explanations of illness follow a trajectory that personal experience is expected to mimic (first health, then illness, then medical treatment, and finally recovery). The narratives of illness in Frank’s account emphasize those elements of the past that will provide the most continuity for the individual’s present and imagined future. Frank elaborates on this tendency, explaining that “…the sense of what was foreground and background can shift to recreate a past that displays what [Donald] Spence calls greater ‘continuity and closure.’” Out of narrative
truths a sense of coherence can be restored” (61). Despite the agency with which these storytellers are credited in configuring their life stories, the resources for creating coherence are often cultural ones that make sense only in particular social contexts. As Frank puts it, “…people do not make up their stories by themselves. The shape of the telling is molded by all the rhetorical expectations that the storyteller has been internalizing…From their families and friends, from the popular culture that surrounds them, and from the stories of other ill people” (3). In noting that “people do not make up their stories by themselves,” Arthur Frank pinpoints some social aspects of life stories, in terms of the societal demands for coherence and the cultural resources for constructing it. There are other social features of personal narrative to be considered, however, and the theorists discussed below point increasingly to the notion that individual narratives are inherently social, in their creation, their transmission, and their function.

In her 1992 book *Remembered Lives: The Work of Ritual, Storytelling, and Growing Older*, Barbara Myerhoff studies a group of elderly Jewish immigrants at a senior citizens’ center in Los Angeles. Her findings are useful in thinking about how coherence is realized not just in narrative, but also in narrative interaction. Myerhoff writes that the senior citizens she studied would create, in group storytelling sessions, “an agreed-upon interpretation of their lives, imposing form on what would have otherwise been chaotic and haphazard, and consoling them by disclosing sense and coherence in the series of choices and accidents that make up a life” (254). These elderly folk were building coherence in the sense of story, life, and person, and as Myerhoff notes, they did so together. Ray Cashman also examines narrative interaction as a social process in
Storytelling on the Northern Irish Border. Focusing on anecdotes about local characters, Cashman explains how these narratives work to shape a community: “[c]ommunity does not exist apart from narratives…and practices…that assert community” (221). In the anecdotes that Cashman describes, individuals can serve as both storytellers and characters; the fact that community members might be the teller of the story or the subject of it creates social bonds at different levels. In this Northern Irish context, telling stories of personal experience lends itself both to the construction of an imagined community—in the evaluation of the traits and morals represented by the people described—and the enactment of a material one, in the social situations where stories are told and heard.6

If community is understood as both imagined and enacted, then it follows that acceptance or rejection of a narrative in the constructed realm implies a material acceptance or rejection in the realm of lived experience. In Narrating Our Pasts, Elizabeth Tonkin alludes to this connection in a positive sense:

People have to use historical accounts when they work to construct social identities which will support and legitimate their claims to resources and land. These constructions in turn succeed when individuals internalise the social identities and thus really become members of the asserted social group. (130)

This explanation serves as an example of narrative claims to group membership being recognized. This process, in Tonkin’s accounting of it, yields material benefits as well as

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6 See also Dorothy Noyes and Benedict Anderson on imagined versus enacted community.
social ones. While some narrative constructions of self are taken up as part of a construction of community, there are other narratives that are excluded. For example, towards the end of her book Tonkin raises “the problem of finding a secure identity when history-as-lived has destroyed the literal place of one’s social identity, the familiar connections (in all senses) through which a positive and recognized ‘I’ can be brought together with ‘we’” (Tonkin 136). The separation of an individual from his or her accustomed social context disrupts the coherence of personal narrative. More than just a disruption of continuity in the events of the life, which might affect the life story’s “plot,” Tonkin suggests that the loss of material connection between the “I” and the “we” makes it difficult to conceptualize the “I” in the same way.

In cases where communities are disrupted by collective trauma, challenges such as those described by Tonkin would certainly be prevalent. When the physical community is disrupted, individuals lose access to multiple narrative resources: their sense of self, their connection to a group identity, the material conditions in which their stories are usually told. All of these disruptions make coherence a difficult narrative goal to achieve, but these shifting conditions tend not to coincide with shifting expectations. That is, individuals are still expected to produce coherent narratives, and as previously mentioned, the stakes for their narrative representations are heightened in contexts of trauma. This is in part because their perception of self is already threatened, and in part because external audiences—such as media outlets, government or other aid agencies, and even strangers—continue to demand a story that makes sense. Narrative coherence garners real rewards for those who manage to convey it, and for those whom it eludes, the
negative consequences are just as real. But if the rhetorical resources to which individuals turn to construct coherent narratives are not available, then the stories they create will not be coherent within that context. Another way of putting this is, in the words of Ken Plummer, “life stories can only be told once a societal framework becomes available for them to be told…Many stories and histories simply cannot be told when the social frameworks are not there” (402). What, then, are the social frameworks that enable personal narratives of traumatic experience?

This question is answered in part by reviewing relevant theoretical work in the field of trauma studies, and in part by turning to critical revisions of what is meant by “experience” in general, and “traumatic experience” in particular. Trauma studies scholarship, since the early 1990’s, has taken a genealogical turn: investigations pursue where the notion of “trauma” originated, how it has changed, and what social forces have enabled and benefitted from those changes. This attention to historical understandings of trauma reveals that the concept itself is not a stable one, though it is often deployed as if it is. In the absence of a concrete, portable definition of trauma, scholars have been freed, in a sense, to study the variable conditions that produce “trauma” as a meaningful category of experience. With major implications for the study of personal narrative, to which the end of this chapter will return in more detail, these new directions in trauma studies present theoretical conceptions of traumatic experience, and experience more broadly, as discursive. This is not to say that a traumatic experience is not “real” to those who endure it, but rather to say that the experience’s very realness is inextricably tied to the language that always already describes it. Therefore, studying a personal narrative
about trauma invites attention not only to the narrative itself, but also to its discursive contexts.

Anthropologists Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, in *Empire of Trauma*, model the genealogical approach to trauma from which my own research emerges. They start by posing a question about how the category of “victim,” historically regarded with suspicion, became a valid category, deserving of compassion, reparations, and treatment. In their words, “[t]he victim—who in fact was rarely thought of as a ‘victim’—was tarred as illegitimate; trauma was a suspect condition…now the victim is recognized as such and trauma is a legitimate status” (Fassin and Rechtman 5). The authors trace key historical moments where the category has surfaced with varying degrees of credibility, asking, “[h]ow and why has trauma been able to embody, equally powerfully, entirely opposing values?” (Fassin and Rechtman 9). They argue that the variations in the meaning of “trauma” and “victim” are neither inconsequential nor accidental; on the contrary, they are often the result of medical practice, research, activism, and policy-making. As they note in sorting out the various interests at work in the shifting category of trauma victim, “[p]olitics of reparation, politics of testimony, politics of proof—in all three cases, trauma is not simply the cause of the suffering that is being treated, it is also a resource that can be used to support a right” (Fassin and Rechtman 10). Although they are pointing out how economic and political forces have influenced the use of these denominations, they are also making a concerted effort to contest neither the suffering of individuals nor the validity of psychology as a science.
Instead of claiming that the category of “trauma victim” is useless given its historical fluctuations, Fassin and Rechtman focus on elucidating the cultural contexts that lend that label the substantial power it wields. Their analysis allows for a clearer understanding of who gets denied that power, by whom, and under what conditions:

Recognition of trauma, and hence the differentiation between victims, is largely determined by two elements: the extent to which politicians, aid workers, and mental health specialists are able to identify with the victims, in counterpoint to the distance engendered by the otherness of the victims…Thus trauma, often unbeknownst to those who promote it, reinvents ‘good’ and ‘bad’ victims, or at least a ranking of legitimacy among victims. (Fassin and Rechtman 282)

The authors have already established the historical tradition of ranking victims on a scale of suspicion, and demonstrated the consequences that accompany that designation. In addition to the psychic toll of disbelief, there are material costs such as refusal of medical aid, denial of compensation, and rejection of asylum. As they allude to in their conclusion, the widespread perception of “trauma” and “victim” as stable categories can prevent nuanced understanding of the conditions in which those terms get deployed. Specifically with respect to Hurricane Katrina, they explain that “the people of New Orleans were already victims of poverty and discrimination that reinforced class inequalities through racial distinctions. Trauma is not only silent on these realities; it actually obscures them” (Fassin and Rechtman 281).
Whereas Fassin and Rechtman produce a genealogy for the category of “trauma victim,” Allan Young investigates the history of this concept from a different angle. In *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*, Young outlines and ultimately critiques a logical narrative—underlying many studies of trauma—that begins with the mid 19th century and culminates in contemporary definitions of PTSD. This chronology originates in the 1860’s with the treatment of injuries from railroad accidents, also known as “railway spine.” Eric Caplan sums up this historical moment, to which he attributes the origins of psychoanalysis, as follows: “[b]orn in 1866 as an exclusively somatic disease, railway spine entered its adolescence in the 1880s as a confusing psychical ailment, began its adulthood in the 1890s in a state of somatic-psychic flux, and suffered an early death in the first decade of the twentieth century” (388). The “death” of this early conception of traumatic neuroses was in part the rise of psychological explanations of traumatic memory, in the discrete but overlapping theories of Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud. Psychoanalysis renamed the condition “hysteria,” and Janet and Freud went their separate ways: toward an emphasis on traumatic memory, and a theory of childhood as inherently traumatic, respectively. These early psychoanalytic formulations still bear mighty influence on both theoretical and popular understandings of trauma. During WWI the dominant conception of trauma was labeled “shell shock,” and it was informed by war veterans and those who studied them, such as W.H.R. Rivers. According to the widely accepted chronology, this historical development of trauma as a concept culminates in the aftermath of the Vietnam war, when American veterans were seen as demonstrating symptoms of trauma, and as a result, they and their allies
succeeded in getting Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder classified in the 1980 diagnostic manual, or *DSM III*.

In presenting this narrative, Allan Young insists that retroactively reading it as continuous is a mistaken endeavor. His primary objection is to the tendency to “discover” PTSD as having existed prior to its formulation in 1980, albeit under other names, and to posthumously diagnose its sufferers. Instead, he posits the following:

[T]his generally accepted picture of PTSD, and the traumatic memory that underlies it, is mistaken. The disorder is not timeless, nor does it possess an intrinsic unity. Rather, it is glued together by the practices, technologies, and narratives with which it is diagnosed, studied, treated, and represented and by the various interests, institutions, and moral arguments that mobilized these efforts and resources. (Young 5)

Although Young’s concern is principally with the category of PTSD, his analysis points to a similar conclusion as the one Fassin and Rechtman reach. That is, he identifies the shifting application of a term used to designate trauma, based on historical contexts, political forces, and something akin to what Fassin and Rechtman call a “moral economy” (275). Like Fassin and Rechtman, however, Young is not interested in denying the reality of trauma as it is experienced by individuals. He explains, “[t]o say that traumatic memory and PTSD are constituted through a researcher’s techno-phenomena and styles of scientific reasoning does not deny the pain that is suffered by people who are diagnosed or diagnosable with PTSD. …The suffering is real; PTSD is real” (Young 10). In both these books, then, there exists a tension between designating a shifting
concept as constructed, in order to reveal its interests and destabilize its power to exclude, and maintaining a concept as “real,” in order to recognize the human suffering it denotes and for which it has the power to secure helpful resources.\textsuperscript{7}

As the discussion above demonstrates, social forces are implicated in contemporary understandings of trauma; therefore, it is fitting that trauma studies scholars have also tended in recent years towards distinguishing between individual and collective traumatic experience.\textsuperscript{8} Dominant theories of trauma in the past have rested on the foundations of individual injury, as in “railway spine,” and individual treatment, as in psychoanalysis. The development of PTSD complicates this understanding because its origins depended on the argument that large numbers of returning soldiers were suffering similar symptoms, caused by their shared experience of war. However, the symptoms and treatment of PTSD, as well as its definition in the \textit{DSM III}, are tied to an understanding of trauma as an individual affliction, not a collective one. In fact, the language of the definition was changed to reflect more individuality in the \textit{DSM IV}; the phrase “distressful to almost anyone who experiences it” was judged to be too universal, given that “people may respond differently to outwardly similar events” (Young 288). Part of the challenge in articulating how collective trauma emerges is found in the intricate ties between understandings of trauma and memory. If people do not share memories, then how can they possibly share trauma?

\textsuperscript{7} For a similar project with emphasis on a different diagnostic category, see also Jackie Orr’s 2006 work \textit{Panic Diaries: A Genealogy of Panic Disorder}.

\textsuperscript{8} See, for example, Mark Seltzer’s discussion of “the pathological public sphere” in \textit{Serial Killers: Death and Life in America’s Wound Culture} (1998).
In their 1999 volume *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer take an important step toward theorizing collective trauma, by compiling analyses of collective memory and its cultural expressions. As their introduction asserts, “memory can be understood as a cultural phenomenon as well as an individual or social one” (vii). They move on to explain that they are interested in the ways that cultural memory is enacted, writing, “cultural recall is not merely something of which you happen to be a bearer but something you actually *perform*, even if, in many instances, such acts are not consciously or willfully contrived” (vii). This allows the volume’s contributors to focus on a wide variety of means by which memory is performed such as works of art and literature, museums and monuments, celebrations, and political movements. The approaches in this volume are useful in that they examine social aspects of the management of trauma: for example, how an event is remembered, forgotten, forgiven, or reinterpreted for political purposes.

In this volume, however, neither the editors nor the contributors are primarily interested in defining what kinds of trauma result in cultural acts of memory; in other words, they do not characterize collective trauma beyond something that happens to a large number of people who presumably inhabit a shared culture. This means their insightful analyses of social practices of memory are not extended to those practices before and during the trauma. They are interested in a society’s remembrance of a pivotal or disruptive event, but not in how what becomes the “cultural recall” gets negotiated prior to its being recalled. Additionally, although they claim at the outset that “cultural

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9 With the exception of Ernst van Alphen, to whose essay, “Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, and Trauma,” I return later in this chapter.
memory… has displaced and subsumed the discourses of individual (psychological) memory and of social memory” (vii), the acts of memory described still seem to adhere to an “individual (psychological)” assumption of traumatic memory. For example, in the chapter by Marianne Hirsch, she describes her concept of “postmemory,” stemming from an implicitly psychoanalytic perception about how traumatic memory works, in which children of survivors suffer the intrusion of images that are essentially repressions transmitted from their traumatized parents. Thus, although contributors to this volume are attentive to the unique ways in which collective traumatic events are remembered, they do not account for the social complexity of the experience itself.

Similarly, other theorists have examined memory’s collective dynamics, but have focused on memory as a performance or a product, rather than focusing on the processes by which memories take shape, circulate, and gain force in social contexts. In his book *Remembering the Year of the French: Irish Folk History and Social Memory*, historian Guy Beiner synthesizes major developments in memory studies in the twentieth century. He begins, “The founding father of the concept of collective memory was the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who furthered ideas raised by his illustrious mentor Émile Durkheim to argue against the validity of individual psychology and to claim that memory is fundamentally a collective function” (Beiner 25). Beiner goes on to explain how “Halbwachs even insisted that all memory is collective, insofar as individual recollections are structured by group identities and conditioned by social consciousness, so that ‘no memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections’” (25). This understanding of memory
corresponds with my discussion below of experience, and there are similar limitations in Halbwachs’ explanation of collective memory as there are in some applications of the idea that experience is discursive. Just as I argue below, with Joan Scott, that experience is discursive but not determined by discourse, I object to Halbwachs’ statement above by contending that memory is social but not determined by society.

In fact, to return to Elizabeth Tonkin’s work *Narrating Our Pasts*, she addresses this objection more fully. Tonkin writes that “[m]emory for [Halbwachs] mediates between the social world and the mind, but only so as to reproduce society” (105). She points out how this suggests a static view of memory, one wherein people are passive recipients. This model fails to account, then, for the capacity of individuals to modify memory, leading to action and change. Tonkin’s contribution to a collective memory model does take these interactions into consideration; she proposes, “[t]he missing term in Halbwachs’ account is socialisation, which I would define as the ways and means by which we internalise the external world” (105). Beiner finds Tonkin’s terminological and theoretical shift, from collective memory to social memory, effective in “acknowledging the role of socializing processes” (Beiner 26). He makes his own addition by distinguishing between what constitutes memory as opposed to the actions of remembering. As he puts it, he “prefers the term social memory when referring to representations of traditional bodies of knowledge, and social remembering (or simply remembrance) in reference to dynamic processes of reproduction” (28).

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10 He also cites James Fentress and Chris Wickham’s use of the term social memory, and points out the added benefits of that term’s distance, as opposed to Halbwachs’ “collective memory,” from Carl Jung’s notion of a collective unconscious (Beiner 27).
Beiner’s distinction is largely in line with one I would make as well, between memory as product and memory as process. I differentiate my own understanding of memory from his in that I focus my attention on a different point in the process. He asserts, “[a]lthough it may be unfeasible to pinpoint social memory as referring to a single clearly defined subject, nonetheless it is possible to positively identify expressions of social memory and moments of social remembering in action” (Beiner 28). I agree with this view, and I add that it is possible and worthwhile not only to identify active “expressions” of memory, but also memory’s processes of formation. This goal is secondary to my research, as I focus on the production, circulation, and reception of personal narratives, but it informs my interest in and attention to these narratives, which are an integral piece in a comprehensive model of social memory. In some ways my task is similar to the one undertaken by Niall Ó Ciosáin’s study on folklore and memory of famine in Ireland. Ó Ciosáin writes the following:

As the memory of the Famine was transmitted, it was probably those elements of local memory that corresponded most closely to popular memory that were most ‘tellable,’ that survive in the narrative repertoire of the informants of the 1930s and 1940s. In this way, popular memory structures local memory…A similar relationship seems to exist between the layer of popular memory and that of global memory, with the former
acting as a framework of reception for aspects of the abstract and long-term accounts. (226)\textsuperscript{11}

Although Ó Ciosáin’s distinctions between “layers” of local, popular, and global memory seem to collapse in the context of my investigation, wherein these levels of discourse are mutually constitutive, my questions mirror his in that we both ask how narratives circulate, accumulate social power, and become part of social memory. To some extent, both his study and mine take up the challenge that Guy Beiner identifies for scholars of social memory: “explaining why certain information was remembered and other information forgotten” (32). In the context of post-Katrina New Orleans, attention and inattention to information is further complicated by dominant expectations about what trauma entails and how individuals and communities will respond to it.

Sociologist Kai Erikson has written incisively about the issues surrounding collective trauma, its articulation in narratives, and its reception by those discursive and institutional frameworks that attach value to categories such as “trauma” and “victim.” Erikson’s study of communities in crisis, \textit{A New Species of Trouble: the Human Experience of Modern Disaster}, leads him to two important critical conclusions regarding trauma. The first is that “trauma” should be understood in terms of effects rather than causes. This differs significantly from the clinical definition of PTSD, which as Allan Young points out, “depends on this temporal-causal relation: etiological event → symptoms” (7). Instead, Erikson argues that “it is \textit{how people react to them} rather than

\textsuperscript{11}Ó Ciosáin’s layers of memory loosely correspond to oral history (local), official history (global, examples of which include narratives circulated by church and state), and folklore (popular, examples of which include “a stylized repertoire of images, motifs, short narratives and supernatural legends”) (224-5).
what they are that give events whatever traumatic quality they can be said to have” (229, emphasis in original). This has implications for both individual and collective notions of trauma. For example, it provides room for the sort of subjective variation sought by the revised *DSM*, while not insisting on an individualized response. Furthermore, it allows for the boundaries of a collective to be drawn based on responses to an event, not necessarily relationship or proximity to the event itself. This revision can be seen as a temporal one; Erikson is inverting the prevailing definition of trauma as “before and after” to suggest that the “after” come first. His second concluding claim is a temporal one as well, though it is a question of duration rather than order. In contrast to the customary explanation of trauma as a single overwhelming event, he offers a long-term characterization. He claims that “trauma’ has to be understood as resulting from a *constellation of life experiences* as well as from a discrete happening, from a *persisting condition* as well as from an acute event” (Erikson 229, emphasis in original). Again, this has ramifications for both individual and collective trauma, but his descriptions of communal suffering are particularly enriched by this notion that there are ongoing circumstances and conditions which define the social contexts of trauma.

In Erikson’s case studies, he describes communities dealing with distinct disasters, many of which are compounded by long term conditions of suffering such as poverty. In the epilogue to his book, he grapples with existing definitions of trauma that do not fit what he has observed in these collective settings. He writes finally, “communal trauma, let’s say, can take two forms, either alone or in combination: damage to the tissues that hold human groups intact and the creation of social climates, communal
moods, that come to dominate a group’s spirit” (Erikson 237). By the second point, he means more precisely that “traumatic experiences work their way so thoroughly into the grain of the affected community that they come to supply its mood and temper, dominate its imagery and its sense of self, govern the way its members relate to one another” (Erikson 237). For this second form of communal trauma, an approach like that outlined in *Acts of Memory* may be sufficient: those essays deal with the “imagery” of communities affected by trauma, and in some ways their studies also examine the way community “members relate to one another” in negotiating the performance of cultural memory. In portraying communal trauma as “damage to the tissues that hold human groups intact,” though, Erikson invokes a metaphor of traumatized-collective-as-organism that is both theoretically unique and productive. It insists on collective impact, and demands an investigation into what exactly constitutes the connective “tissues” in this social body—as well as into their vulnerabilities as perhaps exposed by the trauma.

My interdisciplinary methodology in studying personal experience narratives post-Katrina maintains Erikson’s emphasis on these elusive connective tissues, or social bonds, and reveals how the connections that community members lay claim to are often different than the connections that become highlighted as their narratives travel to wide audiences.

João Biehl’s work, in *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment*, inspires in a different way my understanding of collective trauma and my methodology for analyzing those narratives that emerge from it. Whereas Erikson describes an organic metaphor for the wounded collective, Biehl offers a more mechanical model, but one that takes equal
consideration of connective parts and processes. He describes the combined social forces that have produced the illness and abandonment of his ethnographic subject, Catarina, as a “machine in which a tie to others and to living are rendered impossible” (Biehl 186). Just as with Erikson’s work, this metaphor raises questions about what the ties are that attach one human to another, and what the conditions are that make it possible to sever them. Biehl explains how he attempts to answer these questions with his methodological approach, which he describes as an “ethnography of transition” (125): “[t]his ethnography makes visible the intermingling of colloquial practices and relations, institutional histories, and discursive structures that…have bounded normalcy and displaced Catarina onto the register of social death, where her condition appears to be ‘self-generated’” (Biehl 23). A study such as this one illuminates social dimensions (“colloquial practices and relations, institutional histories, and discursive structures”) of trauma. Furthermore, Biehl’s ethnography insists on the particularity of Catarina’s subjectivity within these dimensions, most remarkably by using her own speech and writing—in dialogue with medical, familial, and political discourses—to name the conditions that enable her abandonment. Whereas Erikson’s focus is on the collective, and his primary claim is that a community suffers trauma together and in different ways from an individual, Biehl’s focus is on an individual, and his claim is that her traumatic illness and death are inflicted by a convergence of social factors. Both of these models productively address the social forces that create the conditions for trauma and shape its experience and its effects.
In my own research on Hurricane Katrina, I combine the individual specificity of Biehl’s work with Erikson’s attention to qualities of the collective, in order to examine how personal narratives emerge from and get taken up in public discourse. I show how representations of traumatic experiences during and after Katrina tend to depict either masses that make individual suffering unintelligible, or representative individuals, “exemplary” of suffering but disconnected from the social processes that produce it. In attending to the social body, which Erikson and Biehl represent respectively as an organism or a machine, I attempt to illuminate the often obscured processes by which these bodies operate in contexts of trauma. Like Biehl, my focus is on the language produced by survivors, and my analysis often explores how that language interacts with dominant narratives. To more effectively situate my view of trauma as social and language as a methodological entry point to that sociality, I turn finally to recent theories arguing that rather than “experience” (traumatic or otherwise) being something that happens outside of or prior to language, experience itself is discursive.

Viewing experience as discursive allows me to analyze how individual stories interact with the existing narratives that constituted the events of the hurricane for its survivors. In a 1991 article in *Critical Inquiry*, Joan Scott argues against taking experience for granted as the basis for knowledge.\(^\text{12}\) Even though she is responding to a practice that sought to bring to light those lives that are marginalized in dominant historical accounts, she argues that this approach stops short of interrogating how certain experiences are disregarded in the first place. Scott declares that “[i]t is not individuals

\(^{12}\) See also Teresa de Lauretis, especially her chapter on “Semiotics and Experience” in her 1984 book *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*. 31
who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience,” (779) and consequently, she attempts to shift scholarly attention to those “…historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences” (780). This shift clearly has implications for studies of narratives that represent experience. One way of putting it is that instead of representing something factual and pre-existing, narratives are representing another layer of discourse. Scott does not address the repercussions of such a model for theories of trauma, wherein defining a traumatic experience as “discursive” (or not factual) can be harmful to survivors in its perceived contradiction of the lived suffering that trauma produces. Other scholars though, in taking up Scott’s concept, discuss more fully how it influences studies of personal narrative and trauma.

Folklorist Patricia Sawin, for example, in her 2004 book *Listening for a Life*, employs Scott’s theory of discursively constituted experience in narrative analysis. In this “dialogic ethnography” of singer Bessie Eldreth, Sawin traces the ways Eldreth enacts her self through narrative. Sawin draws on “theories of gender as performed and the self (and culture) as dialogic,” which “see the individual and culture as contingent and emergent constructions, fictions created in the course of interaction” (5). She describes how Eldreth’s narrative interactions with ethnographers and neighbors are communicative events wherein she subtly revises her identity over time. When listening to Eldreth’s nostalgic reflections on the work she did as a young woman, Sawin is struck by the contrast between Eldreth’s positive view and Sawin’s own impression that Eldreth was exploited for her labor. Sawin offers this explanation to account for Eldreth’s convictions: “Indeed, one might argue, following Joan Scott (1991), that Eldreth’s
‘experience’ is so (inevitably) determined by internalized discourses that what she in fact experienced was valuable work against steep odds rather than excessive work for too little return” (46). Thus, in viewing Eldreth’s experience as discursively constituted, Sawin is able to understand how the events of Eldreth’s past do not exist separately from the discourses that shaped that past.

However, Sawin gives more credit to the power of discourse and less to the power of subjects than Joan Scott does. Scott presents discourse neither as necessarily “internalized” nor as “inevitable” in its determination of experience and subjectivity. In fact, Scott is quite clear in remarking that “subjects do have agency,” and she elaborates on the terms of that agency as follows:

Subjects are constituted discursively and experience is a linguistic event (it doesn't happen outside established meanings), but neither is it confined to a fixed order of meaning. Since discourse is by definition shared, experience is collective as well as individual. Experience can both confirm what is already known (we see what we have learned to see) and upset what has been taken for granted (when different meanings are in conflict we readjust our vision to take account of the conflict or to resolve it…).

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Experience is discursive, but not determined by discourse. Studying the interaction of personal narratives with discourse that “is by definition shared” can help pinpoint the collective aspects of experience, just as it may help to illuminate the “socialisation” process with which Elizabeth Tonkin characterizes social memory. When collective
experience and social memory are traumatic, then, does the role of discourse remain the same?

In Ernst van Alphen’s essay “Symptoms of Discursivity,” the author builds on Joan Scott’s theorization of experience in relation to trauma. Van Alphen writes, “I shall analyze trauma as an experience that has not come about and that shows negatively symptoms of the discursivity that defines ‘successful’ experience…the cause of trauma is precisely the impossibility of experiencing…an event” (“Symptoms” 26). He goes on to explain, “the problem is not the nature of the event, nor an intrinsic limitation of representation; rather, it is the split between the living of an event and the available forms of representation with/in which the event can be experienced” (van Alphen, “Symptoms” 27). Van Alphen is extending Scott’s definition of discursive experience in ways that illuminate central issues in studies of trauma. He differentiates himself from psychoanalysts, who might also see trauma as an unsuccessful experience, or one that the victim is unable to process; in their case, as he explains, the problem is one of mental integration, whereas in his case, the issue is a linguistic or narrative one. This expansion of Scott’s work is also important in that it still allows for the real, lived experience of trauma. Where Scott does not address how the notion of discursivity might invalidate traumatic experience, van Alphen emphasizes that if the pre-existing language that will make sense of an experience does not exist, that does not mean the experience is not “real” in some sense, but rather that the experience is impossible to make sense of.

Van Alphen has written more at length about discursivity and trauma in his 1997 book Caught by History, in which he discusses what he calls the “alleged
unrepresentability” of the Holocaust, a “problem [that] is,” according to him, “fundamentally semiotic in nature” (“Symptoms” 26). He argues that this semiotic problem can be addressed by using modes of discourse other than the historical: “if the problem originates in a technical discursive limitation, the realm of the imaginative might be a solution…and even provide some privileged access, as it pursues its role of creatively challenging the symbolic order” (van Alphen, Caught 42). Van Alphen is responding to what he sees as a preference for historical or documentary genres in representations of the Holocaust, and a relative dismissal of fictional or other imaginative works. He explains how he sees these imaginative discourses as capable of representing the “unrepresentable”:

History brings with it more responsibilities than only knowing and remembering the facts…Other responsibilities that are poignantly imposed on us involve the working through of the traumatic intrusion of an unimaginable reality, and the foregrounding of the cracks and tears that are concealed by the coherence of the stories being told. It is in relation to those responsibilities that the imaginative discourses of art and literature can step in. (van Alphen, Caught 37)

His argument is essentially for privileging imaginative works as opposed to—or at least as much as—historical ones. In my study of narrative representations of Hurricane Katrina, I focus on the kinds of documentary, non-fiction texts that provoke van Alphen’s skepticism. However, his reasoning in turning to the imaginative is very similar to the motives for my methodology. I argue, like van Alphen, that for the ethical representation
of traumatic experience, “foregrounding...the cracks and tears” is essential, and my analysis attempts to explore those places where non-fiction texts successfully do this. I extend this foregrounding not only to the “cracks and tears” apparent in a text, between an incoherent experience and a coherent narrative, but also to the processes by which that narrative is translated from personal to public: that is, in its articulation of the ties that bind social bodies.

Methodology: Interactive Contexts and Critical Discourse Analysis

The body of literature reviewed above reveals the interdisciplinary influences on my project, including my methodology. While scholars in other fields, such as those discussed above, have applied similar theoretical frameworks of narrative, memory, and traumatic experience in, for example, rhetorical, historical, feminist, or cultural studies approaches, the structural apparatus which guides my negotiation of the narratives and contexts in the chapters that follow is largely drawn from folklore studies and the sociolinguistic approach of critical discourse analysis. This particular analytic framework is useful because, like many other scholars who employ a variety of approaches to critical discourse analysis, I view narrative as dynamic and as capable of producing context and reproducing social power.

I subscribe to Martin Cortazzi’s definition, in “Narrative Analysis in Ethnography,” of narrative as “an interactive process of jointly constructing and interpreting experience with others” (384). This view is different from strictly formalist approaches to literary narrative, as well as from older models of folklore studies that viewed narratives as texts to be collected and analyzed out of their contexts of production.
and performance.\textsuperscript{13} Cortazzi goes on to point out that in studying narratives as processes, there are elements beyond form and content that demand attention. Specifically, “[a]ccount needs to be taken of the functions of particular narratives, the cultural conventions and the contexts within which they occur…Since narratives are interactive, occasioned tellings, it is also crucial to consider performance aspects” (Cortazzi 385).\textsuperscript{14} This view of narrative, then, requires a methodological approach that accounts for the “performance aspects” of personal narratives and their “cultural conventions and contexts.” In “Verbal Art as Performance,” Richard Bauman asserts that a performance oriented view of narrative “promises to bring about a major reconceptualization of the nature of the text, freeing it from the apparent fixity it assumes when abstracted from performance and placed on the written page” (303). It is still, however, a view attending to many of the same elements as a formalist analysis. Analysis of performance, as developed by Dell Hymes and Richard Bauman in particular, pays close attention simultaneously to close reading and to context, and sees these elements of narrative as continuously informing each other. Below, I describe further my theoretical grounding and methods of analysis for understanding these dynamic qualities of narrative.

Folklore scholar Richard Bauman writes, in his 1986 book \textit{Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative}, “I understand performance as a mode of communication, a way of speaking, the essence of which resides in the assumption of

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\textsuperscript{13} Alan Dundes’ seminal 1980 text \textit{Interpreting Folklore} advocates for a shift in the field from collecting folklore texts to interpreting text, texture, and context. See also Roger D. Abrahams.
\textsuperscript{14} Although Cortazzi mentions “function,” I do not interpret this in the same way as earlier folklore scholarship in the vein of William R. Bascom.
\end{flushright}
responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative skill, above and beyond its referential content” (3). Bauman draws attention to the performative potential of personal experience narratives. His conceptualization of performance is useful especially in my initial analysis, of oral narratives in interview contexts, because his approach calls for attention to and appreciation for the rhetorical strategies of narrators, rather than an emphasis on the content of their narration. Although Bauman explores the relationship between “story,” “performance,” and “event,” his study falls short of explaining how the “event” itself ought to be understood within his dynamic model. He acknowledges in his conclusion that “…we need…an ethnographic understanding of events and social interaction in terms of the constitutive role of discourse” (114), but it is beyond his aim in this book to offer one. My investigation, then, relies on the discursive theory of experience described above.

Dell Hymes suggests that performances of personal narrative be understood as taking place within a “communicative event.” In Foundations in Sociolinguistics, Hymes delineates the contributions folklore can make to studying such events, employing the “ethnography of communication” for which his book argues:

The term ‘context’ takes on a new meaning, or new force in this regard.
To place a text, an item of folklore, in its context is not only to correlate it with one or more aspects of the community from which it came…It wishes to study the relation between folkloristic materials and other aspects of

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15 His work in this regard is influenced by Erving Goffman and William Labov.
social life *in situ*, as it were, where that relation actually obtains, the communicative events in which folklore is used. (129)

Hymes lays the groundwork for studying narrative “performance,” not in the sense of deviation from a structure, as Noam Chomsky would have it, but as displays of competence within a particular speech community. Context becomes, in this sense, a set of conditions that can enable narrative performance. Because I follow Joan Scott and others in viewing experience as discursive, Hymes’ methodological approach appeals in its capacity to study the relationship between verbal lore—personal narrative, in my case—and “other aspects of social life *in situ*,” including the discursive environment in which narratives are formulated. To systematically analyze this relationship, Hymes and other linguistically oriented scholars turn to aspects of face-to-face interaction between speakers such as conversational turn-taking. These areas of investigation are crucial to understanding an oral narrative in the context of its performance, and I describe in more detail how I rely on them before my analysis of personal interviews in Chapter 2.

However, I also adapt the basic concepts of ethnography of communication as a starting point for my analysis of written narratives. I find particularly useful Hymes’ description not only of communicative contexts for specific communicative events, but more broadly, his “frame of reference within which the place of language in culture and society is to be assessed.” He articulates what such an analytical frame comprises as follows:

> The boundaries of the community within which communication is possible; the boundaries of the situations within which communication
occurs; the means and purposes and patterns of selection, their structure and hierarchy—all elements that constitute the communicative economy of a group…Facets of the cultural values and beliefs, social institutions and forms, roles and personalities, history and ecology of a community may have to be examined in their bearing on communicative events and patterns (Hymes 4).

When my analysis transitions from a study of speech to a study of written communication, it continues to account for this “communicative economy” of Hurricane Katrina survivors. Furthermore, I agree wholeheartedly with Hymes that “[t]he ethnographer is likely to look at communication from the standpoint and interests of a community itself, and to see its members as sources of shared knowledge and insight” (8). This belief, in fact, has influenced the grounding of my project in a study of personal narratives as they relate to the people who tell them. This differentiates my approach from a strictly literary or cultural studies one, in that my investigations consistently return to the “knowledge and insight” of community members, as they interpret how their narratives are circulated and received beyond their communities.

Because I apply Hymes’ methods to a broader communicative context than the kind of speech events for which his model is designed, I draw on other methodologies for delineating and analyzing the contexts of the narratives I study. I turn to the influential 1992 work on context by Charles Goodwin and Alessandro Duranti, and also to more recent (2004 and 2008) contributions of James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium. In their
introduction to *Rethinking Context: Language as an Interactive Phenomenon*, Goodwin and Duranti explain,

> [w]hen the issue of context is raised it is typically argued that the focal event cannot be properly understood, interpreted appropriately, or described in a relevant fashion, unless one looks beyond the event itself to other phenomena (for example cultural setting, speech situation, shared background assumptions) within which the event is embedded, or alternatively that features of the talk itself invoke particular background assumptions relevant to the organization of subsequent interaction. (3)

According to this description of context, then, it is not a pre-existing frame for an event, but rather a set of conditions constituted in part by the event itself. Goodwin and Duranti expound on this by identifying “the capacity of human beings to dynamically reshape the context that provides organization for their actions within the interaction itself” (5). They build on a body of scholarship that crosses disciplines, but that became central to the field of folklore in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s.

Charles Briggs, in his introduction to his 1988 book *Competence in Performance*, summarizes the shift from thinking about context as static and pre-existing to thinking about it as inextricably bound up in texts as they are performed. He notes that some of this work has “followed Burke (1941, 1945, 1969/1950) in analyzing verbal art as involving strategic uses of rhetorical resources in advancing the performer’s point of view”; Briggs also outlines what he refers to as “the contextual school” within folklore studies, including “such scholars as Abrahams (1976/1969, 1971, 1983b), Bauman
(1977/1975, 1986), Ben-Amos (1971, 1977), Dundes (1964; Arewa and Dundes 1964), Georges (1969), and Goldstein (1964, 1968)” (Briggs, *Competence* 11-12). Primarily, the thrust of this shift is a growing “[concern] both with the way that context shapes performance and with the way that performance can transform context” (Briggs 11). Briggs’ own contribution is the emphasis on “contextualization,” or the processes by which context emerges in performance (15). This theory of context as dynamic and emergent is essential to my analysis of personal narratives about Hurricane Katrina, in which I compare the contexts of narrative production, circulation, and reception, and particularly the ways in which narrators attempt to control or shift those contexts.

Whereas “[m] any analysts have…found it both fruitful and unproblematic to devote their energies to description and analysis of the internal structure of stories while ignoring the interaction through which they were in fact told in the first place” (Goodwin and Duranti 11), I argue not only for critical attention to these interactions, but for inclusion of these interactions into publications which distribute the resulting stories.

My understanding of context is an extension of my approach to narrative as interactive. Studying “the interactional activity through which narratives are constructed, communicated, and sustained or reconfigured” requires attention to the contexts in which those interactions occur, and assumes that they are not one-sided exchanges (Gubrium and Holstein, *Analyzing* xvii). The interplay of personal narratives and dominant cultural ones, on which my research often focuses, is certainly multi-directional, but that is not to say the influences these narratives have on each other are equally powerful. As my analyses will demonstrate, dominant discourses tend to absorb or appropriate the
particularities of survivors’ stories, with the combined effects of appearing familiar and therefore unthreatening to audiences, and of upholding the interests of powerful groups by reifying those narratives which bestow power on them. Following Gubrium and Holstein, then, I ask not only “how the leading ‘big stories’ of various settings relate to the individual ‘little stories’ that participants communicate within them” (Analyzing 124), but also attempt to “demonstrat[e] ethnographically how cultural or organizational resources and preferences are brought to bear in the interactional production or preclusion of particular narratives” (Analyzing 52).

To move back and forth between oral narratives and written ones, and to put discursive contexts of narrative production in conversation with the discourses accompanying circulation and reception of published narratives, I rely on the premises of critical discourse analysis, especially as Norman Fairclough explains them. Critical discourse analysis is designed to move between micro and macro levels of communication, which allows me to compare narratives produced in a broad range of settings and constituting a wide array of discursive contexts. Holstein and Gubrium make a similar case for combined analysis of micro and macro levels, but with different terminology, in their article “Context: working it up, down, and across” in the 2004 volume of Qualitative Research Practice: “Context has been a central concern in qualitative inquiry from the start…construed in terms of ‘distal’ factors such as culture, socio-economic status, or social structure, or more ‘proximal’ conditions such as

16 I also draw from the 2001 Handbook of Critical Discourse Analysis, edited by Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen, and Heidi E. Hamilton, especially Teun A. Van Dijk’s contribution to that volume, “Critical Discourse Analysis.”
interactional settings or sequences” (298). These notions of distal and proximal align with my understanding of macro and micro, respectively.

The application of these terms is usefully illustrated in Holstein and Gubrium’s 2012 collection Varieties of Narrative Analysis, specifically in Ray Cashman’s contribution, “Situational Context and Interaction in a Folklorist’s Ethnographic Approach to Storytelling.” Cashman describes his attention to both “proximal aspects of the interactional terrain (who’s speaking to whom, when, where, why, how, and to what ends)” as well as “distal aspects of the relevant context (historical setting, social and institutional structures, and cultural, political, and socioeconomic context)” (187). Briggs and others, including Cashman in this chapter, point out that such a broad definition of context has the potential to be unwieldy, to say the least. As Briggs succinctly puts it, “[t]he task of describing the context thus takes on the form of an infinite regress” (Competence 13). Cashman’s method for deciding what is “relevant context,” as well as when to move between levels of analysis, helps to address this issue and informs my own approach. Cashman writes, “I prefer to begin with proximal aspects of situational context as it unfolds moment-by-moment, but then, when needed, I shift to distal aspects of context...Such broader issues require comment, particularly when narrators reference them in the process of contextualizing their stories” (187). Likewise, my focus on particular elements of distal and proximal contexts of narrative production, circulation, and reception are determined primarily by contextualization cues in the narratives themselves.
The sociolinguistic approach to critical discourse analysis mapped out by Fairclough, which I subscribe to in selecting and joining together the texts in the chapters that follow, is a “three-dimensional” framework where the aim is to map three separate forms of analysis onto one another: analysis of (spoken or written) language texts, analysis of discourse practice (processes of text production, distribution and consumption) and analysis of discursive events as instances of sociocultural practice” (2). Although the third point, “discursive events as instances of sociocultural practice,” is somewhat vague in this iteration, the three dimensions of this framework are explained by Fairclough elsewhere as “analysis of text,” “analysis of processes of text production and interpretation,” and “analysis of context.” (211). Therefore, I interpret the third, contextually-focused element of his framework with the help of the conceptions of distal and proximal contexts described above. The sociocultural practices that are relevant to analysis of a particular narrative will be those that are indexed by the narrative itself, and they may be distal, proximal, or both. I use this methodology to draw comparisons among the spoken and written narratives of Katrina survivors; among the processes by which they are produced, distributed, and consumed in mainstream publications; and between these personal narratives and their mutually constitutive discursive contexts.

Because this methodology is inductive to an extent, in its emphasis on those textual features, processes, and aspects of context that emerge in the narratives as most significant, its application is not always uniform. In fact, one early reviewer of Fairclough’s book pointed out, “If CDA were carried out thoroughly in all three dimensions, it would offer a far greater completeness of analytic statement than
comparable models…However, any thorough deployment of CDA in some specific institutional/discursive domain would be a very substantial research project – and no such project has yet been carried out” (Fowler 422). The reviewer correctly concludes that thoroughness in all three dimensions would be an extensive endeavor, and he envisions only one limited discursive sphere. In my study of Katrina survivors’ personal narratives, which comprises a variety of discursive domains, I attend exclusively to the most salient features of text, process, and context; in the chapter outline that follows, I anticipate what those features are and explain how they correspond with the three dimensional methodology described above.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 2 focuses on the interview collection of the Surviving Katrina and Rita in Houston Project. In the interview narratives that I analyze, the speakers’ rhetorical strategies indicate their concern with coherence, in terms both of their stories and as an apparent logic explaining their difficult choices during the chaos of Katrina. Therefore my close reading of the spoken text engages with these strategies. The narrators and the interviewees also demonstrate careful attention to the establishment of their relationships, and the grounds of their interactions. Consequently, my investigation into the second facet of Fairclough’s framework focuses on the unique processes of production inherent in these interviews; specifically, these interlocutors negotiate the terms of their exchange openly, in a dialogue that appears in the textual product, and the interviewees exhibit greater control over their own positioning as a result. Finally, in terms of examining these interviews as “instances of sociocultural practice,” I look to the aspects of context that the
narratives evoke. Both speakers emphasize their personal responsibility on multiple levels: as narrators in the interactional context of the interviews, and as actors in the events they describe. I argue that this insistence evokes a dominant narrative of irresponsibility among Katrina’s victims that, although it is not explicitly referred to by these survivors, is simultaneously conjured and interrupted by their protestations against it.

When I listened to and transcribed the interviews of SKRH participants, I noticed how participants in this project, on both sides of the recorder, negotiated the context of their communication in order to allow complex narratives to emerge. As I listened to interviewers and interviewees establishing relationships, finding common ground for communication, and sometimes challenging each other, I wondered whether these kinds of negotiations happen in other contexts where survivors’ personal stories are adapted for wide mainstream distribution. I had initially been interested in comparing primarily content, and secondarily form, between personal narratives collected in interview settings and personal narratives collected for publication in various non-fiction genres. Although these questions remain interesting and surface from time to time in the chapters that follow, my main focus shifted to a comparison of the interactional contexts in which each narrative was produced.

I began looking elsewhere for evidence of the kinds of interactions in which SKRH participants engaged, and I discovered that it does indeed occur: survivors do continue to negotiate the contexts of their storytelling, but in the processes of publishing, these negotiations tend to get edited out or obscured. I argue that survivors’ engagement
with the production and circulation of their stories ought to be foregrounded within the stories themselves. This kind of productive engagement currently does not characterize the types of stories about Katrina that are most popular and likely to reach a wide audience. Instead, stories that have found broad distribution and commercial success are those that in many ways confirm perceptions and beliefs with which audiences are familiar and comfortable. I selected three non-fiction texts, my choices inspired both by their popularity and by the fact that they are all based—like the SKRH project—on interviews with Katrina survivors. Therefore it seemed a reasonable expectation, in a text with claims to ethnography, to encounter the same kinds of foregrounded interaction around narrative production that exists in the SKRH collection. What I found, however, is that more often than not there is only the appearance of that interaction, carefully managed by the authors, publishers, and producers of these texts, and made to look like consensus rather than conflict. In my third, fourth, and fifth chapters, I analyze these three texts, and describe how they reinforce dominant narratives. I also describe the limited instances in which survivors manage to engage with and occasionally challenge their problematic representations.

In Chapter 3, I discuss Abdulrahman Zeitoun’s Katrina narrative, which has found great commercial success in its adaptation in *Zeitoun*, Dave Eggers’ nonfiction bestseller. A version of this story was first published as a public blog authored by Mr. Zeitoun himself, and then another version was collected by Lola Vollen for the interview collection *Voices from the Storm* (2006), and finally an extended version as told by Dave Eggers’ was published in his 2009 book. Zeitoun’s story reaches the peak of its
circulation when it is told by someone else, an authority figure who vouches for the story and also promises readers that it is still being told according to the wishes of its original narrator. However, the changes in Zeitoun’s story from blog to book reflect a transition from an urgent first person account, with a narrator who expresses ambiguity, to a lyrical drama that offers readers clear resolution. Ultimately, Dave Eggers presents Zeitoun as an uncomplicated hero, battling natural forces, rescuing helpless women, and facing the combined obstacles of anti-Muslim sentiment in the American South and the prison-industrial complex. Liberally minded audiences are especially eager to embrace this heroic figure, as he comes to represent a hardworking immigrant at whose treatment they can feel self-righteously outraged. Despite Abdulrahman’s early involvement in narrating his story himself, both in his blog and in his interview with Voices from the Storm, when it comes to the bestselling book Zeitoun, the survivor’s engagement with the narration has been removed. Instead, readers are asked to trust that Eggers has been fair in representing Zeitoun’s voice and experience.

The textual features that emerge as most significant as Mr. Zeitoun’s story moves between these versions are the variable claims to credibility. In all three versions, the narrator, authors, editors, and publishers take great pains to assert their own credibility and in the later texts, to differing extents and divergent effects, that of Zeitoun. Furthermore, these shifting textual elements on which my close readings focus reveal the salient processes of production, distribution, and consumption in Zeitoun’s case. Specifically, the shifts among versions reflect the expectations attached to each respective genre, so my analysis points to these adaptations as indicative of demands in the literary
marketplace, especially as they regard authenticity signifiers in firsthand accounts of trauma. Finally, I highlight the sociocultural contexts that Zeitoun’s story evokes. Similar to the interviews in SKRH, these stories engage dominant cultural narratives that are not always explicit; nor are they, I argue, necessarily preexisting in a concrete form. Rather, they are both constructed and challenged by their opposition in the narratives at hand. In the instance of Zeitoun, the variants of his story have different dominant narrative threads: in the blog, Zeitoun counteracts perceived stereotypes about immigrants; in the interview collection, the editors negotiate apparent anxieties about the believability of eyewitness accounts; and in the book, Eggers writes against a narrative of Islamophobia, but in his very doing, shores that narrative up so that it is readily available for the recharacterization of Zeitoun in his present legal predicament.

In Chapter 4, I move to another example of a popular publication based on the narratives of real Katrina survivors: the non-fiction graphic novel *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge*, by comic artist Josh Neufeld. The print version of this book was published in 2009, but before that it was released as a webcomic. In both versions of *A.D.*, my textual analyses focus on how the rhetorical and artistic choices of the author, in part influenced by the medium of comics and in part by publishers’ demands, reinforce stereotypical categorizations, especially of African Americans. The processes of production, circulation, and reception that are particularly interesting in the case of *A.D.* emerge in the character-survivors’ opportunity to comment on Neufeld’s representations of them in the webcomic version. I view those conversations as somewhat similar to the SKRH interviews, where survivors negotiate the terms of their stories’ production.
Because the webcomic is serial and public, the negotiations are also built into the circulation and reception of the textual product, as they are in SKRH. However, despite many public professions of anxiety about and interest in fair representation, Neufeld publishes the print version without the web commentary.

In this chapter and the subsequent one, my discussion of the sociocultural practices that contextualize these texts continues to focus on the narratives implied as dominant by the texts themselves. For instance in *A.D.*, one woman—Denise—expresses her concerns that she is coming across as too much of a stereotype of an angry black woman, at once rejecting that characterization of black women and reproducing its power with her explicit wariness of it. Again, although the webcomic becomes a site of productive contestation in this regard, both in terms of processes of production and negotiation of discursive contexts, the print version of the graphic narrative abandons this dialogue and misses an opportunity to convey the survivors’ challenges to the dominant narratives with which their stories are being aligned. This chapter raises similar questions as those posed by Charles Briggs: “Why do some narratives become authoritative? Why are statements that challenge them erased from public discourse?” (“Communicability” 272). In the case of *A.D.*, my study reveals just how these processes occur, especially in the erasing of Denise’s challenging statements from the eventual print publication of the text.

Chapter 5 examines a final non-fiction, Katrina-based text with wide circulation, Carl Deal and Tia Lessin’s 2009 documentary *Trouble the Water*. In this film, the filmmakers use unique documentary techniques that do incorporate—to some extent—
narrators’ engagement with the processes of their story’s circulation. Specifically, the film includes survivor Kim Roberts’ own footage, shot during Katrina on her handheld camera. My analysis of textual features concentrates on those scenes where Kim’s role as documentarian is foregrounded, as well as those moments in the film where she expresses her awareness about the value of her story and its likelihood of circulating among particular kinds of audiences; these scenes embody the kind of narrator engagement that troubles the reception of these stories as mere confirmation of what audiences already believe. By incorporating Kim’s assessment of the consumption that she knows her story is likely to encounter, the filmmakers successfully integrate survivors’ own critiques of the discourses that typically represent them, and in the process, disrupt the easy empathy that often accompanies reception of personal narratives associated with trauma. However, the film’s optimistic conclusion evokes a dominant narrative of individualistic uplift, which, while potentially aiding in its commercial success, finally undermines the powerful work it is otherwise performing. In this chapter as well as my conclusion, I consider how different practices both construct and interrupt dominant narratives.

Bauman and Briggs have defined discourse as “a process in which actors, populations, and institutions secure the right to decontextualize discourse and recontextualize it in different settings and genres” (Briggs, “Communicability” 273). In my concluding chapter, I indicate how studying the recontextualization of Katrina survivors’ personal narratives has greater implications for understanding the dialogic nature of personal narratives made public.
Through each of these chapters, I point out that those narratives that find commercial success and broad distribution are those that uphold dominant narratives regarding race, class, the American South as a region, and the kinds of behavior commonly believed to characterize those who have been traumatized by a catastrophe like Katrina. I also reiterate that the stories actually being told by survivors—sometimes even in the very publications that reinforce those prevalent misconceptions—are in fact much more complex than they often appear. After witnessing, myself, the frustration of trying to find the right context for sharing Katrina stories, and struggling to tell the right stories for the contexts we found ourselves in; after hearing the complexity in the content of the SKRH interviews and the negotiations which produced them, I was driven to question how communicative contexts and stories of disaster mutually constitute each other. This project examines Katrina in a new light, focusing on the representational tactics of survivors and the processes by which their narratives are recognized or rejected. Beyond that, though, it contributes to current theoretical understandings about how different communicative contexts and rhetorical situations shape the knowledge that is created about trauma and our responses to it. It is my contention that texts conveying the eyewitness accounts of survivors have an obligation to include narrators’ critical engagement with the processes by which their stories are being collected and shared. Ultimately, survivors’ challenges to their own generalized representations should be incorporated into the discourses of disaster, especially because as the case of Katrina has demonstrated, those discourses have a great deal to do with immediate and ongoing recovery.
Chapter 2: “They didn’t know what was really going on”: Survivor Interviews

Introduction

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, during which Texans saw an influx of hundreds of thousands of evacuees, folklorists Carl Lindahl and Pat Jasper orchestrated the Surviving Katrina and Rita in Houston Project (SKRH). The organizers describe the project in the following terms:

[This collection of oral histories is] the first large-scale project in which the survivors of a major disaster have taken the lead in documenting it. The survivors received training and compensation to record fellow survivors’ stories of the storm, their memories of home, and their ongoing struggles to build new communities in exile. (Houston History 37)

In these interviews, survivors explain their impulse to articulate what they have been through: they mention the therapeutic effect of sharing a traumatic story with an empathetic audience; the belief that their experiences are meaningful to others as inspiration, cautionary tale, or historical record; and the desire to counteract negative portrayals of New Orleanians in the news media and other public discourse. This chapter examines three representative narratives from two African American survivors of

17 Carl Lindahl and Pat Jasper employed me to help transcribe and catalogue SKRH interviews between 2009 and 2011, which provided me access to these and over 400 other narratives.
Hurricane Katrina, Shawn and Patrice, who were displaced from New Orleans and interviewed for SKRH. These narratives are representative in terms of the patterns I discuss below, which repeated frequently in the sample of forty interviews from the collection with which I worked. A close reading of the speakers’ rhetorical strategies, and the interactional contexts in which they emerge, reveals that these survivors contend with dominant discourses, especially those about race and responsibility in the context of media coverage of Katrina. Their positioning as narrators within these dramatic accounts constructs a more positive relationship to remembered events, rejecting the widespread representations of African American survivors as either criminals or helpless victims, and portraying themselves instead as competent and caring human beings.

In order to study Shawn and Patrice’s personal narratives in the context of their interview situations, I attend to the more micro-level aspects of the multi-layered approach identified by Norman Fairclough. Although in some oral history projects, interviewees are seen as information resources, folklore scholars in recent decades have largely followed Charles Briggs’ contention regarding interviews that “context-sensitive features of such discourse are more clearly tied to the context of the interview than to that of the situation it describes” (Learning How to Ask 3). I agree with Gubrium and Holstein that “interview results are as actively constructed, collaborative, and situationally mediated as other communicative ventures,” and that consequently “it is important to treat interviews as occasions for narrative work and not just information transfer” (Analyzing 37). This is true especially in the case of SKRH, wherein the interviewers and

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18 I use pseudonyms for the interviewees and interviewers throughout in order to protect the interviewees’ identities in accordance with their wishes.
interviewees are both hurricane survivors, and the interactional context as a result is not a traditional, information-gathering interview setting.

As Fairclough, Hymes, Bauman, and others suggest, I use folkloristic and sociolinguistic tools to draw out the “text, texture, and context”19 of these narratives. The elements that I consider in particular are consistent with Fairclough’s description of linguistic analysis, as a component of critical discourse analysis, which he explains as follows:

I understand linguistic analysis in an extended sense to cover not only the traditional levels of analysis within linguistics (phonology, grammar up to the level of the sentence, and vocabulary and semantics) but also analysis of textual organization above the sentence, including intersentential cohesion and various aspects of the structure of texts which have been investigated by discourse analysts and conversation analysts (including properties of dialogue such as the organization of turn-taking). (188)

In my discussion of the three interviews below, I employ this extended sense of linguistic analysis, looking at elements such as speaker transitions, framing, reported speech, collaboration, and variability in performance. Keeping in mind the emphases in personal narrative scholarship on credibility and coherence, I examine how these stories embody those qualities, by what means, and to what apparent ends. For each interview, I ask similar questions to those posed by Gubrium and Holstein in *Analyzing Narrative Reality*: “What sorts of practices are utilized to assemble and reflexively sustain narrative agency,

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19 Alan Dundes’ often cited terminology from *Interpreting Folklore*
authority, and competence? How do accountability and storytelling fit into the equation?" (160). Although this is the only chapter that deals explicitly with oral narratives, my focus here is consistent with my analysis throughout. I show how contexts of production shape a narrative, basing my claims in analysis of textual and interactional elements, and relying where possible on the comparison of narrative versions to facilitate that analysis.

A unique and fortuitous aspect of these narratives, though, is that the narrators’ engagement with the processes of narrative production is heightened by virtue of the genre: the ways in which these survivors create and critique their communicative contexts is the inspiration for my subsequent investigations, where the genres obscure rather than include those interactions.

In addition to engaging directly with their interlocutors, Shawn and Patrice constitute larger discursive contexts for their stories by invoking and responding to dominant narratives regarding Katrina. In the course of my analysis, I show how the speakers—sometimes implicitly and other times explicitly—bring these narratives into their accounts and, more often than not, refute them. I do not, therefore, begin with an assumption about which “big stories”\(^{20}\) about Katrina are relevant to these survivors; rather, I deduce, from the intertextuality inherent in their stories, with what and whom they are in conversation. However, I will briefly enumerate here what those dominant narratives are, in order to better contextualize these survivors’ responses. Both Shawn and Patrice are concerned broadly with discourses of responsibility, or more precisely, the prevailing perception that New Orleanians most injured by Katrina were to blame for

\(^{20}\) Holstein and Gubrium’s term, cited in Chapter 1
their suffering by virtue of their personal irresponsibility. This view was circulated primarily with respect to the city’s African American population, many of whom were already living in poverty or close to it prior to the hurricane. In Shawn’s case, this discourse surfaces as a characterization of both law enforcement officers and prisoners as irresponsible and criminal, a representation which Shawn rejects within his narrative. For Patrice, she reacts to the depiction of Katrina’s victims as passive and helpless, and portrays instead her willingness to take responsibility for her family and fellow survivors.

“Establish control”: Shawn’s story

In the first of the three interviews discussed here, Shawn, a young sheriff’s deputy, recalls the flooding of the Orleans Parish Prison. While reconstructing this event in narrative form, Shawn builds a credible image of himself acting responsibly despite the limited information available to him at the time of the storm. This self-representation contrasts dominant narratives portraying lower level law enforcers as irresponsible, abandoning their posts as soon as the opportunity arose. A young woman named Amber interviews Shawn, who spent his entire 28 years prior to Katrina living in the Upper Ninth Ward of New Orleans. From the start of this two and a half hour interview, there is substantial evidence of rapport, empathy, and shared communicative norms between Amber and Shawn, a discursive space of the sort that Shawn and other survivors have been denied in representations of Katrina. These qualities create a favorable interactional context, evident in the emergence of the collaborative and individual narratives described below.
The interview between Amber and Shawn begins on a friendly note; both participants are laughing and sounding at ease. The interviewer appears to already know some things about Shawn’s life; for example, she prompts him—“you have sisters”—rather than asking an open-ended question about his family (Shawn). Amber eventually reveals to her interviewee that she used to live in the same neighborhood as him. Shawn calculates that her former address was about eight blocks from his, and laughs while observing, “we was close” (Shawn). As Shawn begins recounting the days leading up to the hurricane, which he spent at his job as a deputy in Orleans Parish Prison, Amber interjects about every two minutes to ask for or offer more information: “And you were working at the—”, “Saturday was two days before,” “And how old is he?”, “On your what?”, “What do you mean, like—”, and then finally, “Let me interrupt you for a second. Just so I can understand, so I can visualize. So the first floor—what’s—is the first floor for the people that work there? Are there inmates there, or—?” (Shawn). After this, as Shawn continues to talk, Amber’s questions are more spread out and are limited to clarification, sometimes as simple as asking “what?” As Gubrium and Holstein have noted, “At minimum, a conversation partner must refrain from speaking and pass on opportunities to speak at possible speakership transition points for an extended story to emerge” (Analyzing 97-98). As a result of Amber’s increasingly withheld speech, at one point Shawn talks for thirty uninterrupted minutes. An hour and forty minutes in, Amber asks the first question that is not an immediate response to something Shawn just said. In this later portion of the interview, Amber asks general follow up questions, inquiring
about details from earlier in Shawn’s narrative, or asking where the people from his story are now, and their talk becomes conversational, with a more even exchange.

This last section, which goes on for about forty minutes, also contains the thread of a play frame throughout, during which Shawn talks about getting himself a new house built in New Orleans by the TV show *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, and Amber responds in joking encouragement. As Jennifer Coates explains this kind of linguistic event, “[t]he idea of talk as play draws on Bateson’s (1953) idea of a play frame. Bateson argues that we frame our actions as ‘serious’ or as ‘play.’ Conversational participants can frame their talk as humorous by signaling ‘This is play’” (31). Shawn and Amber signal the humorous nature of their talk about *Extreme Makeover* with shared laughter, repetition, and increasing exaggeration of the hypothetical scenario. The success of this frame marks an important aspect of this interview because it illustrates both that the speakers are employing shared norms of communication, since they are able to recognize each other’s signals that this is not serious talk, and that they are engaged at least temporarily in conversational collaboration, rather than the strictly question-answer format often associated with interviews. According to Coates, “[c]ollaboration is an essential part of playful talk, since conversational participants have to recognise that a play frame has been invoked and then have to choose to maintain it” (32). She goes on to note that, “because conversational humour is a joint activity, involving all participants at talk, many commentators see its chief function as being the creation and maintenance of solidarity” (Coates 32). Thus, this interview is remarkable for its collaborative
production, in the first and last sections, and additionally for the individual breakthrough into narrative performance that occurs in Shawn’s long portion of talk in the middle.

As Richard Bauman describes it, drawing from Dell Hymes and others, “performance is a variable quality, relatively more or less salient among the multiple functions served by a communicative act” (“Performance” 44). In any act of communication, performance can emerge to a greater or lesser extent. Bauman explains that “[t]he relative dominance of performance” as an aspect of communication “will depend on the degree to which the performer assumes responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative skill and effectiveness as against other communicative functions” (“Performance” 44). Similar to play frames, performances are marked by speakers and, in situations where participants share an understanding of communicative practices, recognized by audiences (Bauman, “Performance” 45). This appears to be the case in Amber’s interview of Shawn, when she recognizes that his breakthrough into an extended story ensures him the right to maintain the speaking floor, and she refrains from taking a turn at talk. During the performative narrative that dominates a half hour of his interview, Shawn describes the progression of Katrina’s events after his arrival at work, from the flooding of the prison to the inmates’ evacuation onto a highway overpass. His story emphasizes the lack of information on the parts of both inmates and prison staff: he frequently follows a description of potentially reprehensible behavior with an explanation that the people involved “didn’t know what was going on.” This theme of misinformation (or no information) is conveyed both explicitly in Shawn’s narration and implicitly in the quoted speech that he incorporates. Interestingly, the development of his narrative does
not recreate the kind of hidden knowledge or suspense that characterized the experience itself.

Whether due to his desire to share knowledge and rectify the situation he is reliving, or to the interview context and his interlocutor’s early pointed questions, Shawn works skillfully at recreating a scene in which information was scarce and withheld via a narrative in which information is plentiful and freely shared. For example, at one point in Shawn’s story, he is describing the events inside of the jail building on the level, or “tier,” where he was working, and he begins to explain how outside law enforcement was brought into an already confusing and tense situation:

...the SWAT team actually came in; they pulled me off the tier and they asked me who was giving the problems, you know, on each dorm. And I let them know because they wanted to come in on them, you know, and try to start some kind of control, establish some kind of control and discipline, you know to try to control the situation. ‘Cause obviously this was happening in each jail, you know, and they finally made it to our jail.

(Shawn)

The levels at which information is withheld and transferred in this brief selection are multiple and complex. First, Shawn depicts the dramatic entry of the SWAT team, who “actually” came in and who “pulled him” from his post. Shawn’s use of “actually” in this sentence suggests both actuality—they really did come in—and the connotative meaning of surprise, as in “believe it or not, this actually happened.” This language implies Shawn did not expect their arrival, and was unaware of their plan of action. The tables quickly
turn, however, and it is not the narrator who is without knowledge, but rather the newly arrived officials, who are inquiring about the situation at hand, at which point Shawn is willing to “let them know” what he knows. Here, an even subtler shift in knowledge appears in that Shawn is prepping the SWAT team with knowledge about the inmates so that the SWAT team can regain their upper hand in the information game. Shawn then repeats three times what he understands as the SWAT team’s mission, to “establish control.” Here, control is explicitly linked to knowledge: the people who know what is going on are in control. Finally, Shawn explains that “obviously this was happening in each jail,” regaining his own control of the narrative by demonstrating that he has knowledge that exceeds what he knew at the time, as well as sharing knowledge that goes beyond what his interviewer or potential extended audience might know.

As Shawn’s story continues, so does the manipulation of knowledge at multiple levels. By directly mentioning the lack of information at some points, he provides a framework for understanding other moments where knowledge is not specifically named as a key factor in determining events. For example, in the sequence that follows, the actions become more significant given Shawn’s thematic foregrounding of information as a tool of control: “and [the SWAT team] was up there by me and they came in, they bust through the doors, you know, shooting the bean bag guns, everybody was on the floors and stuff, and it worked for a little while, you know…They made them stay in the bed and they ain’t want to move. Like I said, that worked for a little while” (Shawn). Here, the SWAT team’s actions are temporarily effective because they are shooting “bean bag guns,” which create the illusion that they are using deadly weapons on the inmates. In
other interviews from the SKRH collection, for instance, witnesses describe seeing a gun being fired, then a person falling down. The witnesses’ first interpretation is that the person has been shot and killed; it is only later that they realize the gun is firing hard bean bags, which strike with enough force to stun someone and knock them over, but not kill them. Here, the SWAT team is intentionally creating a situation where misinformation lends them momentary control—as long as the inmates think they are being fired at, they will not move.

In addition to illustrating how information was manipulated in attempts to gain control, Shawn also demonstrates how the absence of accurate knowledge explained the actions of some participants. Here, it is interesting to note that while Shawn sympathetically portrays both deputies and inmates as being at an informational disadvantage, he does not extend the same explanation of behavior to officials such as the SWAT team, and later in his narrative, the Sheriff and the Attorney General. Unlike in the dominant discourse, where the almost entirely African American prison population was shown as threatening, in Shawn’s narrative, the real threat was in the hands of authority figures with their mishandling of information. For instance, he describes the behavior of the prison’s inmates in these terms:

…we have to run from this floor to that floor, to this dorm to that dorm, try—‘cause people done broke windows and actually trying to get out. You know, so we have to wrestle with some of these people …when they saw all of us, they still—they was like, ‘Y’all gonna have to kill us because we not gonna just sit up here and be treated the way we being
treated.’ When in actuality they didn’t know what was really going on, you know. They ain’t know what we was going through, either. (Shawn)

Shawn implies that had the inmates had knowledge of the reasons for the flooding, chaos, and lack of food and water, they would have acted differently. Their “threatening” behavior, made much of in national news reports, is explained according to Shawn by the fact that they did not understand everyone else was suffering as well. However, other actors in his story who have knowledge of suffering and do not act accordingly are portrayed in a less favorable light: “…we listening and—who we hear on the radio?

Sheriff: ‘Well, I didn’t tell those deputies that came in to come to work. They volunteered to come to work.’ You know. We volunteered?...If this was voluntary I damn sure wouldn’t be here” (Shawn). In this case, not only did the sheriff not use the information he had to protect his employees before and during the hurricane, he then publicly offered misinformation about their experiences to make himself unaccountable, contributing to misrepresentation in the national discourse on Katrina.

Shawn’s rhetorical strategies in his own narrative help his audience situate him as an actor in relationship to information. In an article on “Responsibility and Evidence in Oral Discourse,” Jane Hill describes how narrators work at preserving a positive image of themselves by managing the dissemination of responsibility for problematic events. In Hill’s example, the speaker “uses a variety of rhetorical devices to reduce the likelihood that she will be held ‘personally responsible’ for the ‘trouble’ she addresses…The effect of these devices is a representation of responsibility as ‘distributed’ in a complex social field, rather than concentrated in a single agent” (197). The complex social field that Hill
identifies includes both the characters in the narrative itself, or the “story world,” and the “interactional world,” or the context in which the story is being told (197). Employing similar tactics to Hill’s speaker, Shawn distributes the responsibility for the troubling events that unfold in his story about the flooded prison. One of these tactics, for example, is the use of reported speech, such as in Shawn’s recollection of the Sheriff’s radio announcement. This locates responsibility in both the story world, with the dishonest Sheriff, and in the storytelling context; as Hill demonstrates, audiences are less likely to directly dispute “constructed dialogue,” thereby enabling “complicity with the interlocutor” (197). Perhaps the most striking similarity between Hill’s case study and Shawn’s narrative is in the explicit association of information and responsibility: in Hill’s study, the narrator “represents herself as being unable to influence directly the course of events, both because she is legally unable to do so and because she lacks the necessary knowledge at crucial junctures” (198). Shawn’s narrative of Katrina creates a “story world” wherein other people are irresponsible in their manipulation of information, and an “interactional world” where he is a responsible narrator who openly shares information with his audience.

Examining one narrative moment wherein Shawn does engage in the withholding of information for dramatic effect, which might appear to be an exception, in fact only furthers his presentation of himself as someone who does not engage in the type of dangerous information mismanagement that his story describes. At this particular point in his extended narrative, he allows his story to lead the listener to surprise:
And we had a back-up call downstairs, and I remember running down the steps, and I just—I was coming off the second floor and I was coming down the steps and—\textit{shwoom}—I slipped in the water. I say Lord, they got water coming up to the second floor. And I fell down the steps into the water, and [chuckles] it was funny—well it’s funny now, but it wasn’t funny then ‘cause I’m like, man this water not stopping, you know.

(Shawn)

Here, Shawn creates suspense with his repetition in the first two lines, drawing out the action of running down the steps. He then provides a dramatic sound effect followed by the sudden, “I slipped in the water.” This is surprising to the listener not only because of the build up that precedes it, but because this is his first mention of the water being at that level inside the building. He has his listener encounter the flooding just as he did: unaware, and at full speed. This kind of withholding information, however, is immediately tempered by humor as Shawn invites his listener to laugh with him at something that is “funny now” even though “it wasn’t funny then.”

Shawn manages the distribution of information strategically, then, but the effects are presented as harmless, even humorous, as opposed to life threatening. Bauman writes:

\ldots[S]tories, like all literature used as equipment for living (Burke 1941), have a certain metaphorical as well as metonymic meaning…as a kind of extended name or label for the recurrent social problem situations they portray…And to extend the Burkean perspective still further, the stories
also convey an attitude toward such situations and a strategy for dealing with them. *(Story 77)*

In Shawn’s Katrina story, he conveys that the lack of information available to lay people was a problem, and his impression that these people—himself included—acted accountably given the circumstances, contrary to their depiction in the national news and public imagination. Finally, this interview gives him space to express his belief that a more responsible management of information is an appropriate strategy for dealing with situations like the one he endured.

*“It worked out”: Patrice’s story*

The second and third narratives examined here are both from Patrice, who gave two interviews about her experiences of Katrina. The first interview, conducted by Adele, was done in January of 2006; it lasts about 42 minutes. The second interview was ten months later, in November 2006; conducted by Sheryl, it is 56 minutes long. Examining these two interviews shows how the same person responds to different interview styles, as well as how a story evolves over time. It is difficult to sort out which of these factors might have more influence on the changes that occur from the first interview to the second, not to mention other factors such as the interview setting. Nevertheless, considering the interviews in comparison to each other produces observations that may be attributable to the known variables: in this case, the second interview is characterized by a slower pace and more explicit interest in Patrice’s pre-Katrina life, resulting in a second narrative more reflective of her logic and responsibility in the face of the storm. Furthermore, listening to Patrice’s interviews together with Shawn’s reinforces that an
interactional context with an empathetic listener and shared communicative norms produces narratives in which Katrina survivors have the place and the power to situate themselves in a better light than that cast by popular public discourse.

In the first interview, from January, Patrice’s narration is confused, and does not communicate a sense of control over her post-Katrina actions. The interviewer sets a quick pace with her first four questions, asking the following all within the first minute of talk: “How are you doing?”, “Where did you live before Katrina?”, “Where were you the day of the storm?”, and “How long before the storm struck did you know about it?” (Patrice, Jan.). Patrice gives equally quick answers, and then Adele follows with, “Okay. Can you tell me what happened the day the storm struck?” (Patrice, Jan.). Her use of “okay” here suggests that she is ready to move on, perhaps to what she sees as the real reason for the interview, the events that occurred during the hurricane itself. The other questions appear as a brief formality to establish Patrice’s whereabouts for what quickly emerges as the main event. Patrice, who has responded consistently with the tempo of the first few questions, hesitates with this new open-ended format. She replies, “Well, when the – when it – when the storm was coming, like that – I’m trying to think of the days. The storm was on that Monday?” (Patrice, Jan.). Having jumped from the present moment (“How are you doing?”) to her pre-Katrina life (“Where did you live before Katrina?”) to the storm itself (“Where were you the day of the storm?”) in less than a minute’s time, Patrice is understandably disoriented. She exhibits this by searching for words, struggling with recollection of the exact day, and finally, seeking confirmation from her conversation partner—“the storm was on that Monday?” Rather than confirming
Patrice’s hesitant query, however, Adele disagrees and says the storm was on Tuesday. They go back and forth for a moment, until Patrice gains certainty and declares (correctly), “It was Monday” (Patrice, Jan.). With this statement, she begins her first segment of extended narrative, describing her initial knowledge of the storm and her discovery that other parts of the city were flooding.

As the first interview proceeds, however, Patrice continues to question herself with frequent false starts and repairs. Her narrative jumps in both chronology and location, and reported speech threatens to take over the logical progression of her story. For example, when she describes how her sister called to inform her of the storm’s severity, Patrice starts to recount a conversation that she says happened that Monday: “And my sister, she called me. She was like, ‘Girl, you’ – No. I take that back. Like that part – the day before the storm, my sister called me, and she said, ‘What you doing, you better get out’” (Patrice, Jan.). Perhaps Adele’s initial questioning of Patrice’s memory has instilled doubt in the narrator’s mind about her ability to accurately recount her experience. Patrice’s rapid movement between different times and places also reflect the pattern set by the first few minutes of interviewing. She continues to describe the days around the storm as follows:

The day after the storm, that’s when the water started coming…Cause the storm was over when that – before that water, I mean – the water came. And so like I had my four kids, my nephew, and I had this little baby that I had accumulated in the storm…We had food and stuff. Like I said, my neighbor, they had a generator and we used that, and it lasted till like four
o’clock that, that Wednesday morning…And I was like, ‘Oh, when the
water go down tomorrow’ – cause I knew my friend, she said she wasn’t
going away, and she – I say, ‘I got to go check on [Cathy].’ And then I
say, ‘My friend, [Nicole],’ or whatever, so I said, ‘I got to go check on
[Nicole].’ But the water never went down. And the amazing part of it was
– the same way the people was trying to separate the men and the women,
and stuff. (Patrice, Jan.)

In this brief segment of speech, Patrice moves back and forth between Tuesday,
Wednesday, Monday, and an unspecified stretch before and after (from “I knew my
friend…wasn’t going away” to “the water never went down”). She also intersperses
activity at her house, a neighbor’s, and her friends’ homes. Perhaps most out of place
chronologically and geographically is her concluding comment, which alludes to a much
later series of events when evacuees are struggling to get on buses at the highway
overpass where she and her family will end up later that week. After she mentions it here,
however, she goes back into explaining who was in her home with her, and she does not
pick up this dangling narrative thread until about five minutes later in the interview.

In addition to exhibiting doubt and chronological confusion in the progression of
her story, Patrice also includes the words of others in such a way and to such an extent
that the reported speech almost overwhelms her narration. For instance, when continuing
to describe how she first heard that the city was in danger of flooding, Patrice recounts
the following:
So, one of my other friends, well she called me…she said…‘you better get out of there.’ I said, ‘Girl, let me call you back. My sister just called me talking about twenty feet of water.’ So I said, ‘Twenty feet of water, twenty feet of water.’ I said, ‘They said they had a forty feet surge and twenty feet of water was coming out of the, the river, or wherever it was coming from.’ So I said, ‘Twenty feet of water. That mean it got to be distributed among the whole city.’ So I said, ‘Well, it ain’t going to be that bad. We probably got like two feet by the time it get to us.’ (Patrice, Jan.)

In this excerpt, Patrice incorporates the words of her friend, her sister, and an unidentified “they” which most likely refers to newscasters. She includes her own thought process as reported speech, which relegates her own knowledge at the time to one voice in a confusing sea of voices. With laughter at the end of this account, Patrice also distances her present self, as the narrator who now knows better, from the self who mistakenly believed that “twenty feet of water” referred to the total amount that would flood the city, and that it would be “distributed” so that it would not exceed two feet in her neighborhood. However, this hint of distance between Patrice as a narrator in the interview situation and Patrice as the actor in her hurricane story is not sufficient to counter the confused portrayal of her actions, which resonates in some ways with the news media’s reductive depiction of African American hurricane survivors as helpless victims. In her second interview, Patrice is able to contradict that dominant narrative by presenting her actions as logical in their consistency with her belief system, as well as

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21 Patrice references gathering information from the news previously in the interview.
responsible and compassionate in the care they demonstrate for her family and other survivors.

The interview that Patrice gives ten months after her first one is generally more coherent, includes more fluid sentences and a more straightforward chronology, and contains more moments of reflection on and evaluation of the experience being narrated. These changes may in part be due to the greater amount of time that has passed since the storm, as well as the different style of interaction that occurs with the second interviewer. Patrice’s second interview, conducted by Sheryl, gets off to a much more gradual start than the first one. For the first four minutes of the interview, Sheryl asks questions that build on each other in eliciting a description of Patrice’s life prior to Katrina. The series of questions is as follows: “Tell me a little bit about your life in New Orleans; where did you live?”; “…And what did you guys do out there? What was your neighborhood like?”; “And did you—did you like living in this area?”; “Did—what kind of things did you guys do—activities, for fun?” (Patrice, Nov.). This sequence is more chronologically and geographically consistent than the first interviewer’s opening questions, and these questions also follow a pattern (after the first one, which Patrice answers with three words) of being open-ended, and of demonstrating a bit of hesitation on the part of the interviewer. This line of questioning produces longer, more coherent answers from Patrice, and when the interviewer finally asks about the storm (“And, where—where—what were—what was going on when you first heard about the storm?”), Patrice responds with over five minutes of uninterrupted talk (Patrice, Nov.). She also prefaces her first reaction to the news of the storm by describing both the prevailing beliefs about
hurricanes in the city—“they call New Orleans ‘The Big Easy,’’ and I think we kind of like thought that it was going to be what it always was, that the storm is coming and the storm never comes”—as well as her own belief system: “I have faith in God and I know that, you know, our beginning and our endings are mandated by Him” (Patrice, Nov.). In this way, Patrice builds up a logical narrative frame for her reluctance to evacuate, a decision that she reflects on more explicitly in this version of her narrative.

One factor in her initial decision to stay, which Patrice reiterates in both versions of her story, is her religious faith. Early on in both interviews, Patrice shares the concerns she had at the time because her children do not share her trust in God. Although this fear emerges as a critical moment in both storytelling events, it does so in different ways that merit comparison. In the first interview, Patrice explains her doubt as follows:

And I was getting a little paranoid or whatever, so I was like, ‘Lord’ – you know, like, you know, cause I, I’m a Christian, and I’m like, ‘I hope I’m not being selfish, you know, making my kids stay here,’ or whatever, you know, ‘because maybe they don’t – you know, they don’t know You like I know You,’ so I was like, ‘Oh, my God.’ So he was like, ‘Don’t worry about it. I got your back.’ So I was like, ‘Well, we going to, we going to stay,’ or whatever. (Patrice, Nov.)

In this account, Patrice uses false starts, qualifiers, and hedging (“a little paranoid”, “I, I’m a Christian”, “maybe they don’t—you know, they don’t know You”). These qualities of her speech might indicate her hesitation at the time of the events being narrated; in other words, she is reliving the worry that made her wonder whether she was right in
acting on a faith not shared by her children. The later iteration of this story, however, reveals a different picture of her doubt.

In the second interview, Patrice describes the role of faith in her decision process in the following words:

I don’t really like to push religion on people, and I don’t force it on my kids, so some kind of way I feel, you know I feel kind of like bad because—because what I believe in I didn’t want to—I felt like I had forced it on them, and I felt like I had kind of like jeopardized their situation because of what I believe in God, and so I was like, ‘Oh Lord, I made my children stay here, and I’m depending on you.’ And it was like, and I—and I, you know, you know, and God said, ‘If you don’t hear my voice, just pay attention to my plan.’ So basically, that’s what I had to do. I just had to pay attention to his plan and it worked out. It worked out.

(Patrice, Nov.)

In this case, Patrice’s concern becomes less about the difference between her faith and that of her children, and more about the responsibility that making that decision for them places on her. She makes explicit here the fear that she had “jeopardized their situation because of what [she] believe[s].” Consistent with the overall tone of this second interview, Patrice offers reflection about the experiences she is recounting. Again, this may be because of the time that has elapsed, giving her distance to examine her motivations and build a logical narrative out of scattered memories, and it may be a result of the interview setting, wherein Patrice’s narrative is first grounded in a conversation
that leads up to the troubling events of the hurricane, and is then slowly elicited with open-ended questions.

Whatever the cause of Patrice’s shift in storytelling style, the effect is that Patrice emerges as a more competent narrator—and, consequently, a more competent actor in the story about her experience. In the first example above, for instance, she is being “paranoid” and possibly “selfish,” making a decision marked by a great deal of ambiguity: “So I was like, ‘Well, we going to, we going to stay,’ or whatever.” The qualifications surrounding her decision lend it uncertainty and convey doubt on Patrice’s part about whether her choice was in her children’s best interest. The more contemplative tone in the second account moves from doubt in her decision to a larger (and more removed) moral question about whether it is acceptable to “force” religion on other people, especially one’s children. In this narrative Patrice still reveals her doubt, but only in a passing moment; her fear for her children is quickly mitigated by her faith, and her decision is validated when she repeats—twice, for emphasis—“it worked out.”

One additional long excerpt from her two interviews, another example of the same moment described in different terms, illustrates even further Patrice’s growth in competence. In both the first and second interview, she recalls her horror at the treatment of elderly people who were waiting to be rescued on the highway overpass in Metairie, just outside city limits.22 In the earlier telling, the narrative unfolds in this way:

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22 Metairie is within Jefferson Parish, whereas the city of New Orleans is in Orleans Parish. Jefferson Parish officials, allegedly with the support of then-Sherriff Harry Lee, notoriously used force to prevent many evacuees from crossing parish lines.
You know, and then Metairie, where they dropped us off at, you know, it was just, it was horrible. The old people was on the ground. They were stepping on them. One lady I can remember her like she was my mama. She say, ‘You all keep stepping on me,’ until she didn’t even open up her mouth no more. She just laid there. And the young folks, they just walked all over these old people because nobody was making arrangements for the old people to get on the bus before the younger people. Now, if you want to talk about fair is fair, with the women and the babies, I think the elderly people should have been a priority, and they was not a priority at all. I seen them…you know, dirty clothes and just shit – excuse me – on them and stuff. And nobody even cared. Nobody even stopped to say, you know, ‘Can I help you?’ Or whatever. Nobody did. (Patrice, Jan.)

In the later interview, this same scene emerges with its terribly memorable details, but cast in a slightly different light:

I feel bad for the old people, like when they took us you know in the helicopter and then we went under—what street is that—Causeway, they were stepping on the old people, you know. It’s like nobody cared. And I’m like, ‘Do y’all see y’all stepping on these people?’ You know, they couldn’t move. And it was like, one lady, they just stepped on her so much, she didn’t even look up no more. I guess the lady was like, well it’s just not going even do me a bit of good, because she didn’t have no
energy, she was old and she couldn’t fight nobody; you know it was—it was no sense of urgency. (Patrice, Nov.)

In both accounts, Patrice focuses on one elderly woman in particular, the one who persists in her memory like her own mother. There is a notable difference though in the speaking roles from one variation of this story to the next. In the first interview, Patrice recalls that the woman on the ground said, “You all keep stepping on me.” In the later recollection, the older woman says nothing and it is Patrice who remarks, “Do y’all see y’all stepping on these people?” In both versions, the scene ends with the utter hopelessness of the old woman giving up and laying on the ground while younger people literally walk over her. However, in Patrice’s later narrative, the change in voice marks a change in accountability: Patrice herself emerges as one person who does care, who will say something to help the woman. Furthermore, at this point in the interview, Patrice transitions from her remark about “no sense of urgency” into a critique of government and media agencies. Thus, the problem shifts outwardly from the lack of compassionate response from those at the scene to a more general failure on the part of disaster response officials. In this way, much like Shawn in his tale about the prison flooding, Patrice is able to distribute responsibility to “a complex social field” in this second interview (Hill).

Conclusion

The SKRH interviews provide a unique communicative context: the two individuals in conversation are, in many geographic and social senses of the word, from the same community of New Orleans, and are now part of a new community of evacuees in Houston. They are also, as the design of the project itself suggests, likely to empathize
with each other as a group of survivors of the same disaster. As evidenced in Shawn’s interview and Patrice’s second interview, these commonalities have the potential to enable remarkable communicative events, marked by collaboration, and by competence in both narration and, retrospectively, in action. In the first interview, Shawn is able to manage the information that was withheld from him during the storm and present himself as someone who acted responsibly with the knowledge he had. In Patrice’s second interview, she reflects on her decisions in order to explain them in the context of her belief systems. She also presents herself in the second interview as compassionate in the face of chaos and neglect. Where communicative norms are not shared, as in Patrice’s first recording, the narratives reflect incomprehensibility and self-doubt. Furthermore, with the creation of rapport in the interview setting, narrators enact the distribution of responsibility for troubling events; what Jane Hill calls the “complicity with the interlocutor” may even serve to strengthen the sense of a bond between interview participants. These narratives raise larger questions about the rhetorical strategies of speakers and their effectiveness within the interactive dynamics of interviews. How does the interaction shape the narrative of the interviewee? How does the narrative position the speaker in relation to the experiences they are recounting? To what extent do these two levels of interaction—between interviewer and narrator, and between narrator and narrated—influence each other? In these representative interviews, empathetic collaboration and shared communicative norms enable the emergence of a narrative in which the speaker positions him or herself favorably in relation to the events they describe. In a documentation project where the object is to allow individuals to tell their
own story, on their own terms, these stories are positive results. They allow speakers to contradict their negative portrayals in public discourse with their own versions of themselves: not criminals, not helpless victims, but responsible employees, good parents, and caring neighbors.
Chapter 3: From “angel of mercy” to “radical Muslim”: Zeitoun’s Story Travels

Introduction

Abdulrahman Zeitoun is a Syrian American contractor who has spent most of his adult life in New Orleans with his wife and children. The story of his experiences during and after Hurricane Katrina is in some ways extraordinary and in other ways representative of larger trends of experience. Like many New Orleanians, Zeitoun remained in the city in order to protect his property. There were other reasons, which resonate for locals, such as reluctance to deal with the hassles of evacuation, belief that predictions of danger were overstated, and curiosity and desire for adventure. For people with fewer resources than Zeitoun, these reasons were compounded by financial and logistical obstacles to evacuation. In Zeitoun’s case, however, staying was a choice, and it was one that resulted in a nightmare scenario: flooding of his home and neighborhood, abandonment of those awaiting rescue, and ultimately, his own wrongful incarceration. Perhaps because it is both remarkable and typical—many survivors of the hurricane slipped through the cracks in the justice system—Zeitoun’s story is one that circulates well. Audiences are intrigued, outraged, and sympathetic, especially when reading the account of his ordeal as told in the widely popular Zeitoun, written by Dave Eggers and published in 2009. Before Zeitoun, though, there were other versions of this story. The human rights organization Voice of Witness, of which Eggers is co-founder, included
excerpts of interviews with Zeitoun in their 2008 publication *Voices from the Storm*. Even before that book hit the shelves, a first-person blog chronicling Zeitoun’s experiences appeared on the Nola.com website, parts of which were handed over to local survivors in the months following the hurricane as a forum to share information and stories. The blog entry was published online in November of 2005, only two months after Zeitoun’s release from the Hunt Correctional Center. So what happened to the story of Zeitoun between 2005 and 2009? How did his story transform given its variety of venues, the circumstances of its sharing, its presumed audience, the addition of other voices to its telling?

This chapter examines the narrative as it morphs in each version, and considers the external elements that influenced these changes, including contexts of production, expectations attached to genre, and relevant dominant narratives. A comparative analysis reveals at least four features of Zeitoun’s story that emerge as both significant and variable: the strategies used to affirm credibility; the management of emotional content, particularly in figurative language; the use of reported speech; and finally, what William Labov calls narrative evaluation, or the point of the story according to its narrator. Identifying the trajectory of these qualities ultimately reveals that when Zeitoun’s account travels, it becomes what its genres demand and what its various audiences want to hear: the honest tale of a hardworking immigrant, then the broken voice of an emotional eyewitness to trauma, and finally, the exotic foreigner who transforms—temporarily—into an all-American hero.
In order to compare the narrative representations of Zeitoun’s experiences as they appear in first blog, then interview, then non-fiction bestseller, analysis in this chapter focuses on one significant moment that emerges in all three narrative contexts, though it is not perhaps the most obvious choice of moments. The climax of the plot as Eggers eventually presents it is Zeitoun’s arrest. The arrest is indeed the story’s most awful lesson: Zeitoun is snatched without explanation from his own property, informally accused of terrorism then formally accused of looting, held for three and a half weeks in various jail facilities, strip searched, robbed, interrogated, and denied basic rights including a phone call to his family, who meanwhile presumed him dead. He is eventually released on bail, and continues to deal with the legal and personal repercussions of his incarceration—a terrible mistake forged in the fires of panic, Islamophobia, and crippled bureaucracy. In all three narrative accounts, Zeitoun’s first encounter with the officials who arrest him does emerge as a key narrative moment.

However, an earlier moment in the story is equally important in considering the narrative as a performance or presentation of self by the narrator. Each text—blog, interview, and book—includes a visually striking recollection where Zeitoun enters a house to rescue an elderly woman who is literally hanging on for her life, holding herself up by the rafters of her flooded home, surrounded by her billowing dress. This moment lends itself to retelling for a number of possible reasons. First of all, its imagery is vivid and memorable. As Ulf Palmenfelt describes in his study of WWII narratives, one of the most often-repeated stories is one where a child uses his family’s cherished ration book to

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23 I use “performance” here as Bauman defines it, and “presentation of self” in the sense that Goffman describes it.
purchase milk, and then drops the jar of milk on the way back home. The story centers on
the heart-wrenching image of the white milk spreading out over a cobblestone street
(Palmenfelt). In stories like these, the repeated visual element takes on the qualities of an
icon—instantly recognizable, both symbolic and indexical in its representation of
suffering. Like the spilled milk, the floating woman appears in multiple renditions of this
story, almost unchanged, and is a narrative moment that reviewers and readers often
discuss.24

The encounter with the elderly woman is also the first and perhaps most crucial
depiction of Zeitoun as the hero of this story. As Zeitoun paddles around flooded streets
in his canoe, he and his friend hear the woman call out for help. Zeitoun goes to great
lengths to rescue this woman, swimming up to her home, kicking down the swollen door,
going to find more help because the woman is heavy and nearly immobile, and finally
maneuvering her into a waiting boat. Given her age, gender, and frailty, she fits the
quintessential description of a helpless victim, and Zeitoun’s rescue efforts in this
scenario serve as a dramatic counterpoint to his later categorization as a criminal. This
heroic moment makes his wrongful arrest and imprisonment even more ludicrous. To
varying degrees in each narrative, Zeitoun reflects on the sense of purpose he feels after
saving this woman, which lends a motive to his actions and adds to the tragic irony of his
incarceration. In the context of Zeitoun’s narrative, seeing him as a hero on a mission
enables the audience to fully sympathize with the obstacles he later faces. Thus, this

24 Although as my colleague Brian McAllister helpfully pointed out on reading this,
Palmenfelt’s reading of this image as iconic depends on its resurgence in a variety of
stories told by different narrators, whereas the image of the floating woman appears in
multiple versions of the same story.
pivotal moment serves as a focal point for analyzing the differences in each narrative as it emerges first in the context of his public blog, then in his interview for *Voices from the Storm*, and finally in Eggers’ literary adaption, *Zeitoun*.

*The Blog: “I found this old lady”*

Under the title “Rescue efforts lead to arrest nightmare for N.O. businessman,” Zeitoun’s story appeared on a blog on NOLA.com on November 24, 2005. NOLA.com is the website associated with the New Orleans daily newspaper *The Times Picayune*, although the site’s contents are often more geared toward tourism and entertainment than headline news.25 The blog originally bore the name “Bourbon Street Journal: Tales from the Quirky Side of the French Quarter,” and although many of the entries in the months immediately following Katrina still have contributing editor Jon Donley’s name in the byline, their content appears to be provided entirely by other contributors. This shift toward stories from locals or displaced New Orleanians is consistent with other blogs associated with the Times Picayune and NOLA.com, which transformed into emergency communication or other community forums in the wake of the storm. For example, Zeitoun’s blog entry follows on the heels of an open letter to FEMA from an angry resident, and it precedes a nostalgic entry from a local writer who relocated to Texas. Other items on the news website from the 24th include stories about Thanksgiving meals served to volunteers and homeless survivors, the installation of temporary mail trailers, and photos of the dark skyline of the still power-less city. In other words, the website in

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25 This accurately describes the site and the newspaper at the time of Zeitoun’s blog and my first exposure to it; however, the website has shifted toward headline news since the *Times Picayune* reduced its daily distribution to publication only three times per week.
general is almost entirely focused on post-Katrina developments, and the blog in particular is dedicated to personal accounts of survival and recovery.

Zeitoun’s entry is extensive, about twelve pages in length, and its first half is segmented into discrete days in the style of a journal. After the description of his arrest, the account is no longer organized into days, and time stretches out indefinitely as it must have for the jailed man himself. Zeitoun begins by explaining that he is a local businessman, assuring readers that he has “a very good reputation through out the city of New Orleans” and that he is “listed with the Better Business Bureau” (Zeitoun). This introduction offers credentials before he launches into his story. In addition to the common tendency for narrators to make claims to credibility, Zeitoun’s awareness of the outrageous treatment he endured dictates added necessity for proof of his trustworthiness. As Labov suggests, Zeitoun’s story defies believability because of the events that transpire within it, ironically the very events that make it a story worth sharing.²⁶ He has also been through an ordeal in which his reputation was disregarded, so he is reaffirming that measure of his identity. To invoke authority, he refers to official organizations and emphasizes hard work as his defining characteristic: “I started my life from scratch, and worked my way up to where I am now” (Zeitoun). This claim also places him in a narrative framework recognizable to his (primarily local and American) audience, that of the hardworking immigrant whose bootstrap mentality has paid off in a successful business. This relatively positive stereotype of hardworking immigrant may be intentionally conjured to counteract an alternative stereotype that plagued Zeitoun’s post-

²⁶ See Labov citation in Chapter 1.
Katrina nightmare, wherein he was suspected of terrorism largely because he is a Muslim man of Middle Eastern descent. In subsequent iterations of Zeitoun’s story, efforts to establish credibility continue, although the measures taken to do so change with the genre of storytelling.

The description of the rescue scene, in which Zeitoun and his friend encounter the elderly survivor they bring to safety, highlights other shifting features of storytelling as well. Reading this scene across genres, readers encounter fluctuation in explicit emotional content, changing patterns in the inclusion of reported speech, and a variable evaluation. This scene emerges during the fifth segment of Zeitoun’s Nola.com blog entry, which recounts the events of Wednesday, August 31st. This is Zeitoun’s first trip out in his canoe since the levee failure on the previous day, and he sets out with the intention of checking on his rental properties and with the thought he may be able to “even help people if they needed help” (Zeitoun). At the point where he and his friend encounter the elderly woman, he writes the following: “[W]e heard this muffled scream coming from somewhere. We couldn't find where it was coming from. I think the only reason we heard it was because the streets were so quiet. We yelled out to it. Asking ‘Where are you?’ The muffled voice was found coming from a house on Nashville Ave” (Zeitoun). Two elements especially will bear comparison to later accounts of this moment. First, the description of the woman’s voice changes slightly throughout the transformation of this narrative; here, it is a “muffled scream.” Also, the observation that Zeitoun shares about why they were able to hear the muffled scream at all is repeated with slight variation later on. In this case he explains, “the only reason we heard it was
because the streets were so quiet.” Subsequent analysis will return to the subtle shifts in later versions of this account as well as their potential implications.

Following their realization of where the cries for help were coming from, Zeitoun describes his rescue efforts as follows: “I hopped out the canoe and swam to the door. I tried to open it, but it was stuck. The lady inside kept yelling ‘Please help me! Please help me!’ I kicked her door and finally got it open. I found this old lady in a one-story house, floating on her back, holding on to a piece of furniture calling for help. I told her I came to help her” (Zeitoun). The dramatic discovery of an elderly woman floating helplessly inside her own home will be repeated as this story continues to travel to subsequent audiences, but important aspects of it will change. This version of the discovery is essentially matter of fact; it moves bluntly from problem to solution with little added emotional content. This is not to say the narrative is not a moving one, but rather to point out its simplicity, its focus on action, and the relative absence of the emotionally laden imagery that emerges later on.

Finally, Zeitoun narrates his levelheaded response to the crisis in which he finds the elderly woman:

She said she can't swim. I grabbed hold of her and tried to pull her out of the house. She was a heavyset woman, so it was very hard. When I got her out of her house, I told her to hang on to her porch railing. She said ‘Please don't leave me, please don't leave me.’ I told her, ‘I can't put you in the canoe, it might flip.’ I promised her that we would be back with help. She yelled ‘I can't hold on very long. Please hurry, please hurry!’ I
got back in my canoe and we continued up Nashville to look for help. As much as I was happy to have this little canoe, was as much as I hated that it was so small. (Zeitoun)

In this manner, Zeitoun sums up his first attempt to rescue the woman, his realization that he and his friend could not do it alone, and his decision to seek out more help. After this, he goes on to recount how they finally found a larger boat with helpful civilians aboard—though they were passed up by several official first responders—and together the men managed to get the woman onto the larger boat and take her to safety. Quoted speech in this version portrays Zeitoun as rather straightforward and forceful, and the woman appears nearly hysterical; he describes her as “yelling” and in his quoted language she repeats everything twice. Finally, Zeitoun’s evaluation, his suggestion of the point of this story, can be found in his poignant remark that “as much as I was happy to have this little canoe, was as much as I hated that it was so small.” In other words, he feels good about being able to help but simultaneously unable to do enough. Moving on to the subsequent versions of this same dramatic rescue highlights the changing nature of Zeitoun’s story; as the arena for storytelling changes, so does the form the narration takes.

_The Interview: “I see one old lady, remind me like my grandma”_

_Voices from the Storm_ is one in a series of books edited by Dave Eggers and Lola Vollen and published by Voice of Witness and McSweeney’s Books. The aim of the series, as stated in each of their publications as well as their website, is as follows: “Using

27 Many personal narratives from Katrina convey frustration that official first responders from outside of the city, such as members of the National Guard, were either not present or not helpful in the days immediately following the flood.
oral history as a foundation, the series illustrates human rights crises through the stories of the men and women who experience them,” which serves the dual purposes of “allow[ing] those most affected by contemporary social injustice to speak for themselves” and simultaneously educating readers who are “interested in a reality-based understanding of ongoing injustices.” The series includes nine books; in addition to narratives from Katrina, the topics include narratives from wrongfully convicted Americans, undocumented immigrants in America, “the abducted and displaced people of Sudan,” Zimbabweans, “survivors of Burma’s military regime,” “narratives or post-9/11 injustice,” and “narratives from women’s prisons” (voiceofwitness.org). This series and its editors are clearly dedicated to the premise that circulating narratives of human rights abuses has the potential to bring attention to and presumably ameliorate those abuses. Identifying the books as texts that address “human rights crises” already frames the events and narrators in certain ways, creating expectations associated with popular discourses of human rights. For example, a reader of such a text will most likely expect to be moved and outraged by the stories, although perhaps not to identify with the narrators. The stories might carefully balance exoticization with familiarization in order to engender empathy without creating too much discomfort.28 In other words, before even encountering “those most affected” who are “speaking for themselves,” readers are being instructed about how to listen.

The *Voices from the Storm* book is based on interviews with thirteen individual narrators who lived in New Orleans and survived the events of the hurricane. The

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interviewees comprise a wide range of ethnic backgrounds and professions, and in terms of socioeconomic background they tend toward the working class population of New Orleans. There are five women and eight men among those represented. The interview excerpts are arranged chronologically, first offering snippets from each narrator’s life prior to Katrina, then interweaving accounts from each narrator day by day from August 27th to September 4th, continuing with excerpts describing the week after the hurricane (September 5th to 11th) then more broadly “weeks after,” then finally segments of interviews where narrators are “looking back” on their experiences from an unspecified vantage point. After the interview-based portion, the book continues with a brief note about methodology followed by an extensive section of appendices.29

Between each chronologically arranged section there are editorial inserts, including sketched images of each narrator accompanied by mini-bios, maps, and a bulleted list of what the editors must have viewed as key context for each section of interviews. For instance, the introductory page for Monday, August 29th explains that, “At 8:14 a.m., the National Weather Service warns of a breach in the Industrial Canal” (Vollen 73). These notes, in addition to the several appendices, presumably serve as guideposts for the reader, who may encounter conflicting memories from narrators, or who may doubt the veracity of these accounts without the authoritative framework that bolsters them. Like Zeitoun’s citation of the Better Business Bureau, citations like the one of the National Weather Service serve to validate stories of events that may seem incredible. In contrast to Zeitoun’s invocation, however, these “truth-frames” erode the

29 The appendices comprise information like maps, demographics, National Weather Service warnings, and government agency reports and meeting transcripts.
narrators’ authority rather than adding to it. Whereas Zeitoun makes himself more credible by referring to his good reputation, these inserts imply a lessened credibility of narrators by insisting on the need to substantiate their accounts with facts and figures. In other words, the inclusion of these materials suggests that, from the editors’ perspective, the narrators are incapable of establishing credibility on their own. This is not to say the narrators are less credible, but rather to argue that the authority asserted by the volume’s framing devices in fact undermines the authority of the narratives themselves. This may be reason enough to question the imposition of outside authority onto the narrators’ stories, but the editorial inserts are problematic for other reasons as well. The September 4th page, for instance, offers this quip: “New Orleans police kill at least five New Orleans residents on the Danziger Bridge after those residents opened fire on government contractors hired to repair the 17th Street Canal” (Vollen 171, emphasis added).

Subsequent investigations and trial proceedings related to these incidents have revealed that the residents were only suspected of opening fire, and that in fact, police shot six unarmed civilians, killing a man with mental disabilities and a teenager (McCarthy). The report offered by Voices from the Storm may have been the only information available to the editors about those events at the time of publication. This discrepancy is not meant to imply carelessness in research, but rather to illustrate that the “facts” framing the interviews are equally as subject to reconsideration and revision as a personal account might be, and the use of such framing devices perhaps creates a false sense of superiority when it comes to outsider, official knowledge as opposed to insider, informally recounted experience.
In an excerpt from Zeitoun’s interview in *Voices from the Storm*, he describes the same dramatic moment discussed above, when he rescues a neighborhood woman from inside her home: “We hear this quiet noise and we stop to hear, to see where the noise come from, and we start following the voice and we got to very small house, few houses before Claiborne, one-story house, and have like green awning, I remember” (Vollen 120). In this version of their discovery of the woman, the woman signals her presence with a “quiet noise” as opposed to the “muffled scream” of the blog entry. Zeitoun continues, “To go closer, I have to jump from my canoe, jump to the water, and I open a screen door, go to the porch and I get to the house. Inside, I see one old lady, remind me like my grandma. Her dress full like a big balloon, floating in the water, and she’s on her back holding to her furniture” (Vollen 120). Zeitoun’s narrative is both more elaborated and more subdued in this context. In contrast to the short, violent phrases of his blog (he kicks the door, she yells repeatedly), in this version Zeitoun enters the house with ease and the woman barely makes a sound. In fact, he does not quote the woman at all in this section of the story. Whereas reported speech disappears from this version, the emotionally laden content that was absent from the blog makes an appearance here. The metaphorical language Zeitoun uses to describe her helplessness—her dress floating around her “like a balloon”—juxtaposes the fragility and innocence of that childhood toy with the desperation of the woman hanging from her ceiling. It also evokes a sense of the bizarre, in that a balloon is a strange and unexpected object in a story of a flood; this has the effect of conveying the inexplicable nature of some things encountered by
survivors.\textsuperscript{30} Even more explicitly in terms of emotional impact, Zeitoun tells his audience that this woman “remind me like my grandma.” This statement not only confirms the woman’s age and perhaps her weakness, but also the sense of obligation Zeitoun felt to help her. The familial reference is in fact reminiscent of an interview in the SKRH collection, in which a Katrina survivor recalls feeling particularly moved by the sight of a woman who she remembered “like [her] own Mama.”\textsuperscript{31} These moments of association with family members have the effect of both humanizing the perhaps overly abstracted images of survivors for audiences and also of imparting the emotional impact that these experiences had on the narrators themselves.

Finally, in addition to credibility claims, use of reported speech, and emotional content, Zeitoun’s evaluation of the narrative’s point changes with this version of his story as well. He wraps up this vignette as follows: “I drag her by her shoulder, and brought her outside through the door. No way to put her in the canoe. To save her would be to drown her if I tried put her in the canoe, because it would flip no question. And I take her to the porch to try to go get some help” (Vollen 120). Whereas in the first account he used the small size of his canoe to represent both his feeling of pride in helping and his limited capacity to do so, here he continues to express his frustration by remarking that for him, “to save her would be to drown her.” In fact, in this starkly poetic version of his narrative evaluation, Zeitoun emphasizes even more than in his first performance of this story his frustration and inability to do enough.

\textsuperscript{30} For more on strange occurrences and their implications in survivor narratives, see Carl Lindahl’s 2012 \textit{Journal of American Folklore} article “Legends of Hurricane Katrina: The Right to Be Wrong, Survivor-to-Survivor Storytelling, and Healing.”

\textsuperscript{31} See Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion of this quote and interview.
Dave Eggers’ *Zeitoun* is a compelling work of literary non-fiction, which adapts the story of Zeitoun into another generic category. In this version, instead of first person blog or minimally edited interview, readers encounter a second person narrative, a tale artfully crafted by a well-known writer but one which sticks—according to its author—to the true story of Zeitoun’s life and experiences. *Zeitoun* begins with Abdulrahman’s childhood in Syria, and includes his world travels as a Merchant Marine, his marriage to Kathy and her conversion to Islam, and the growth of their family and their contracting business in New Orleans. The narrative centers on Zeitoun’s decision to stay in New Orleans during Katrina, as well as the actions he took to save his properties and help stranded neighbors, and climaxes with his wrongful arrest and imprisonment. This story gives far more background and depth than either of the other two, as the events of the storm are incorporated into the narrative context of an entire life. Nonetheless, this version also shares elements in common with the other two versions, especially in terms of its implicit and explicit claims to truthfulness and in its narrative representation of the rescue scene.

In much the same way that *Voices from the Storm* gathers facts and statistics between its covers in an apparent effort to validate its first person accounts, the narrative of *Zeitoun* is surrounded by affirmations of its credibility as well as promises of its fidelity to its subject’s original story. The truth claims that frame the story of Zeitoun in this literary text go a step beyond those in *Voices from the Storm*. Whereas those framing devices undermined narrators’ credibility by indicating a necessity for external evidence,
Eggers’s book makes this same move but then attempts to counter it by continually insisting that the remarkable narrative being related is done so “through [Zeitoun’s] eyes” (345). These claims create the illusion of credibility, but in fact what Eggers has done is created a credible character of Zeitoun, who is portrayed in this literary work. The problem inherent in this kind of storytelling is that Zeitoun transforms from narrator, to narrator *in absentia*, and Eggers’ efforts to redeem his disappearance result in a characterization that becomes a character type. Zeitoun becomes the silent, long-suffering immigrant whose heroic actions are righteous in the face of his treatment by xenophobic Americans. As Gillian Whitlock has noted in her book *Soft Weapons*, life narratives, especially those about lives which are foreign to Western audiences, are often accompanied by “endorsements and authorizations in the form of introductions, prefaces, appendixes, and blurbs that guide the reception of the text,” and as “public intellectuals confer authority on the narrator; they both encourage and instruct the reader to read the text properly” (20). Whitlock’s study is of autobiographical texts from or about Muslim cultures, whereas *Zeitoun* is an American-written biographical account of a Muslim American. However, her theorization of how and why such accounts circulate in the Western literary marketplace is accurate and useful in understanding *Zeitoun’s* strengths and weaknesses: “Ethnic autobiography is highly valued for its exotic appeal and educational value, for the status it confers on the consumer as an enlightened, sympathetic, and politically correct individual, and for that comforting narcissistic recognition that denies difference across cultures” (Whitlock 15). The authoritative framing of Zeitoun’s story in Eggers’ book does the problematic work of conferring this
status, and the harder it works at “humanizing” the character of Zeitoun the more it serves “that comforting narcissistic recognition.”

Zeitoun’s characterization as a particular type moves beyond the story’s paratextual framing to the narrative itself. In the section of this book describing Zeitoun’s rescue of his elderly neighbor, the narrative management of reported speech, emotional content, and evaluative commentary continue to shift in relation to the blog and the interview. The story begins in this way:” As they were paddling…they heard a faint female voice. It was a kind of moan, weak and tremulous….It was coming from a one-story house on Nashville. They coasted toward the front door and heard the voice again: ‘Help me’” (Eggers 109). In this iteration, the woman’s voice has transformed from the blog’s “muffled scream,” to the interview’s “quiet noise,” to a “weak and tremulous” moan. Not only has the sound become increasingly meek and pleading, but it also has acquired a gender: before, it was introduced as a scream from an unidentified source; now, it is heard initially as a “faint female voice.” The difference may seem insignificant; however, the dramatic necessity of Zeitoun’s heroism is dependent on the dire circumstances of his quest—in Eggers’ rendering of this tale, readers can instantly read this as a damsel (albeit an elderly one) in distress. The fact that she is actually an older woman might add to the appeal of this story for readers; Zeitoun poses no threat to popular conceptions of Western masculinity as he might if he were rescuing a beautiful young (white) maiden from the flood.

The story continues as follows, describing Zeitoun’s entrance into the house and his first sight of the woman:
Zeitoun dropped his paddle and jumped into the water. He held his breath and swam to the porch. ‘Hello?’ the voice said, now hopeful. He tried the front door. It was stuck. Zeitoun kicked the door. It wouldn’t move. He kicked again. No movement. With the water now to his chest, he ran his body against the door. He did it again. And again. Finally it gave. (Eggers 109)

This description of Zeitoun’s attempts to get into the house are reminiscent of his blog entry, bearing more in common with that forceful language than with the toned down interview account. Even the woman’s voice has re-entered the account in the form of reported speech, but just barely, with her pleading “hello?” In this case, however, Zeitoun’s continued bursts of activity (“He kicked again”) are interspersed with the inactivity of the door itself (“No movement”). Thus, while the language echoes Zeitoun’s previous action-oriented statements, the narration also incorporates a new element of dramatic suspense. The drama continues as Zeitoun sees the woman: “Inside he found a woman hovering above him. She was in her seventies, a large woman, over two hundred pounds. Her patterned dress was spread out on the surface of the water like a great floating flower. Her legs dangled below. She was holding on to a bookshelf. ‘Help me,’ she said” (Eggers 110). In this case, the language echoes the interview version of the story, with its memorable image of the dress. Whereas Zeitoun described it as a balloon, however, Eggers uses the metaphor of “a great floating flower.” This continues to capture the vulnerability of the woman evoked by the balloon comparison, but it loses its bizarre quality: in many ways, a flower is not surprising at all—what more clichéd image is there
to describe a woman awaiting a man’s arrival? The woman being rescued and her rescuer both become generalized to some extent, in part because of the recognizable narrative tropes and metaphorical language, but also because Eggers leaves out the most personal appeal to emotion that Zeitoun had included in his earlier story: in this tale, there is no reference to the woman reminding him of his grandmother.

As this segment of narrative nears its conclusion in Eggers’ book, Zeitoun’s evaluation does not emerge as it does in the other narrative contexts. At the comparable point in the story, where Zeitoun and his friend decide they need more help and a bigger boat to get the woman to safety, what previously served as evaluation serves here as a conflict to be resolved. Eggers writes, “No one knew what to do next. It would be very difficult to fit a woman of her size into the canoe….The canoe would certainly capsize….They had no choice but to leave her and find help….She was unhappy to be left alone again, but there was no choice” (110). The narration goes on to describe their search for help, their success in getting the woman to safety, and before the story cuts over to Baton Rouge to describe Kathy Zeitoun’s simultaneous experiences, the reader leaves Abdulrahman “alone in the canoe...soaked and exhausted” (Eggers 114). Zeitoun’s quandary is perhaps implied in the statement, “there was no choice,” but this evaluative statement obscures the conflicting emotions Zeitoun endured. Nowhere does this mini-narrative grasp with the same concision the combination of utility and despair that Zeitoun expresses in previous narratives: “as much as I was happy to have this little canoe, was as much as I hated that it was so small,” in his blog; and in his interview, “to save her would be to drown her.”
The overall patterns of change from one narrative to the next are not a clear-cut movement from more personal to more archetypal. Rather, each text relies on different rhetorical strategies to convey meaning and engage an audience. In the blog, Zeitoun appeals to external validations of his individual credibility, and draws to some extent on generalized conceptions of immigrants in America. He characterizes his rescue efforts matter-of-factly, portrays the woman he rescues as agitated and even somewhat difficult, and expresses ambiguity about his ability to help those in need. In his interview with the editors of the human rights compilation, Zeitoun’s story is framed by external assurances which, by implicitly deferring to discourses of “fact-checking,” has the effect of diminishing the value of the interviews, or at the least of treating them as a sort of secondary evidence to a story being told with more authority by others. In this context, Zeitoun emphasizes the personal relationship he felt to the woman he rescued, and he downplays both her aggressiveness and his own. He introduces new elements of metaphorical language with more explicit emotional content than his previous version, and he emphasizes his feelings of futility during this experience. The strategies used to convey credibility, meaning, and emotional impact evolve based on where authority is located by the forces shaping the story’s production, including the anticipated audience. In Eggers’ case, he has the luxury of already possessing credibility as a narrator, so he is free to take more liberties with the management of Zeitoun’s credibility. Rather than having to focus solely on external validation of factuality and a narrative evaluation that conveys this story’s purpose, Eggers’ challenge is to fit this story into a framework that readers accustomed to literary genres will recognize and read correctly. Thus, where
Zeitoun is concerned with expressing authority, urgency, and finally ambiguity, Eggers is concerned with creating a believable character type, a suspenseful buildup, and finally, a clear resolution. The impact of these changes in Zeitoun’s narrative becomes clearer with an expanded study of the narrative’s publication. In other words, once the story is distributed, which parts of it are received well by audiences and critics? Which parts are remembered and repeated and passed on as important? Examining two instances of Zeitoun’s reception, first in an NPR interview and then in a New York Times book review, will help illuminate both the potential motivations for the changes described above as well as their possible implications.

“He was needed”: Zeitoun’s Reception

Shortly after Zeitoun’s release, NPR aired an episode of All Things Considered titled “War On Terror, Katrina Intersect in Zeitoun,” which discussed the book. As continued evidence that the rescue scene discussed throughout this chapter is a story that travels well, the episode uses that particular moment to illustrate the dramatic appeal of the book. The show transitions from Eggers’ interview responses to Zeitoun’s, with the two voices edited into a continuous narrative by the additions of the show’s host. The effect is a hybrid of the two storytelling styles demonstrated in earlier texts, with Zeitoun’s urgency and ambivalence and Eggers’ clear sense of purpose. Eggers begins, “he hears a faint voice, coming from a home, and…he was with a friend at that point, and they paddled up to the house and…” (“War”). The recording cuts to Zeitoun’s voice, distinguishable with its relatively accented English from that of Eggers: “…and we start slowly follow the noise…” (“War”). In case the transition of speakers is not clear for
listeners, the host interjects, “Zeitoun picks up the story from here” (“War”). Zeitoun continues:

I jump to the water, swim to her house, and got the door. I try force the door to open; I kick it to open. As soon I open I see the lady—she have one story house. And middle her living room, she have furniture all over covered with water. She holding to her dining room table and like she’s—the water up to her shoulders. And her dress floating ‘round her like—like flower or like umbrella, however you going to say it. And she said “please, take me out of here.” I mean when I saw her, I—first thing I see, like, my grandmother. I mean full of so sadness, and so happy at the same time I discover her. (“War”)

This rendition of the encounter bears familiar elements from Zeitoun’s second published account, in the interview collection *Voices from the Storm*, with its reference to his grandmother. He also reiterates the ambivalent evaluation at the anecdote’s end, with this conclusion that he was “full of so sadness, and so happy at the same time I discover her” (“War”).

In relating the image that has become the iconic kernel of this narrative, Zeitoun describes the woman’s “dress floating ‘round her like—like flower or like umbrella, however you going to say it” (“War”). He nods to Eggers’ word choice, of the “flower,” but he goes on to return to a less vulnerable, feminine metaphor of his own—“or like umbrella”—which also evokes a similar sort of unexpectedness as his earlier simile, in which her dress looked like a balloon. Finally, in a move that has an equivocating effect,
Zeitoun concludes, “however you going to say it” (“War”). This appears to acknowledge Zeitoun’s awareness of the differences in representation between his version of the story and Eggers’, but it also gestures toward dismissing either choice. Though this may undercut Zeitoun’s description, it has the simultaneous consequence of undermining Eggers. In keeping with the ambiguity expressed elsewhere in Zeitoun’s account, he seems unwilling to endorse Eggers’ consistency in portraying him as a hero with a definite purpose.

Again with the host’s explanation, the audience turns “back now to author Dave Eggers,” who adds his own narrative evaluation to the story Zeitoun has just told: “Because the canoe was so quiet, he was able to hear things that others weren’t. And others going around in motorboats and fan-boats that are so incredibly loud, he was in this quiet canoe and was able to sort of help animals and people and see things and hear things that others weren’t able to” (“War”). By offering this explanation, Eggers paints Zeitoun’s presence as somewhat mysterious, or even predestined. He is singled out from other survivors and rescuers, as a patient figure moving calmly through the chaos around him. This image resonates with readers and reviewers, who tend to tune out the ambiguity suggested in Zeitoun’s version of things and zero in on those events and qualities that form a familiar narrative of heroism.

For example, in an August 2009, review of Zeitoun for the New York Times, Timothy Egan echoes Eggers’ heroic tune. Egan writes, “Zeitoun paddles around New Orleans in his canoe for a week, an angel of mercy.” He continues, focusing once more on the rescue scene:
Zeitoun saves elderly and dehydrated residents trapped in rotting, collapsing homes: ‘Help me,’ comes the voice of an old woman. ‘Her patterned dress was spread out on the surface of the water like a great floating flower. Her legs dangled below. She was holding on to a bookshelf.’ In his first day in the canoe, Zeitoun assists in the rescue of five residents. ‘He had never felt such urgency and purpose,’ Eggers writes. ‘He was needed.’ (Egan)

Not only is this review noteworthy for its choice to quote the very same lines as All Things Considered, with the scene that resurfaces time after time in retellings of this tale, it is also interesting in the way it condenses Eggers’ language. In the book itself, the quote Egan selects about Zeitoun’s “urgency and purpose” appears three pages after the description of the woman in the floating dress. In between, the story cuts to the actions of Kathy Zeitoun, who has evacuated to Baton Rouge with the couple’s young children. In the book’s reception, then, what gets emphasized and crystallized are the helplessness of the woman being rescued and the unequivocal purpose of her rescuer, combining to forge a familiar heroic tale that audiences recognize and embrace.

Conclusion

In an ironic and sad turn of events, the public “character” of Abdulrahman Zeitoun has transformed from valiant to evil. In fact, I argue, the demand for unambiguous heroism finds its inverse in Zeitoun’s most recent publicity, wherein allegations of domestic abuse against him have been received with eagerness to cast him
as a villain. As many news outlets reported in early August 2012, Zeitoun was arrested twice for assaulting his wife Kathy. After the first incidence, the two were divorced. While in jail as a result of the second assault, Zeitoun allegedly hired another man to murder his former wife; Zeitoun was then jailed again for solicited murder. As the New York Times sums up the events, “[t]he couple divorced last year after he was convicted of assaulting her. And on Wednesday, the New Orleans police charged him with plotting to have Kathy Zeitoun, her son and another man murdered” (Brown). The article also explains, “Ms. Zeitoun said the book [Zeitoun] had accurately portrayed their relationship at the time. But she said her ex-husband had since grown angrier and more violent and his Islamic views had become more ‘radical’” (Brown).

Although many of the vitriolic comments regarding Zeitoun’s Muslim faith have since been removed from the various articles which reported this crime, a representative response in this vein reads as follows:

He comes from a culture/religion of violence and hate, where, after a divorce - the woman gets NOTHING, and where beating women you own - is an accepted practice, as evidenced by the lack of negative reaction (and indeed the support) of the local muslim/arabic populace in New Orleans. I don't see where there is anything to be shocked, or surprised about, here. (Albert_F)

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32 This story broke after this chapter was drafted, so although the news regarding Zeitoun is obviously relevant to his story and its public reception, it is not central to my analysis, especially since I do not believe it contradicts my findings here.
This commenter equates Zeitoun’s abuse of Kathy with his Muslim religion, based on prevalent American stereotypes associated with Muslim men and women, and admonishes other readers for being astonished after Eggers’ hero turned out to be a violent criminal.

In their book examining “the roots of Islamophobia,” Gottschalk and Greenberg ask, “how, in the minds of so many Americans, has Islam become synonymous with the Middle East, Muslim men with violence, and Muslim women with oppression?” They propose the following, in describing the extent to which these misconceptions are entrenched in American discourse:

One measure of the significance of this phenomenon is the tenacity of its stereotypes. Despite more than a half-century of both economic dependence on Middle Eastern oil and political involvement in Middle Eastern affairs, American images and understandings of Middle Eastern cultures remain largely unchanged. From the package for Camel cigarettes to the décor or the Trump Taj Mahal Casino in Atlantic City, pyramids, men in kaffiyehs, exotic women, and onion-domed mosques remain as central components of a stereotypical scene. This usually implies latent or actual violence directed outward at ‘unbelievers’ or inward toward women. (Gottschalk and Greenberg 4)

Thus a ready-made story exists to explain Zeitoun’s crime, that of the violent Muslim man who is abusive towards his oppressed wife.

Just as Zeitoun’s post-Katrina exploits were fitted to a dominant narrative of
American heroism, his recent actions are aligned with a different dominant narrative of Islamic masculinity. Zeitoun has become no more complex or dynamic a character, he is just starring in a different role. What I find remarkable about this transition is the ease with which it occurs. Dave Eggers went to extraordinary measures to cast Zeitoun as a hero, countering the discursive contexts of his arrest and imprisonment that cast him as at best, suspect, and at worst, a violent proponent of Islamic fundamentalism. It is not merely ironic that this worst-case narrative ends up describing Zeitoun in another context. In part, Eggers’ departure from Zeitoun’s ambiguity, in his efforts to create a fixed oppositional narrative, ultimately lent authority to the discourse he tried to discredit. In the chapters that follow, I will point out how those stories most likely to interrupt dominant discourse are those that opt for complexity over fixity, and my analysis will illustrate how this is achieved by incorporating, within the text itself, the dialogic processes inherent in narrative production.
Chapter 4: Katrina Stories Get Graphic in *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge*

*Introduction*

Josh Neufeld is candid about making his non-fiction graphic novel, *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge*, a representative sampling of Hurricane Katrina narratives:

I felt it was important to tell the story from the perspectives of a range of real people who had lived through the storm: well-off and poor, black and white, young and old, gay and straight, male and female, those who evacuated and those who stayed behind, people who were greatly affected by the flooding and even some who weren’t. (*A.D.* 191)

This statement, and thus the premise of this text and others like it, raises problematic issues attending the production of hurricane stories. First, Neufeld’s list fixes these categories as oppositional (e.g. “gay and straight”). This not only belies similarities across pre-conceived categories, it also obfuscates what Kimberle Crenshaw calls the “intersectionality” of these presumably independent identities. “The problem with identity politics,” manifested here in separate and pre-conceived identity categories, is “that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences” (Crenshaw 1242). The underlying premise in Neufeld’s book—that putting faces on a checklist of identities translates to equal representation of a diverse community—is a faulty one.

Intersectionality “highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when
considering how the social world is constructed” (Crenshaw 1245), rather than grouping people into neatly differentiated categories. Intersectionality, then, reveals central tensions in communal trauma as it is articulated in texts like *A.D.*: can individuals stand in for categories of identity, without erasing the multiple identity locations of each individual? Can diverse voices in the community be included while avoiding the leveling effect of multiplicity? These questions drive the following analysis of the stories in *A.D.*

First, to illustrate the desires of publishers, authors, and readers to see particular identity types portrayed in narratives about Katrina, I identify how people’s stories are chosen for inclusion in *A.D.* Then, examining the narratives and images in both *A.D.* and a closely related Scholastic publication, I articulate the ways in which Neufeld presents the selected individuals as representing larger groups, often falling into stereotypes associated with these groups. I explore how these stereotypes are unique to the medium of comics, but also how this work of graphic non-fiction faces similar challenges and relies on similar rhetorical strategies as the interview collections and works of literary non-fiction examined in previous chapters. Ultimately, I claim that the presentation of characters in *A.D.* undermines the assumption that individuals can productively serve as the public face of communal trauma, and in fact this mode of representation upholds negative stereotypes rather than challenging and revising dominant discourses about Katrina.

*A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge* is a non-fiction graphic novel based on the stories of seven New Orleans residents. The book’s creator, comic artist Josh Neufeld, draws these real life New Orleanians and depicts their narratives in five chronological
sections: “The Storm,” “The City,” “The Flood,” “The Diaspora,” and “The Return.” The seven people featured are Denise, Leo and his girlfriend Michelle, Abbas and his friend Darnell, Kwame, and “the Doctor” (Brobson). Given the author and publishers’ self-avowed interest in presenting survivors who represent disparate demographics, it is useful to first identify these “characters” along lines of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, and class. Another distinction made important by the author, and by many New Orleanians, is between those who evacuated and those who did not, as well as those who suffered from flooding, either surviving it themselves or having it damage their property. This text intentionally includes residents of the city across these spectrums. A brief overview of the characters follows; my aim in presenting them in the terms used below is not to reify these categories—indeed, the bulk of this chapter will argue against such practices—but rather to illustrate the particular realms of identity and experience which Neufeld and his publishers felt compelled to include in A.D.

Denise is an African American counselor who rides out the brunt of the storm in her Central City apartment,\(^33\) endures a long wait for rescue first at a local hospital and then at the Convention Center, and struggles financially and emotionally to finally return to New Orleans after two and a half years in Baton Rouge. Leo and Michelle are a young white couple living in Mid-City who evacuate, stay with friends and family around the country, then return about three weeks after the storm to find their apartment and belongings destroyed. Abbas is a middle-aged Iranian man; when his wife and children evacuate, he stays in New Orleans to protect the small supermarket he owns. His friend

\(^{33}\) At one point in the text, this area is mistakenly identified as Mid-City, a different albeit similarly named neighborhood.
Darnell, an African American man, stays with Abbas in the store. The two fight through days of flooding until Darnell’s asthma makes them accept a boat ride out of the city. Abbas returns to New Orleans the week after the storm, slowly rebuilding his business over three years, and Darnell relocates to Atlanta, because “his place in New Orleans was ruined, and he didn’t want to deal with starting over” (Neufeld, A.D. 161). Kwame is an African American high school student from New Orleans East, who evacuates with his family to Florida. When his parents realize their house is destroyed and his father’s church will need to be rebuilt, they send Kwame and his brother to California for the school year. Despite starting college in Ohio, Kwame visits New Orleans frequently, where his parents’ house is still being rebuilt three years after the hurricane. Finally, Dr. Brobson is a white middle-aged man who sticks out the storm in his upscale French Quarter home with his male partner. Brobson hosts friends for a hurricane party in his unscathed home, then offers his medical assistance to people around the French Quarter in the weeks following the storm.

* A.D. weaves together complex individual stories, and in fact has a complicated story of its own. The book began as a serially produced web comic, published on the *SMITH Magazine* website. That site’s editor, Larry Smith, sought out Neufeld after reading “Katrina Came Calling,” the author’s “self-published zine about [his] time volunteering with the Red Cross in the Gulf Coast after the hurricane” (Neufeld, A.D. 191). Smith thought Neufeld would be perfect to document the real life experiences of the hurricane, although in the shift to a larger collection, Neufeld leaves behind his own volunteering story and focuses instead on the stories of survivors. During 2007 and 2008,
the online version of *A.D.* was produced, and in 2008, Pantheon Press picked it up as a book project (Neufeld, *A.D.* 193).

In the complex origins of books like *A.D.*, and *Zeitoun* in the previous chapter, we see that some stories travel better than others. In her book *Other People’s Stories*, Amy Shuman argues that rather than viewing accuracy as the crux of the crisis of representation, critics ought to examine how personal narratives connect to allegorical ones. She advocates asking, of a story that travels between the particular and the universal, “[W]hose story is it…what is it being used for…what does it promise…and at whose expense?” (162). I argue that studying shifts in narrative interaction and rhetorical strategies as a story travels from one instantiation to the next can add to this line of questioning. What are the features that make a particular narrative travel? What do these features and their adaptations in different contexts reveal about cultural perceptions of trauma and the stories told in its wake? Whereas Chapter 3 addresses the conditions that enable *Zeitoun*’s favorable reception, this chapter explores the circumstances that influenced Neufeld’s selection of narratives for inclusion in *A.D.* Ultimately, both texts demonstrate that those stories about traumatic experience which circulate widely and achieve mass appeal in the literary marketplace are often stories that confirm their readers’ preconceptions, or those that surprise readers in nonthreatening ways. In the case of *A.D.*, the selection and depiction of individuals on whom Neufeld focuses and his audience’s responses to those choices reflect both the artist’s formal saturation in cultural stereotypes, and his readership’s eagerness to see those stereotypes confirmed and even
vindicated, in the text’s implicit claims that these fixed identities are somehow representative of cultural and experiential diversity.

“Standing in”: selection and characterization of categories

Josh Neufeld and Larry Smith, the editor of the online magazine that published the A.D. webcomic, discuss their process of deciding whose stories to feature in a video titled “Comic Book News and Reviews: Pulp Secret Report,” from May of 2007. Smith explains that he was looking to produce something related to either “the environment or New Orleans,” presumably because of the contemporary relevance of such themes in 2006 when Smith first approached Neufeld (“Comic Book News”). Smith points out that this webcomic tells the story of Katrina “from the perspective of five unfamous people”34 (“Comic Book News”). The “unfamous” in Smith’s comment emphasizes their role as unknown residents of New Orleans, rather than well-known spokespeople or celebrities. This indicates that it is important to the author and editor to focus on extraordinary experiences but of ordinary people.35 Furthermore, examination of the selection process and readers’ responses illustrates how the author, publishers, and audiences see these people as representing particular categories of identity.

In the “Comic Book News” video, Neufeld remarks on the task of choosing individuals to feature in A.D. He explains, “there were a couple people that we kinda knew right away that we wanted to use, and the first one was Leo, who’s the comic book fan” (“Comic Book News”). Leo is a heterosexual white man, not to mention a comic

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34 There are five primary stories, including two pairs, for a total of seven people.
35 Perhaps seeking the balance described in Chapter 1 between the believable and the noteworthy, as well as the familiar and the exotic.
collector and aspiring artist, and as such is the character who shares the most—at least in terms of visible attributes—with Neufeld himself. Mentioning him as their first clear choice is interesting, and perhaps resonates with this book’s origins in Neufeld’s own story. If *A.D.* is not to be a narrative about his experiences, it can at least have a character who stands in for him in a way. In fact Neufeld writes later, in a comment thread on the web version of *A.D.*, “My goal often is to have one character’s specific experience—say with evacuating the city, or suffering the effects of the hurricane, or dealing with the flooding—stand in for many of the others, so as to not repeat things too much” (Neufeld, *SMITHMag.net*). Although this particular explanation has more to do with the arrangement of the comic’s plot than with the initial selection of characters, it indicates the author’s belief that not only is “standing in” possible, it is an effective storytelling strategy. Neufeld operates with the assumption that if we as readers have seen one response to the rising floodwaters, we can imagine the others; similarly, if we have one straight, white, male artist in the story, we can extrapolate and fill in the experiences of other similar individuals.

Certainly, there is a practical necessity for being selective. As the editor acknowledges in their video, “We obviously have a mix of different experiences; some stayed for the hurricane, some got out right away. There’s many many more perspectives, but five is about what we could handle” (“Comic Book News”). What is interesting here is not the fact of selectivity, but rather the logics behind it, and then the way in which it is read as comprehensive. The logics I am referring to here are not those of Neufeld alone.

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36 Selection is also a key principle of coherence, as many narrative theorists have pointed out.
There are demands from editors and publishers and expectations from audiences that inform his artistic decisions, and exploring some of those—as I do below in the context of a book closely related to A.D.—pinpoints what is behind the choice of characters as well as the problems that arise as a result of those choices.

In 2011, Scholastic published State of Emergency, a book in their “On the Record” series. The book is an adaptation and combination of both Zeitoun and A.D., and in fact was created by Sari Wilson, who is, in addition to being a comic artist in her own right, Josh Neufeld’s wife. In a blog post from April, 2011, Neufeld announces a request from Scholastic’s editors for him to illustrate the cover of State of Emergency, which he describes as a text “aimed at high-school ‘reluctant readers’ (thus the appeal of the graphic novel format)” (“State of Emergency”). In this blog entry, he details the process of the cover’s creation, including his initial sketches and the feedback and instruction from the publishers. Their feedback reveals the categories of people widely perceived as needing to be represented in public discourse on Katrina, and also which signifiers are most easily understood as pointing to those categories.

Neufeld’s illustration, a drawing of three adults pulling children in a tub through flooded streets, is posted in its various stages, so blog readers watch as it develops. When the artist submits his rough sketch for their review, the publishers respond with the following requests, summarized and commented on here by Neufeld:

Their only specific note at that point was that I add a dog to the boat (!), and to make sure that at least one of the characters was African-American. (That was a no-brainer for me, for a couple of reasons. One was that the
majority of the flooded areas in New Orleans were black neighborhoods, which is just a fact of the storm. The other reason was that I’ve had enough experience working in academic publishing to know there is always concern about issues of diversity and representation of “minorities.” These are things I think about a lot too.) (“State of Emergency”)

Though the dog comment may seem inconsequential here, there is a larger pattern of audience responses to animals in distress in a number of hurricane narratives. Reviewers of Zeitoun and A.D. comment that they are particularly moved by anecdotes of abandoned or rescued cats and dogs. Thus, Scholastic’s request that a dog be included perhaps indicates their awareness of this sympathetic tendency, a hunch that young readers will be moved to empathy (or at least engagement) by the presence of an animal in peril. The subsequent commentary on race is equally suggestive of patterns in popular storm narratives, and these are more relevant patterns for the analysis at hand.

Neufeld agrees with the publishers’ demand that “at least one of the characters” portrayed on the cover of State of Emergency be African American. He finds it to be a “no-brainer” because of the disproportionate number of African American residents in New Orleans who were significantly affected by the storm and its aftermath. Still, his remark that this is “just a fact of the storm” discounts the centuries of racial—and racially motivated economic—discrimination that ensured African Americans were harder hit by the storm than white New Orleanians. Neufeld’s awareness of “concern about issues of
diversity and representation of ‘minorities’” is partially responsible for his artistic decision to make sure the requisite category—in this case, African American New Orleanians—is properly alluded to. This engagement with Scholastic shows that Neufeld is cognizant of publishers’ needs, presumably informed by consumers, to nod to multiculturalism in the works they produce. However, they continue to produce images and narratives that confirm pre-existing conceptions about race, gender, class, and in this case, experiences of Hurricane Katrina. Neufeld’s comments do not seem to be rooted in willful ignorance, but they do reveal publishing norms that are part of the larger tendency of Katrina narratives, A.D. certainly included: authors and publishers view the inclusion of multiple identity categories as sufficiently representing a diverse and complete picture of communal trauma. On the contrary, their tokenistic approach to multiplicity flattens the experiences of vastly different people and groups. It ignores the intersectionality of people living at the nexus of social constructions, and disguises the structural inequality among the categories it portrays.

When Neufeld submits the next iteration of his cover art (see figure 1 in appendix), the feedback he gets from the publisher indicates not just which categories they deem necessary to represent, but the ways in which they believe these categories should be represented. In these characterizations, I find evidence of the tendency to fall back on troubling stereotypes in lieu of critically engaging with a diverse realm of lived

37 It is not entirely clear why Neufeld uses quotes around the word minorities. I presume, based on his tone elsewhere, that he is being ironic, and suggesting by quoting this word that the groups publishers are concerned with representing are not, in fact, demographic minorities (perhaps he is referring especially to New Orleans, where African Americans are a majority of the city’s population).
experience. Neufeld writes, “Though generally happy with [this] pencil sketch, the
powers-that-be soon got back to me with a few suggestions and one major change: they
wanted the guy on the right to be a woman!” He continues, “They also asked that the guy
on the left should be more ‘manly,’ that the woman in the background not seem so
depressed, and that there be one fewer kid in the tub. I found these requests to be a bit
idiosyncratic but not particularly onerous” (“State of Emergency”). Unlike Neufeld, I do
not chalk these requests up to idiosyncrasy. Rather, I attribute them to the publishers’
wish for the people on the cover of their book to be immediately accessible and
unthreatening to their audience.

The decision to add the sympathetic figure of the dog is motivated by similar
forces as the decision to change the man to a woman: the woman will presumably be
more sympathetic, because she will not signify threat in the way the man will—especially
as an African American male does in the visual discourse of post-Katrina New Orleans.
In Critical Rhetorics of Race, Michael Lacy and Kathleen Hespel describe the effect of
media coverage of Katrina, in conclusions derived from their extensive study of over 300
news articles, as follows:

We found that the news discourse produced a mythic narrative featuring
an apocalyptic scene filled with dangerous black brutes and chaos, which
implied that a great white militaristic force (e.g., a cavalry) should restore
order and rescue the culture. Tragically, the apocalyptic scene enabled
government officials to excuse their delays, absolve them of their failure
to save New Orleans’ poor and black evacuees, and taint victims as dangerous criminals. (23)

Instead of challenging this narrative by featuring an African American male towing a tub of children to safety, the production of this *State of Emergency* cover participates in that narrative by giving readers what is comfortable in the stock and trade of stereotypes: a white man, but not an effeminate one; no black men in the flood waters; black women, but not too sad; with children, but not too many. And a dog. One further exchange between artist and publisher supports the notion that the goal of these revisions was to make the images less threatening or uncomfortable for imagined readers. To Neufeld’s penultimate revision, in which the “manliness” of the white male is drawn in harsh lines, bared teeth, and scruffy facial hair, “[the publishers’] only comment…was that the guy on the left be a little less ‘intense’ (which I happened to agree with)” (“State of Emergency”). Intensity is not the goal in this pedagogical text; accessibility is. Although there may be value gained in making texts available to readers, especially young ones, there is also value lost in not challenging their assumptions. This is not to say that Neufeld’s original drawings were a better option, only marred by the meddling of the publishers; rather, the interactive process of creating, exchanging, and revising these images is documented here to expose how the production of texts incorporates the expectations and norms of a number of individuals and institutions.38 In striving for consensus among all these participants (even in the early stages of creation), perhaps a

38 Including, in the Scholastic example, educational institutions and the public policies that shape them.
text like this arrives at a sort of lowest common denominator: this will be the image most agreeable to all.

Scrutinizing these shortcomings in the specific case of Neufeld is also an inquiry into the conditions that make his work possible and popular. In a number of genres with different authors, publishers, and readers involved, the same kinds of faulty assumptions emerge about multiplicity—if there are enough different types of people, familiar in their reductive categorization, then we can rest easy that we are getting the full story of communal trauma. These conventions characterize the production of many texts portraying Katrina, and their results collectively reinforce simplistic misconceptions rather than asking readers to reconsider them. Neufeld’s attempts to rely on this common strategy is further examined in the following sections, in which discussion of reader responses to the A.D. webcomic and close readings of the graphic novel itself show how this approach falls short.

“That woman is me”: representativeness gone wrong in A.D.

In A.D.’s original webcomic version, Neufeld published short chapters online approximately once a month. The format of the website allows for commenting by viewers, and these comments influenced the creative process of the next chapter. When asked by one interviewer how far in advance of publication he completed each chapter, Neufeld responds, laughing, “I was never ahead, not even for a second” (Comics Reporter). He was literally drawing the next panels while reading responses to the previous ones. Neufeld reflects, “having people be able to respond, some of that criticism or some of those positive responses, whatever it is, helps to sort of shape the direction
that I may go forward” (“Comic Book News”). The feedback allowed him to “find out what’s working, what’s not working, or what pushes people’s buttons and so forth” (“Comic Book News”). In an interesting twist on this non-fiction comic, some of the “characters” commented on the chapters as well. In one instance, a disagreement emerges in a comment thread between a reader and Denise, the woman featured in *A.D.*

Examining their exchange, as well as Josh Neufeld’s reactions to it, illuminates problems with the presentation and interpretation of one person as “standing in” for a category of people.

In Chapter 5 of the webcomic, the last panels portray Denise alone in her apartment at the height of the storm, in the early hours of August 29th. In panel 13, she stands—arms and legs splayed for support—in a doorway; walls crumble around her, the building itself seems to buckle in the wavy lines of the floor and ceiling, and wind and rain burst in through a shattered window. The wide-eyed Denise looks stunned. In the subsequent panel, which is divided into two frames, Denise dives onto a bed that she had previously lodged in the hallway for emergency shelter. The first frame shows her full body, suspended in the air over the bed; the second frame is a close up of her distraught face and her hands clinging to the mattress (see figure 2 in appendix).

One of the first commenters on this chapter is Dean Haspiel, a relatively well known comic artist and former collaborator with Neufeld. Dean writes, “A.D. continues to amaze as Josh pits reportage with art and makes universal fiction with emotional truths” (*SMITHMag.net*). Dean’s choice of phrasing here is interesting: given the clearly non-fiction status of the text, what does he mean by “universal fiction”? He continues,
“[m]y only criticism is with the last panel when the woman screams ‘I’m gonna die in this bitch!’ It felt forced and took me out of the drama” (SMITHMag.net). Within this criticism, the contours of Dean’s “fiction” begin to sharpen. Perhaps he finds this to be a story that can have universal resonance, one that can be true in ways to everyone. Because this moment feels dissonant for him, it breaks the otherwise sustained “fiction” that makes the reader feel present in the experience. However, Dean has more to say, as he explains exactly what it is that takes him “out of the drama” of Denise’s near death experience:

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? I have faced many awful situations and discovered that my faux bravado diminishes greatly when I think I’m about to perish. Still, if that’s how it went down, I’m impressed! (SMITHMag.net)

There are several layers to this commentary. First, Dean does not find Denise’s reaction to having her life threatened to be realistic. Partly, this is because her response is not the same as he imagines his own would be. Additionally, her response reminds him too much of a particular genre—rap music—that he thinks is an inappropriate mode of expression in this instance.

Almost immediately (seven hours later, according to the comments’ time stamps), Denise herself responds to Dean in this way:

Dean, [t]hat 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. (*SMITHMag.net*)

Remarkably, the comment forum of the webcomic allows Denise to confront Dean directly about his misreading of her speech. She corrects him on a number of levels. Her first sentence alone collapses his fragile construction of a “universal fiction,” because “that woman” who Dean is reading as a character in a story, as Denise succinctly puts it, “is me.” Quickly shifting from abstract characterization to lived experience, Denise addresses Dean’s other misconception: where he projected his own expectation of false bravado, Denise points out that her exclamation emerged from terror. Finally, Denise takes on Dean’s criticism of what he hears as the misplaced sounds of rap music. In a deft rhetorical move, Denise simultaneously claims and rejects the genre that Dean finds unsuitable for her expression.

To Denise’s corrections, Dean replies first with the following: “Hey, Denise–Fair enough. I grew up on the origins of hip-hop in the upper west side of Manhattan and I cherish the music. Just ask Josh” (*SMITHMag.net*). With this reach for credibility, Dean seeks to establish his own right to critique rap, which really is not the crux of the debate between these two. Rather, it appears to be a slightly muted battle over who has the right to say what is appropriate in terms of an authentic or realistic representation of an African American woman. Whereas Dean finds Denise’s language too much like rap, and
therefore removed from reality, Denise counters that the language of rap is part of her reality. With this, Dean promptly backpedals and claims it as part of his reality, too. Dean goes on to justify his criticism in the interesting lines below:

Still, there are some things that happen in real life that don’t always translate well in adaptation, especially in semi-autobiographical ‘fiction,’ and, for some reason, that very real line of expression [of yours] took me OUT of the drama. I’ve produced many semi-autobio comix and I find myself editing certain facts so I can get to the meat of the truth better for universal consumption. It’s a difficult thing to juggle. (SMITHMag.net)

Here, Dean gets to the heart of an issue with which many non-fiction texts about Katrina wrestle. Though he continues to insist on some level of fiction in this text—perhaps because of the comics medium—he touches on the problem of reality versus the feeling of reality for “universal consumption” by audiences. What he neglects here, and what many critics of Katrina-based stories neglect as well, is to ask about what kinds of realities do translate well, for whom, and at what cost.

Another frequent commenter on the webcomic is Neufeld himself, and he responds to this conversation between Denise and Dean both on the website and then later in an interview for The Comics Reporter. On the comment thread, he writes, “Dean and Denise, [y]our exchange was fascinating to me, and in a way I can understand both your points. Certainly, as I was writing the scene, I wouldn’t have had the Denise character say what she did” (Neufeld, SMITHMag.net). In this acknowledgment he agrees with Dean to an extent; this exclamation does not fit into his expectation about what a
near death experience would look and sound like. Neufeld continues, though, as follows:

“But I have the benefit of having the actual Denise for inspiration! When Denise told me the ‘I’m gonna die in this bitch’ line, I just knew I had to use it. 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” (SMITHMag.net). He closes by thanking them both and expressing gratitude for Denise’s willingness to share the experience in the first place.

Although Neufeld seems to be arguing against Dean in this comment by insisting on representing the moment as Denise remembers it, interesting qualifications emerge. For example, he recalls that he “just knew [he] had to use” the line in question, and concludes that “at least in this case” her reality was the best version of the story to go with. Their disagreement is not really about whether personal stories should be adapted to make them ring true with audiences; it is about which elements of a particular story are most likely to have that effect. Neufeld finds that Denise’s line imparts a sense of real danger in a way consistent with her character, even if it is not in a way consistent with some readers. The line, then, is a point of contention about the believability of Denise’s character.\(^{39}\) Neufeld’s subsequent commentary on this subject indicates that he recognizes—as does Denise—that in depicting the anger and fear of an African American woman, he walks a fine line between reality, recognition, and stereotype.

Early in the process of web publication, Neufeld gives an interview for NPR, along with Leo and Denise, in which the three openly discuss some of the problems of

\(^{39}\) This relates to the issues of credibility raised in other chapters; Denise’s credibility is at stake in readers’ perceptions of lines like the one discussed here.
representing real people in a graphic narrative. While Leo is quite pleased with his incarnation as a comics character, Denise expresses her reservations. She explains:

Josh and I talked on the front end, and I was kind of critical about the way my character could possibly be perceived. It seemed to me that my character will fall easily into stereotype and I was upset about it. But what I liked was that Josh didn't have a knee-jerk reaction to my criticism. And instead of becoming defensive, he listened to my concerns and he allowed me greater involvement in the process. So right now, I'm really pleased with how things are going. (“Post-Katrina Depicted in Comic Strips”)

Denise is savvy about the dangers of representativeness as well as the potential pitfalls of the comics form. Knowing that certain characteristics will be exaggerated and knowing that, as the sole member of this category present in the collection, she will potentially be read as standing in for the experiences of other African American women, she is aware that the elements likely to be focused on are elements that make her easily recognizable as a symbol of that category. In popular American discourse in general and in post-Katrina discourse in particular, those qualities include rage.⁴⁰

Josh responds to Denise’s expression of concern with the following explanation of how he amended his creative process: “Denise, after she saw her representation in the first chapter, where I sort of introduced the character, she, you know, very rightfully had concern about being portrayed in sort of the stereotypical way of an African-American woman…. [W]e agreed that for future episodes, it just works better all around, I would

⁴⁰ See, for example, Bell Hooks’ *Killing Rage: Ending Racism.*
show her the script before” (“Post-Katrina Depicted in Comic Strips”). This conversation in the NPR interview is one of many public venues where Neufeld explains Denise’s trepidations and his response to them. The sensitivity that the author displays toward this issue, as well as his willingness to have Denise review and critique his representation of her, is compelling evidence of Neufeld’s responsibility as an artist. On the other hand, the reception of the text by both Denise and other readers, such as Dean Haspiel, implies that the problem of stereotypical representation is not entirely resolved. Furthermore, although Neufeld frequently describes his interactions with Denise around this issue, he does not address this question in relation to any of the other people portrayed in A.D. In what ways, then, are depictions of Denise or others still problematic in the text? And why is it still an issue given how hard Neufeld worked to avoid it?

The exact nature of Denise’s qualms with her character is revealed in yet another interview conducted by New Orleans’ alternative newspaper, Gambit Weekly. In a similar discussion to the one in the NPR interview described above, although this time without Denise’s presence, Neufeld is asked to specify what Denise did not like about how she appeared in the comic. He explains:

Her first appearance in the book, I guess she came across as caustic or foul-mouthed. Negative, in a knee-jerk way. She thought that was a stereotypical portrayal. I think she called it “an angry black bitch.” I could see it from her point of view. She said, “I went through a major trauma, and the person that you know now, who you met after Hurricane Katrina, is a very different person than before Hurricane Katrina.” (Gambit)
The section of the comic to which Neufeld refers here is really just a glimpse of an introduction to Denise, and the emotions she displays are mild in comparison to later segments in the story. Specifically, her mother shares that she will ride out the hurricane at her workplace, Baptist Memorial Hospital, and that the hospital has promised to provide them with a private room for shelter; to this, Denise responds with a smirk, “Yeah, I’ll believe that shit when I see it” (Neufeld, SMITHMag.net 19). This panel remains unchanged in the print version of the comic (Neufeld, A.D. 34).

Part of Denise’s response, as Neufeld relays it in the interview with Gambit Weekly, is her concern that her character falls into a common stereotypical representation of angry African American women. One scholar describes this particular stereotype, commonly referred to as “the Sapphire”:

A[n]…image of Black women, reinforced by the media portrayal of the Amos and Andy radio show, was developed in the 1940’s and 1950’s. The Sapphire image, which was the antithesis of the Mammy representation, was the hostile, nagging wife of Kingfish, and was portrayed as ‘…iron-willed, effectual, [and] treacherous toward and contemptuous of Black men.’ (West 461)

West and others discuss the real world implications of this stereotype, noting that it has informed “societal expectations [that] discourage displays of anger, and often appropriately assertive behavior by underrepresented minorities” (West 461). In other words, the stereotypical image of the angry black woman has discouraged the expression of anger by real black women, or at least has shaped responses in such a way that those
expressions are not taken seriously. West adds that “popular culture and media perpetuate stereotypes in ways that foster the belief that these images are accurate representations of particular groups” (458). Denise is obviously aware of this stereotype, and she is wary both of perpetuating it and of being misread as inappropriately angry.

Denise’s critique includes her explanation of the traumatic experience that she has endured. According to Neufeld’s statement in the Gambit Weekly interview, Denise has told him that she was “a very different person” before Hurricane Katrina. In the context of her criticizing the anger he attributes to her character, this implies that she might be seen as an angry person now, but she was not that way before the storm. The background story of her personality shift as a result of trauma yields multiple insights. First, this reveals the limited ability of Neufeld’s post-storm knowledge about these people to capture the full effect of the rupture in their lives and worldviews. Furthermore, this serves as a caution for reading and viewing post-storm discourse in a case like Katrina, where the majority of people affected by the storm were the city’s poor and African American residents, and where this population became suddenly visible en masse to the public eye of the national media. Denise’s critique of Neufeld could also serve as a critique of the broader tendency to view those ruptured lives on display as unruptured—in other words, to read that despair retroactively onto the lives of those seen suffering.

This viewing practice is perhaps made most infamous by former First Lady Barbara Bush’s remark about survivors in the Houston Astrodome: according to a New York Times article from September 7, 2005, Mrs. Bush “declared [the response to Katrina] a success for evacuees who ‘were underprivileged anyway,’ saying on Monday
that many of the poor people she had seen while touring a Houston relocation site were faring better than before the storm hit” (“Barbara Bush Calls Evacuees Better Off”). However, this kind of perception was more widespread than just its instantiation in those now well-known words. As Anna Hartnell writes in her article on “Visualizing Race and Class in New Orleans,” “the way in which the black poor were framed by the media in the days that followed the levee breaches undoubtedly did conform to the race-based assumptions of many viewers” (307). Thus, commonly held—though perhaps not commonly discussed or admitted—stereotypes, in combination with the images circulated by the news media, resulted in “the media in essence provid[ing] a comfortable answer to the uncomfortable revelations about race and class that Katrina uncovered: poor blacks themselves were culpable for their own need” (Hartnell 307). In the process of producing A.D., Denise is well aware of the consequences of feeding the American public the kinds of images it unfortunately expects to see. She knows there is a very real risk that the effects of traumatic experience will be interpreted as the status quo of a frequently misrepresented group of people. Therefore, even though her experience of Katrina was characterized by terror and subsequent anger, she is reluctant for those emotions to be highlighted in her graphic incarnation in A.D.

Although he is perhaps not as sharply aware of this risk as Denise is, especially at the outset of the project, Neufeld does share her concerns, as he discloses in his interview with The Comics Reporter: “I was trying to be very sensitive in my drawings. I didn't want to create stereotypical images of ‘scared black faces’ or ‘angry black faces’ or anything like that. There's such a history in comics of stereotypical presentations of black
people” (Comics Reporter). Here Neufeld demonstrates his awareness both of common stereotypes attached to portrayals of African Americans, and of the particular tradition of those portrayals in the comic form. Given this knowledge on Neufeld’s part, his subsequent explanation of how he creates images is somewhat confounding. First, he tells his interviewer, “I used a lot of reference, photos of real people from the convention center and the Superdome. I tried to find individual people and put them into the comic” (Neufeld, Comics Reporter). What Neufeld fails to recognize or acknowledge in his use of this strategy is the media’s participation in the circulation of stereotypical images. Finding “photos of real people” does not equate to finding images that undermine the potentially racist expectations of viewing audiences. Furthermore, Neufeld continues, “[a]t the same time, I was having fun with the basics of comics storytelling, going back to my mainstream cartoonist past, or the exaggerated art of Tintin” (Comics Reporter). Tintin may be a beloved cultural relic and inspiration for many contemporary comic artists, but it is also an interesting example for Neufeld to cite, given its own roots in overtly racist depictions of African people. If Neufeld is aware of this history, and the potential for stereotyping given his source material and his formal inspiration, why is it so hard for him to avoid recreating these stereotypes in some ways?

Part of the answer to this question is that even with Neufeld’s hyper-sensitivity to the lineage of racism in cartoon images of African American people, and even with Denise’s cautions about the particular traps of depicting an angry black woman, the text’s audience is still primed to read it in a certain way. The role of the Sapphire and the form of the racially derogatory comic are both so recognizable that any hint of either spells
trouble, and their combination is doomed to a certain extent. These intertwined histories of representation predetermine the character of Denise to the point where her legitimate anger as a survivor of disaster and injustice cannot be read only as her anger. The production of a text that selects her as a symbol of a larger category, combined with a reader reception saturated in the discourses of black femininity and the traditions of the comics form, ensure that her image is read a certain way, informed by stereotypes. Either she confirms them, as in her own reading of how she appears, or she confuses them, as in the reader who read her “terror” in the midst of the storm as hip-hop “bravado.” The most telling result of that interaction is that instead of acknowledging that he had misread her emotions, the reader concluded that the moment “took him out of the drama,” thereby disrupting the story’s appeal for “universal consumption.” Stereotypes are easiest to digest when they do not talk back.

Denise’s image in the comic is unique in that she engages with its presentation at every step of the way. She offers Neufeld input on his early drawings, she comments on the webcomic, entering into dialogue with others tempted to read her in predetermined ways, and she voices her ongoing concerns about and involvement in the project via publicity events and interviews. What happens in terms of representation when no such involvement is apparent? Darnell, who waits out the hurricane in Abbas’ Uptown store, has no visible engagement with the processes of production, and his portrayal in comic form evokes a history of stereotypical images of black men, especially in the context of comics. In an article historicizing representations of African and African American people in comics, Sylvia White and Tania Fuentez refer to the work of Donald Bogle,
who “cites five basic stereotypes that have dictated black images” in visual media (74). White and Fuentez argue that these “negative stereotypes persist” in the present, “in particular where black men are concerned” (74). The stereotypes identified in their study most relevant to Darnell’s image are what Bogle labels “The Tom” and “The Coon.” According to these descriptions, “The Tom,” despite being “chastened, harassed, flogged, enslaved, and/or insulted,” “remains loyal” and appears as “selfless, faithful and deferential” (74). The stereotype of “The Coon” presents an African or African American man “as amusement object and black buffoon” (74). In part, White and Fuentez claim, these images endure because “minority characters” are portrayed as objects of “ridicule…in negative stereotypes designed to raise the self-esteem of the dominant culture while lowering the self-esteem of the minority group” (75). Darnell’s role in the story of *A.D.*, and his verbal and visual depictions, coincide with these racial stereotypes. He is presented as the loyal friend of the storeowner Abbas; despite suffering a great deal from asthma and other afflictions, Darnell insists, “No, Abbas -- I told you already. I ain’t leavin -- (wheeze) -- without you” (Neufeld, *A.D.* 131). This paints a picture of Darnell as being “selfless” and “faithful” perhaps against his own best interest. Furthermore, there are many instances where Darnell serves as “amusement object” or the butt of a joke. For example, throughout *A.D.* he is frequently shown as being more interested in eating and drinking than survival, focusing on provisions such as “beef jerky” and “beer” (88) whereas Abbas makes sure they have practical items for survival such as “flashlights” and a “Red Cross first aid kit” (51). In many panels Darnell is shown eating (64, 84, 89) or sleeping (161) while Abbas is checking the water levels, trying to get in touch with
family, or later, rebuilding his store.

One representative example of Darnell being an object of humor occurs in “The Flood” section of *A.D.* As the night approaches on August 29th, Abbas suggests they try to “get some rest and see how things are later” (90). Standing next to an emptied shelf, he remarks, “I’ll sleep here, and you take the sandwich counter…” (90), to which Darnell responds, “I know, I know -- because I look like a big ol’ po’ boy!” (90). The subsequent panel shows their joint laughter echoing outside the store, over dark floodwater rising ominously in the street. The same scene appears in Chapter 8 of the original webcomic, to which one reader responds, “Thanks for that final chuckle. People need to find humor in the midst of horror” (*SMITHMag.net*). Darnell is doubly the object of humor here; he both makes fun of himself (his size, shape, and affinity for food), and he also serves as an ironic example of carelessness in the face of danger that is obvious to others—in this case, the readers of the comic.

In an article examining the changing representations of black faces and bodies in cartoon images, Ruth Thibodeau writes the following, offering in this extended quote her conclusions regarding the pitfalls of comics depicting Africans or African Americans, especially when drawn by white artists, and especially when produced for comedic effect. Her summation here offers a useful explanation of what goes wrong in Neufeld’s portrayal of Darnell:

> [T]he very human characteristics drawn upon by the cartoonist to portray *any* individual, regardless of race, are also likely at times to have strong associations with a particular group…For the white cartoonist wishing to
portray blacks in nonracist ways, these tenacious associations are bound to be problematic. Given the salience of racial information, it is likely that a specifically racial interpretation will result when a black character is shown engaging in a human behavior—if that behavior is simultaneously a potentially stereotypical one—even when a racial meaning was not intended to be part of the humor. If this behavior is also unflattering (and cartoons often expose the less noble aspects of the human condition) then the possibility of the cartoon assuming a racist tone, at least in the eyes of some viewers, becomes even more probable. (Thibodeau 493)

In depicting Darnell as goofy, lazy, and deferential in comparison with Abbas, Neufeld draws on negative stereotypes associated with black men, and in part because of their historical associations, these are recognized as humorous by his audience.

How, then, is an artist to avoid the visual history of racist stereotypes, especially when representing the true stories of an angry black woman and an easygoing black man, who rely on these qualities for survival under duress? Part of the answer to this is that the problem does not lie in asking whether the stereotypical qualities are accurate in characterizing real life individuals. The real issue is in the circulation and reception of these qualities: their recognition and celebration by publishers and readers. The problem is that these features are in part what makes stories like these travel from the particular—a traumatized woman is angered by the failure of officials to rescue and aid in the recovery of her and her family—to the (stereotype-informed) universal: black women are angry. Patricia Hill Collins argues in “Learning from the Outsider Within” that “[m]any
of the attributes extant in Black female stereotypes are actually distorted renderings of those aspects of Black female behavior seen as most threatening to white patriarchy” (S17). She continues, “To ridicule assertive women by labeling them Sapphires reflects an effort to put all women in their place” (S17). Instead of labeling and eradicating such representations, Collins believes that “[b]y defining and valuing assertiveness and other ‘unfeminine’ qualities as necessary and functional attributes for Afro-American womanhood, Black women’s self-valuation challenges the content of externally-defined controlling images” (S18). Extended to Darnell, perhaps this approach would call for a re-definition and revaluation of the stereotypical qualities with which he is associated in this text. This critique affirms that the way out of stereotypical representation is not by avoidance—an arena in which we see Neufeld’s sincere attempts with Denise fail—but by redefinition of those perceived weaknesses as strengths, dependent on recognition that they are cast as weaknesses only in as much as they threaten dominant groups. The final section of this chapter demonstrates how Neufeld falls short of this redefinition, and also how critical and popular reception of these Katrina narratives continues to perpetuate rather than redefine stereotypes, and even celebrates them as symbols of diverse representations of humanity. The combined effects of these processes of production and reception illustrate the downfalls of representativeness, or more specifically, of putting an individual face on communal trauma.

Conclusion

In A.D., Neufeld draws relatively realistic humans, though their images tend toward the simple lines of those cartoons that Scott McCloud, in Understanding Comics,
classifies as “iconic abstraction” (50). Theoretically, these images should encourage identification due to their lack of visual specificity. As McCloud puts it, “When you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face—you see it as the face of another. But when you enter the world of the cartoon—you see yourself” (36). This is part of the appeal of comics; the minimal lines on the figures’ faces can invite more involvement and identification on the reader’s part. While soliciting audience engagement may be an admirable endeavor for Neufeld, iconic abstraction backfires when characters are depicted as standing in for unquestioned categories of identity.

For example, when Neufeld depicts Darnell as representative of African American working class males, his reliance on the iconic form of comics results in the problematic simplification of this category of people. Scott McCloud explains iconography in comics as follows: “When we abstract an image through cartooning, we’re not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential ‘meaning,’ an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can’t” (30). The details which Neufeld focuses on in drawing Darnell refer to a visual history of objectification and subjugation, so the “essential ‘meaning’” that gets amplified comprises negative qualities associated with that history. The representation of Darnell when he is at his most vulnerable harkens unmistakably to racist caricatures of black men (see figure 3 in appendix). His exaggerated lips, wide-open mouth, and bulging eyes are characteristic of the blackface minstrel tradition and racialized cartoons that evolved from it. Although in the case of A.D., over-simplification is heightened by the visual mode of representation on which graphic narrative depends, this pattern of
stereotyping is typical of other genres of hurricane narratives. The comics genre calls attention to the artificiality of its representation, its very trademark being an intentional emphasis on recognizable features. This trend may be less immediately visible in other genres, but it is no less relevant and troubling. The texts examined in other chapters also rely on uncritically selected categories of identity, and then work to make those categories recognizable by zooming in on features that will be immediately familiar to a wide audience. Instead of achieving their desired effect of increasing diversity and getting the whole story of a community ordeal, these texts exacerbate divisions within that community by reifying constructions of difference and inequality.

Rather than being challenged for their reproduction of simplified categories and their failure to redefine stereotypes, texts such as A.D. are received positively by audiences and critics. As Gillian Whitlock contends, “[c]omics, and indeed representations in general, need to be read with attention to their specific productions, and the locations and relocations of their reproduction and consumption” (ix). She insists that criticism ought to examine not just the text but “the epitexts and peritexts that carry the traces of complex textual histories” (Whitlock x). In line with this approach, I turn to an enthusiastic review of A.D. in Guttergeek written by Elizabeth Hewitt and quoted at length below:

Each section [of A.D.] is itself composed of the individual stories of the protagonists. Their individual tales of loss—emotional and property—are told with sensitivity and detail, but with no melodrama. Indeed, reading Denise’s harrowing experience at the Superdome waiting for relief that
never came or seeing the brave stoicism of Abbas and his friend Darnell camping on the roof of their grocery, bringing supplies to stranded residents, I was struck by what was so ineffective about the other flood comic published this year, *Some New Kind of Slaughter*, which merely offered archetype and no humanity. What was so splendid about *A.D.* is that it gives us such a multi-faceted portrait of responses to catastrophe and with no moralizing as to whose story was braver, about who did the right or wrong thing. Everyone suffers and everyone is a hero—but their heroism and martyrdom is neither romanticized nor mythic. It is exemplified in the particular and real events that Neufeld so painstakingly records: the loss of a lifelong comics collection, the rebuilding of a community church, the discovery of a family cat everyone assumed was killed in the storm.

In this review, Hewitt articulates what is so popular about a text like *A.D.*, but she also unknowingly alludes to its major weaknesses. By offering the “humanity” that Hewitt felt was lacking in another publication, Neufeld appears to resist what she sees as “merely…archetype.” However, in her own listing of apparently equivalent personal details, Hewitt echoes the flattening effect of *A.D.*’s presentation of its “characters.” Their “humanity” *is* reduced to types, but the multiplicity of those types creates the illusion of complexity, and their recognizability lulls readers into the comfortable sense of the reality that they expect.
Readers of *A.D.* have similar responses as reviewers, as the comments on the webcomic indicate. For instance, one commenter writes the following: “Portraying such diverse points of views can’t be easy. You pull it off, Josh. They’re all believable, not because they happened, but because your reporting seems to be on point” (*SMITHMag.net*). This reaction sums up what is at the core of both Neufeld’s success and his failures: these people’s traumatic stories are “believable,” but that credibility stems from the mode of presentation, not the story or the person who lived it. In making his “reporting…on point,” Neufeld reaches audiences and critics through his balancing of danger and comfort—he tells a story that makes people feel fear, but not for themselves or for a real and unsettling other. As another reader writes, “[t]hose panels make me so anxious I almost need to stop looking. Almost” (*SMITHMag.net*). The character types who end up on the pages of *A.D.* do not threaten dominant narratives of race, gender, class, or sexual orientation, nor do they substantially disrupt the official versions of Katrina stories. They perpetuate stereotypes both visually and in their characterizations, and in doing so they fail to redefine those qualities, such as anger and humor, which might have been seen as survival tactics rather than as confirmation of negative associations with oversimplified identity categories.

Neufeld’s failures matter in both theoretical and material ways. First, if the sharing of stories about trauma ought to create “an ethical human community defined not by sentimentality and guilt but by empathy and by responsibility for violence and towards those affected by it” (Cubilié 223), Neufeld’s representational strategies disappoint. On the webcomic version of *A.D.*, Denise sometimes corrects readers indulging in guilt and
sentimentality, but this is ultimately lost in book version of the comic. Furthermore, neither version encourages responsibility for the violence inflicted by the storm or the failures of rescue operations in its aftermath. The cost of irresponsibility is summed up as follows:

The speed (within six days) with which media transformed innocent victims and evacuees into dangerous black criminals and the global reach of such media demonstrate the power that demonic racial villains have on our cultural psyche in times of fear and distress; it also justifies and excuses extreme actions in response to cultural crises. (Lacy and Haspel 37)

Accepting the stereotype-driven discourse of media representation as true, as many Americans did after Katrina, has disastrous impacts in life and death situations. The inverse of the quote above is also true; the slowness with which this criminalizing discourse was contested, and the invisibility of stories featuring African American survivors as either rescuers themselves or victims of racist violence, demonstrates a reluctance of that “cultural psyche” to shift, even after the “fear and distress” have dissipated. Authors and artists such as Josh Neufeld have an opportunity to aid in that shift, by redefining stereotypes, resisting simplistic identity categorization, and challenging dominant narratives that characterize Katrina. It is an opportunity lost in the case of A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge.
Figure 1: Josh Neufeld’s drafted illustration for Scholastic’s *State of Emergency* cover; “State of Emergency: Evolution of a Cover”; *Joshcomix; Wordpress.com*, 4 April 2011; Web; 28 September 2012.
Figure 2: Denise reacts to the storm in Chapter 5, panel 13; *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge*; SMITHMag.net; SMITH Magazine, 2007-2008; Web; 10 January 2012.

Figure 3: Darnell in danger in Chapter 11, panel 1; *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge*; SMITHMag.net; SMITH Magazine, 2007-2008; Web; 10 January 2012.
Chapter 5: Documenting Disaster: Unsettled Filming in *Trouble the Water*

*Introduction*

Carl Deal and Tia Lessin’s 2009 documentary film *Trouble the Water* features the personal narrative of Katrina survivor Kimberly Roberts, along with her husband Scott and their friends and family. The Robertses, an African American family who lived in New Orleans’ 9th Ward neighborhood prior to Katrina, rode out the hurricane in their flooded home. They moved to a neighbor’s home as conditions worsened, and after being forcefully turned away from a local Naval base where they sought shelter, they found refuge in a nearby school building. Later, along with twenty-five other survivors, they drove a truck to their family’s property in Alexandria, Louisiana, where they continued to suffer with no water, no electricity, and delayed emergency aid. They received some assistance at a shelter in Alexandria before Kim, Scott, and their friend Brian were forced further north by Hurricane Rita, which hit Louisiana in September 2005. After residing with family members in Memphis, Kim and Scott finally returned to New Orleans and began rebuilding their lives.

*Trouble the Water* participates in a documentary trend that aligns audiences with the film’s subjects as opposed to the viewpoint of an unknown cameraperson. In many ways, this film relies on traditional documentary techniques such as archival news footage, editorial captions, and direct address to the camera by the film’s subjects.
However, this film also incorporates footage shot on a handheld camera by Kim Roberts during the hurricane. Kim’s footage is the catalyst for the Robertses’ relationship with the film’s directors, and it also drives the film’s narrative progression and emotional impact. Incorporating the subject’s viewpoint is not an entirely new tendency in documentary film. For example, Deborah Scranton’s 2006 documentary _The War Tapes_ consists largely of film recorded by soldiers during their deployment. Similarly, films like _Senna_ (2010) and _Restrepo_ (2010) adopt the perspective of participants in the action, even if those individuals are not the ones holding the camera. This technique has the effect of greater excitement and proximity to the action, but I argue that in _Trouble the Water_, it serves another purpose: foregrounding the “cracks and tears” that Ernst van Alphen, and I, advocate for in ethical representations of traumatic experience.41

In the case of _Trouble the Water_, the inclusion of Kimberly Roberts’ footage raises questions about the framing and circulation of eye-witness narratives similar to those questions raised by the other firsthand accounts examined in previous chapters: in what ways do the filmmakers invoke particular discourses in order to validate survivors’ accounts, and how to those relate to the survivors’ own claims to credibility? To what extent are these narratives shaped by their contexts of production, and vice versa? What is revealed about preconceptions of trauma victims, and in particular of Hurricane Katrina survivors, by the discourses engaged and the shape this story takes?

The ways in which the Roberts family and their friends engage with the process of _Trouble the Water_’s production suggest that this film successfully escapes the pattern of

41 See Chapter 1.
delivering comfortably consumable narratives of “othered” trauma. Just like Denise in
*A.D.*, these documentary subjects talk back, but unlike her voice, their voices are
incorporated into the text in question. Similar to the narrators in SKRH interviews, the
survivors in the film reveal an awareness of their audience’s expectations that is both
powerful and unsettling. Denise is concerned that audiences will read her emotions as a
racialized stereotype, Shawn and Patrice know they are competing with dominant
narratives portraying them as irresponsible, and as I discuss in more detail below, Kim
Roberts expects that “some white folks” will be interested in her footage. When listeners,
readers, and viewers are confronted with these implicit characterizations of themselves,
they are no longer innocent bystanders; they are made complicit in the suffering that
these texts convey. The ethical representation of trauma narratives depends on the
resulting uneasiness, and *Trouble the Water* provides a model of how to responsibly
integrate this kind of discomfort into a text’s production and circulation. However, this
film also indulges in a concluding narrative of uplift with respect to Kim and Scott
Roberts. As with *Zeitoun*, the established, recognizable storyline lurks behind what is
presented as an exceptional particularity. The film’s final nod to a dominant narrative of
racial uplift, which appeases audiences troubled by the film’s uncomfortable
contestations of the status quo, may ultimately be responsible for the film’s commercial
success.42

42 According to boxofficemojo.com, a subsidiary of the Internet Movie Database
(IMDB), *Trouble the Water* grossed $522,766 worldwide in its nine-month theater run,
ranking it 187th of over 1,000 listed documentaries. The film was also nominated for an
Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature, and was the winner of the Grand Jury
Prize for Best Documentary at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival.
Breaking the Frame: Trouble the Water’s Unconventional Speech and Footage

Right from the start, Carl Deal and Tia Lessin reveal how their concept of the film they set out to make was challenged by the reality they encountered, thus setting up a narrative framework in which preconceptions about Katrina survivors are subjected to challenges from the survivors themselves. For example, Trouble the Water did not even begin as a documentary about the Roberts family. In an interesting contrast to the making of A.D., where the author and publisher sought out particular voices representative of the categories they wished to portray, the directors/producers of Trouble the Water were on an entirely different mission when they first encountered Kim and Scott. As Carl Deal and Tia Lessin put it in an interview about the film’s creation, “[w]hen we arrived in Louisiana a week after the levees failed, we wanted to tell a different story” (Deal). The pair, who had worked together previously as producers on Michael Moore’s Bowling for Columbine and Fahrenheit 9/11, were headed to Louisiana to film the homecoming of Louisiana National Guard troops in the midst of Katrina’s aftermath. The military officials on site prevented them from achieving that goal, and they ended up interviewing evacuees at a nearby emergency shelter, coincidentally the same shelter in Alexandria, Louisiana, where Kim and Scott were seeking assistance.

In an early scene in Trouble the Water, the filmmakers are in the middle of conducting an interview with an unnamed survivor who is taking refuge at the shelter. Just moments into this conversation, Kim and Scott appear for the first time, interjecting to announce that they have hurricane footage. Kim’s appearance on camera is sudden and somewhat confusing, as she begins speaking while the camera is not on her, and whoever
is holding the camera seems unsure about whether to focus it on her while she contends:

“This need to be worldwide. All the footage that I seen on T.V.? Nobody ain’t got what I
got. I got right there in the hurricane.” Shortly after this dramatic entrance into the film, 
_Trouble the Water_ cuts to Kim’s handheld camera footage, affirming her claims and 
realizing her declaration that her images, now incorporated in an award winning and 
widely circulated documentary film, “need to be worldwide.”

Lessin and Deal’s editorial choice to include the scene in which they first meet Kim quickly fills the audience in on how the film became centered on her, but it also sets 
up the relationship between Kim, the directors/producers, and the audience as an 
unsettling one. This is different from _A.D._ or _Zeitoun_ where the audience is given the 
impression that any conflicts involved in the choice of subjects have already been 
resolved, and they are now free to feel like conscientious consumers of these narratives. 
Viewers of _Trouble the Water_ are taken aback, along with the camera’s lens, by the force 
of Kim’s entry into the visual and auditory frame: immediately they see the power of her 
presence, and her insistence on sharing her story. By opening with this scene, Lessin and 
Deal expose their own surprise and flexibility, rather than emphasizing directorial control 
over the selection of subjects for their film. The opening scene of _Trouble the Water_ is 
the first of several scenes where Kim asserts her awareness of her testimony’s value and 
the likelihood of its circulation in ways that may make audiences uncomfortable.

In particular, the first scenes from Kim’s own footage reveal Katrina survivors’ 
understanding of the discourses with which their stories must contend, as well as the 
capacity of truth-telling genres to challenge those discourses by foregrounding survivors’
engagements with them. When the documentary cuts to Kim’s recording, viewers are quickly immersed in her pre-Katrina life. She walks and bikes through her 9th Ward neighborhood, narrating over shaky images and occasionally posing questions to people she sees. Given audiences’ knowledge of what is to come, these images and interviews take on a nostalgic and tragic quality, such as when a group of young children playfully tell Kim’s camera that they are not scared of any hurricane and reveal that their families do not plan to evacuate. Despite those moments of innocence about what the storm will bring, Kim repeatedly asserts her cognizance of what she is documenting and why. She remarks that she is taking her “before and after shots,” and that she will continue to capture “live and direct footage when this here go down.” Kim is not an accidental witness to the events of Katrina, a bystander who just happened to have a camera. Rather, she intentionally set out to record what she anticipated would be a historical moment.

Furthermore, Kim’s on-camera comments disclose her motivations for creating this record and her expectations about who might be interested in it. She remarks over the images of her streets and neighbors, “Just in case it’s all gone I got it on tape, see? I’m showing the world that we did have a world, before the storm.” This declaration eerily anticipates both the destruction of the areas she is filming and the post-Katrina discourse that constructed communities like hers as not having “a world” worth rebuilding.\(^43\) Kim also predicts the following, in conversation with a group of neighborhood women sitting on their front steps: “Right here gonna be a day to remember, that’s why I’m recording.

\(^43\) This discourse covers a wide spectrum, from remarks like former Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert’s comment that “a lot of that place could be bulldozed” to the Bring New Orleans Back Commission’s proposal to reduce the city’s “footprint.”
Hey and, this thing really hit us, you know, I’ll be have something to show my children. If I get some [inaudible] shit, I might could sell it to them white folks, y’all heard me?” In this commentary Kim identifies two potential audiences for her footage, her future children and “them white folks.” Ironically, it is in fact a pair of white film producers who eventually incorporate Kim’s footage into their documentary.\(^{44}\) The inclusion of this prediction in the documentary itself is potentially unsettling to viewers: it creates the sensation that Kim is watching them, just as they are watching her. She has already imagined this audience, summoned by the “white folks” who picked up her story and delivered it to them. Does that mean viewers have been manipulated, duped? Does it mean they are participating in an exploitative market, trading in stories of personal struggle? The questions raised by this moment have the power to make viewers—especially white ones—consider the implications of their own viewership, of their own identity in relation to the identity of the film’s subjects.

The powerful turning of the spectatorial gaze back on the film’s audience is one of this documentary’s greatest strengths, and a strategy for circulating narratives of traumatic experience that models what Dominick LaCapra calls “empathic unsettlement.” In his 2000 book *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra describes the role of empathic unsettlement in responses to trauma:

> Historical trauma is specific, and not everyone is subject to it or entitled to the subject position associated with it. It is dubious to identify with the victim to the point of making oneself a surrogate victim who has a right to

\(^{44}\) And, as Kim has joked in an interview regarding her trip to Sundance, primarily white audiences on the film festival circuit.
the victim’s voice or subject position. The role of empathy and empathic unsettlement in the attentive secondary witness does not entail this identity; it involves a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place. (78)

LaCapra argues essentially for a respect for difference that must be achieved by maintaining distance. In part this is a response to an approach to studying and representing trauma which allows the appropriation of victims’ voices and experiences, and as a result, their continuous victimization even by those who mean well.

In addition, empathic unsettlement can be a corrective to what some theorists recognize as a flawed system for the public reception of personal trauma narratives.45

Gillian Whitlock explains the shortcomings of audience empathy as follows:

Empathy is attractive, but there is something self-reflective about it, and because empathy makes us feel good, it is very easy to bear…A more difficult contract for dealing with trauma but a more timely one given ‘compassion fatigue’ might…complicate the notion that we can assimilate strangers and negotiate difference through empathic understanding. It could, for example, project intractable difference that must be negotiated in other ways. (156)

Similar to LaCapra, Whitlock insists on the recognition of difference between the listening subject and the speaking one. Identification on the part of the listener not only

45 See also Lauren Berlant’s 2004 edited volume *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion.*
usurps the place of the narrator, it also precludes the listener from an ethical response. Empathy, in a sense, acts as an anesthetic for the secondary trauma of listening. The uncomfortable alternative, where “the audience is shaken out of complacency,” is empathic unsettlement (Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics* 90). In narratives that have this effect, empathetic sentiment is more likely to become a means to an end, compelling audiences to action, for example, rather than the end in itself. Furthermore, by discouraging listeners’ identification with victims, empathic unsettlement creates a communicative context in which audiences can see their own complicity in a narrative of suffering. These are the powerful effects of the unsettling moments in *Trouble the Water*; audiences are consistently reminded of the “intractable difference” between their position as viewers of this film and Kim’s position as survivor and documentarian, and as a result they are forced to consider how their spectatorship—in relation to this and other representations of Katrina—implicates them in the discursive and material violence afflicting hurricane survivors.

In addition to the film’s opening sequence where Kim introduces herself and her footage, and where she anticipates the kind of audience her story will attract, there are later scenes that contribute to the film’s unsettling impact. As the film progresses, viewers see Kim’s footage covering the storm itself and the ensuing flood. Meanwhile, the audience is also following the interwoven story of Kim and Scott in the weeks after the storm, now in the company of Carl Deal and Tia Lessin. The filmmakers also include clips from news coverage of the storm and aftermath, which remind audiences of the

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46 Hesford is referring specifically to political theater, in the broader context of visual rhetorics in human rights discourse.
external perspective on these events. At other times, the selection and placement of specific news clips creates an ironic contrast with the firsthand footage from Kim’s camera. For example, in the chaotic midst of water rushing through Kim’s streets—overtopping the stop signs at the intersection outside of her house, where survivors are huddled in the hot, dark attic—the film cuts quickly to a broadcast of Michael Brown, calmly reassuring his interviewer and the news-watching public that FEMA is prepared to respond to this disaster. This juxtaposition critiques the federal government’s preparedness for and response to Katrina’s flooding.

With good reason, Michael Brown is a popular scapegoat for the mismanagement of responses to Katrina; however, the film’s more subtle and potentially less popular critiques target the broader American public who watched the news coverage, sometimes accepting the narrative that African American New Orleanians were lawless and violent, and sometimes seeing survivors as helpless victims for whom they felt empathy but not an ethical imperative to respond. One such critique emerges in a scene a little over half an hour into the film. As Kim, Scott, and their neighbors endure their wait in the attic of a flooded home, they watch the water and skies outside through a small dormer window, commenting on the surprising absence of rescuers. At one point, an unnamed woman in the attic with Kim observes, “New Orleans looks dead like a motherfucker. They probably got us all on the news.” The film immediately cuts to news coverage of Katrina survivors, confirming the woman’s suspicions. In these replayed news broadcasts, viewers of Trouble the Water see images that are most likely familiar because they were so widely circulated during the height of the storm’s media coverage. For instance, there
are young African American survivors on a rooftop with scrawled messages pleading for help, and families crowded onto highway overpasses around the city. The familiarity of these images is disconcerting when it follows the astute observation made by Kim’s friend. Seeing this coverage again, recontextualized, makes viewers see it differently. Hearing people realize how their suffering is being broadcast, but not alleviated, implicates those who witnessed that suffering from a safe distance. By presenting Kim’s firsthand footage in this context, the filmmakers refuse to allow identification and appropriation of the traumatic experiences she and her friends endured. Instead, they reintroduce that intractable distance between the trauma survivor and the audience to her story by reminding viewers what they were likely doing when this happened—standing by and watching.

Beyond their inclusion of Kim’s unsettling commentary and that of her neighbors, the filmmakers incorporate other techniques and rhetorical strategies that distance audiences from the subject positions of Katrina’s victims. One such recurring strategy is an unusual sort of “double filming” that occurs throughout Trouble the Water. Although the movie uses Kim’s original footage to depict her experiences before and during the

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47 Maurice Stevens and Rebecca Wanzo both describe media coverage of Katrina victims as “illegible” to viewers. In Wanzo’s words, in The Suffering Will Not Be Televised, “[i]llegibility is not invisibility—the victims of Hurricane Katrina and state neglect were hypervisible on television. To be politically illegible as a sufferer is to have one’s story visible but obscured by historical and cultural debris, thus the intended audience cannot read or interpret it in a way that leads to true comprehension of the cause of suffering” (32).

48 I am indebted to many people for helping me discover this point by sharing their reflections on viewing Katrina-related news from an outside perspective, including my “Documentary in the U.S. Experience” students who were impressively open in discussing their experiences of watching such broadcasts.
storm, this comes almost entirely to an end once Kim joins forces with Carl Deal and Tia Lessin. In other words, even though there are flashbacks in the film’s chronology, they mostly predate the meeting of the Roberts family with the directors/producers. Following this encounter, as Kim and Scott await financial assistance at her uncle’s home in Alexandria, then evacuate from Hurricane Rita to a cousin’s home in Memphis, and finally return to New Orleans, their struggles are documented by the professional film crew. What is striking about this, though, is that Kim continues to use her camera, as does their friend and companion Brian. As a result, there are many points in Trouble the Water where the viewer is watching Kim or Brian as they record things, but never seeing what they are recording. This pattern has the contradictory effect of simultaneously validating and undermining Kim’s authority as documentarian. Additionally, there are compelling scenes where the audience’s inability to see what Kim and Brian see creates the distance necessary for empathic unsettlement.

Kim’s continued use of her camera asserts her right and ability to record her experiences, but at the same time, her documentary project has been subsumed by that of Deal and Lessin. In one interesting scene, Kim, Scott, and Brian return to New Orleans with Deal and Lessin for their first post-Katrina visit. As they drive into the city, viewers get multiple perspectives even within the closed space of their van. The scene begins with a close shot of Kim talking on the phone, explaining to someone how she survived and is headed back to New Orleans with “some people I met.” Kim explains, about the people she is traveling with, that “they doing a documentary. Like a real documentary? Like, you know, on…hurricanes and stuff.” Hearing Kim describe the project in this way
reveals her belief that the project of Deal and Lessin bears some legitimacy that her own filming perhaps did not. Rather than cite their experience, equipment, bankroll, or any other qualifications, however, Kim refers to their broad topic of “hurricanes.” Despite the filmmakers’ clear interest up to this point in the Roberts family’s experiences, this description hints at Kim’s assumption that a documentary would require a topic of more general interest and importance than her own personal story. Nonetheless, Kim follows immediately on that remark by saying, “all in the same minute, I’m teaching Brian how to be a director.” Sure enough, the footage from the inside of the car comprises images both of an unnamed camerawoman, part of the official film crew, and images of Brian holding a camera. The viewers are left to assume that the shots of the crew are taken by Brian, and vice versa. In this brief scene, then, there is shared authority of directorial control and of visual perspective: we hear Kim say she is with a real documentary crew, and we see Brian’s viewpoint of them, and then we hear Kim say she is making Brian into a director and we see the film crew’s gaze turned back on him. Finally, Kim has the video camera back in her own hands and the audience’s view is of both her and what she is looking at—the shot includes Kim’s face, the scene of devastation outside the car window, and the viewfinding screen of her handheld camera. Ironically, Scott remarks at this moment, “[T]his look like a movie, man. This can’t be real.”

What are viewers to make of these layered representations, of people filming people, who are simultaneously filming something that looks “like a movie”? The resulting confusion mimics the complicated struggle to depict narratives of traumatic experience. Eyewitness accounts of survivors are often framed and circulated by someone
else in attempts to lend them legitimacy, and this framing echoes the survivors’ own attempts to record and make sense of surreal experience. Furthermore, survivors are capable of negotiating that external framework, turning it back on itself in order to assert their own authority as producers of narratives. By incorporating this negotiation in *Trouble the Water*, Carl Deal and Tia Lessin challenge the dominant discourse of trauma victims, especially in the case of Katrina, as passive or helpless, and of their stories as ones that can be easily packaged, transported, and purchased by consumers eager to feel good about their own capacity for sympathy.

While those scenes where viewers see what Kim and Brian are filming are complex and interesting, an even more powerful moment arises when audiences of *Trouble the Water* are denied access to the amateur footage, and thus to the survivors’ perspective. Upon returning to their 9th Ward neighborhood, the Robertses and Brian are shocked not only by the destruction, but also by the evidence that few search or rescue crews have been in the area. They read from the spray paint markings on homes, noting that in many cases either no one has entered these buildings—at this point, two weeks after the storm—or that the only organization that has searched a home is the local animal rescue team, the LASPCA. Kim’s mounting anger culminates when she realizes, “I betcha…my uncle still in the house, y’all.” With this, the group approaches the home where Kim suspects her uncle may have taken shelter during the flood. As she dons a surgical mask to protect against odors and airborne mold, Brian follows her through the

49 First responders and other rescue organizations left a spray painted “X” on the exterior of any building they entered, along with the date of entry, the acronym for their organization, and the number of bodies (dead or living) found inside.
home’s front door with the video camera in hand. Meanwhile, viewers see the film crew’s perspective, looking in from the front door as Kim and Brian enter a second room. We watch Brian’s back in this second doorway; he films something we can not see as Kim’s voice comes from within the inner room: “Yeah, he been decomposing right here.” With this graphic verbal description, we see Brian turn quickly, remarking “Oh Jesus,” and leaving the house with an expression of disgust. Kim confirms, “Yeah, he died up in here, ya heard me?” Based on Kim’s narration and Brian’s reaction, viewers of Trouble the Water have no doubt about what they have found inside the house: the dead body of Kim’s uncle, undiscovered by officials and left to rot in the Louisiana heat. However, while Kim and Brian see this horror, we do not. This moment is perhaps the film’s most compelling example of empathic unsettlement. As secondary witnesses to this trauma, we are never going to see exactly what they saw. Nor should we, the filmmakers seem to imply. There is an irreconcilable distance between what Kim and Brian experienced in this discovery and what we are able to comprehend, which the camera’s distance, in not exposing that awful image of death, insists on maintaining.

_Uplift and Appeasement: Trouble the Water’s Conventional Ending_

Despite being effectively uncomfortable at many key moments, Trouble the Water offers a relatively feel-good conclusion that reinforces dominant narratives rather than continuing to challenge them. First, Scott and Kim are shown happily at work in their respective post-Katrina jobs, then several captions appear to inform viewers of some ongoing issues with the city’s recovery, and finally, Kim is shown celebrating with other New Orleanians at a demonstration in front of City Hall. Overall, this resolution lets
audiences off the hook too easily, implying not only that Kim and Scott have found closure after their traumatic experiences, but also that these experiences were ultimately positive ones for the couple. Despite paying lip service to locals’ uphill battle of recovery, the film’s ending is ultimately contrary to the insistence, on the part of many hurricane survivors including Kim Roberts, that the suffering they endured during Katrina is continuous, in both material and emotional terms. Furthermore, ending Kim and Scott’s story on an optimistic note relieves the productive tension established by the film’s earlier strategies of empathic unsettlement. Instead of feeling implicated by their own passive viewership of enduring hardship, by the end of the film, audiences are left feeling assured that everything worked out for the best.

As the documentary moves toward its problematic conclusion, a caption informs audiences that this final footage is from “six months later” (eighteen months after Katrina hit). The scene opens on a clean, bright New Orleans, complete with sunny blue skies, in dramatic contrast with the previous scene, which had been filmed at night. The camera cuts to Scott Roberts, who confidently measures and marks a piece of wood in the midst of a construction site. The following sequence reveals that Scott is now doing carpentry, working with “a cool boss” on rebuilding local houses. As he saws wood under the guidance of his employer, Scott’s voiceover proclaims, “I ain’t got to be looking over my shoulder, I ain’t got to be worrying about somebody looking for me with a gun.” His lifestyle as it is shown in these closing scenes contrasts with earlier references in the film to his involvement with dealing drugs. In explaining how he came to hire Scott, the older, white man explains that he overheard Scott say “all I really want to do is work” and
concluded, “that’s the kind of guy…you know you can rely on.” As the camera shows Scott engaged in physical labor, his voice continues to explain how he feels about this job: “I’m happy I did come back ‘cause now I get to rebuild my city…I come in in the morning, jump straight to work. I love the smell of that sawdust.” This final depiction of Scott’s post-Katrina life ends with some motivational words he offers to other survivors: “try to make a difference in your neighborhood if you can’t make a difference nowhere else.”

In their choice to conclude the documentary in this manner, the filmmakers fall back on the dominant narrative of “racial uplift,” specifically as that term refers to the industrial educational philosophies of Booker T. Washington and others in the late 19th century. For example, Washington’s Tuskegee Institute, perhaps the most well known manifestation of this belief system, “emphasized manual training, sought to inculcate the dignity of labor, taught a curriculum of rudimentary education, and was intended to produce common-school teachers who would, to the benefit of southern black farmers and their families, inculcate habits of industry, thrift, and morality” (Gaines 34). The conclusion of Trouble the Water reflects this narrative in its uncritical celebration of Scott Roberts’ manual labor. By having Scott’s final scene in the film be one in which he joyfully proclaims that he “love[s] the smell of that sawdust,” the filmmakers imply that this newfound vocation is a happy culmination of Scott’s difficult past experiences. His voiceover explains, “I’m just—at work. This where I spend my time out; I spend my nights at home,” confirming that in accordance with the dominant narrative of racial uplift, Scott is learning the “habits of industry, thrift, and morality.” In fact, as he is
talking about how he “jump[s] straight to work in the morning,” the camera follows his muscular body up a ladder on the side of the house on which he is working. As he ascends, his body is framed by the bright blue sky behind him. Deal and Lessin’s choice to show this imagery of Scott’s literal climb as he explains his current work reinforces their presentation of this scene as a metaphorical climbing, and imparts the value they place on Scott’s realization of the “dignity of labor.” Although there is no inherent fault in Scott’s choice of work, or in the filmmaker’s depiction of it as valuable, there is a class division inherent in this narrative, wherein it is implied that a man of Scott’s socioeconomic background has reached his pinnacle in manual labor. Moreover, there is a problematic lapse into a recognizable narrative that reinforces racist beliefs and upholds the mistaken credo that individuals are capable of overcoming systemized discrimination by virtue of their own hard work.

Marlon B. Ross describes the central problem historically characterizing narratives that echo this philosophy of racial uplift:

Although the Jim Crow regime is shown as clearly the one in error, the burden of change in the uplift narrative tends to be loaded on the shoulders of the racially stigmatized themselves. Washington, for instance, had urged the Black Belt residents to ‘cast down your buckets where you are,’ to prove themselves worthy of American freedom, prosperity, and inclusion by accumulating property through the performance of humble vocations of labor and enterprise. (Ross xxvii)
In *Trouble the Water’s* conclusion, the issues Ross describes here emerge in full force. Although the final scenes do level criticisms against the structural inequalities of pre- and post-Katrina New Orleans, the emphasis on Kim and Scott’s individual success places the “burden of change” on the wrong shoulders. As Kevin Gaines argues in *Uplifting the Race*, “[a]lthough uplift ideology was by no means incompatible with social protest against racism, its orientation toward self-help implicitly faulted African Americans for their lowly status, echoing judgmental dominant characterizations” (4). Especially given the propensity in post-Katrina news coverage and national discourses to blame the storm’s victims (for failing to evacuate, for creating an environment hostile to rescuers, for not using recovery funds responsibly, etc.), a film that echoes this discourse of individual responsibility—even in seemingly positive ways, as *Trouble the Water* does—is dangerous in its proliferation of the belief in this dominant narrative, as well as remiss in its lost opportunities. Had the filmmakers resisted ending in this way, they would have a powerful example of a public adaptation of personal narrative that maintains distance, employing empathic unsettlement to deter the identification of viewers with its subjects. Instead, they ultimately deliver subjects who in their final appearances, if not their initial ones, are all too identifiable: as embodiments of a centuries-old ideology built on racism and classism.

Although the final scenes that depict Kim Roberts embracing her musical career are not as readily recognizable as the “humble vocations of labor,” the scenes focusing on her resonate with other aspects of the racial uplift narrative as it is characterized by Ross, Gaines, and others. Kim is shown smiling and nodding her head as the sound of her
recently written song fills the room. The song’s lyrics are about Katrina, and with a defiant tone (“we survivin’ out here”), they comprise several critiques of the injustices she and her neighbors endured during the storm and in its wake. As Kim is shown listening to her song, the camera zooms in on what appears to be new, sophisticated recording equipment, indicating increased financial success. In the next scene, the camera cuts to Kim driving a car. Viewers might remember at this point that in the beginning of the film, Kim attributes her inability to evacuate to not owning a car, suggesting that this vehicle is new to her family. Thus, Kim and Scott are shown to be “accumulating property” as Washington’s philosophy of racial uplift advised, putting them on track to “prove themselves worthy of American freedom, prosperity, and inclusion.” The fact that the film has previously documented their exclusion from these American ideals during and after Katrina makes this moment a dramatic narrative contrast and means that this conclusion offers a positive resolution to what is, unfortunately for Kim, Scott, and thousands of other struggling survivors, no longer the audience’s problem.

As Kim’s music continues to play, and she drives through the city, she is shown smiling and dancing in her seat until her car moves off-screen. Now the same city backdrop is crisscrossed by graphics of yellow caution tape, each one bearing statistics about the city’s problems since the storm. These captions inform viewers of the following points: “billions of federal rebuilding dollars have not been disbursed,” “rents in the city have doubled and so has the homeless population,” “thousands of livable public housing units are being demolished,” “most African-Americans have not returned while most white residents have,” “the majority of the city’s public schools are deemed academic
failures,” “Louisiana’s incarceration rate is still the highest in the world,” “and the rebuilt levees in New Orleans remain flawed and vulnerable.” This litany, though accurate in its representation of problems facing the city, seems out of place given the rest of the film’s conclusion. After the two preceding scenes, which emphasized the individual successes of Kim and Scott, this list is disconnected from these personal stories that viewers have been following. In fact, it reinforces the notion that Kim and Scott have survived and excelled not because of structural changes, but in spite of them. The next and final sequence of the film rounds out the concluding uplift narrative that makes this film palatable and even pleasurable to viewers.

The film’s final scenes show New Orleanians protesting conditions in the post-Katrina city, including a shortage of affordable housing and spiked rates of violent crime. The camera pans across the crowd of people, including Kim Roberts. As horn players begin blaring an upbeat version of “Wade in the Water” and protesters parade toward City Hall, Kim’s voiceover tells viewers that because of her family’s displacement after Katrina and Rita, “We got to go see how other people was living. It opened up our eyes. I mean, it’s like they preparing them for the future; here in New Orleans, it’s like they preparing us for prison.” During this voiceover and shortly after it, Kim is shown, first resolute and then smiling, holding a sign that says “stop the violence.” Despite the dismal truth of her realization, the context in which this quote is delivered gives it the air of a positive epiphany, a kernel of knowledge gained through hardship. The juxtaposition of her voice and image imply that her experiences during

50 These issues are evident in the signs displayed by protesters in the film; additionally, I am aware of the causes at hand because I attended this protest in 2006.
Katrina have empowered her in a sense, making her an activist for change in her city. The brass band’s horns grow louder as the camera shifts from her to other faces, showing people laughing and dancing, and landing on the final frame of an older black man, smiling and raising his hand triumphantly in time with the music.

Dominick LaCapra argues against this sort of resolution, and again in favor of empathic unsettlement, as follows:

At the very least, empathic unsettlement poses a barrier to closure in discourse and places in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance or a benefit (for example, unearned confidence about the ability of the human spirit to endure any adversity with dignity and nobility). (41-42)

Although the film embraces this barrier to closure elsewhere, it indulges in harmony and spiritual uplift in its final scenes. LaCapra’s choice of the word “unearned” is crucial to understanding the implications of Trouble the Water’s conclusion. Perhaps the Robertses have earned the right to feel confident about their strength after being tested by Katrina, and perhaps they have discovered things about their abilities to survive that allow them to view themselves in newly admiring light. However, the audience has earned no such privilege, and having been removed from the suffering, they should not be allowed to reap its minimal, costly rewards.

Although perhaps well meaning, the filmmakers’ indulgence in closure and a dominant narrative of uplift was not naïve. In response to an interview question about
what attracted them to Kim and Scott as documentary subjects, Deal and Lessin explain
the following:

The Roberts and their friend Brian thoroughly defied the stereotypes we
were seeing on TV at that time – the depictions of New Orleans’ African
American residents as either rampaging criminals or helpless
victims...[Kim and Scott] expressed a lot of hope and optimism, emotions
that often seemed at odds with what was happening on the ground. (Deal)

Deal and Lessin deserve credit for their awareness of the prevalent discourses
characterizing Katrina survivors as either criminal or helpless, and their resistance of
those categorizations. Like Josh Neufeld in the case of Denise, Deal and Lessin are
conscientious about stereotypical representations of African American Katrina survivors.
Also like Neufeld, blinded by their own concern about perpetuating stereotypical
representations, they lose sight of how those identity categories are already being
effectively negotiated by their subjects. In A.D., this leads to Denise being perceived
either as a typecast angry black woman or as an unrealistic character, rather than a black
woman whose uncharacteristic anger and despair arise in the face of traumatic
experiences. In Trouble the Water, it leads to the filmmakers opting for the closure of an
optimistic ending, rather than showing the complications of the Roberts family’s
continued struggles to balance lives marked by both obstacles and optimism, and
wavering between dire need and self-sufficient hope.

Deal and Lessin are not alone in their impulse to portray an oversimplified
positive story to counteract a stereotypically negative one. In fact, their summation of
what drew them to Kim and Scott is almost identical to the stated purpose of *Harlem Diary* co-producer Terry Williams. In that 1995 Discovery Channel documentary, filmmakers focus on nine young people from Harlem who they believe represent possibility in the face of the extreme adversity of their socio-geographical location.

Under different circumstances than *Trouble the Water*, but with a similar desire for raw affect and proximity to traumatic experience, the filmmaking team of *Harlem Diary* provides the young men and women who their film follows with video cameras so they might participate in the documentation of their lives. In an article explaining the limitations of such an approach, Michael Hoeschmann and Bronwen E. Low address the problem that also plagues *Trouble the Water*:

*Harlem Diary* challenges mainstream media representations by giving voice to those usually spoken for, and yet, we argue, does so without critically examining some of the dilemmas of representation and power this project entails. Williams clearly states that his goal is to counteract the stereotypical representations of black youth as either criminals or passive victims with ‘remarkable examples of good’ and so provide ‘possibility and hope.’ Yet the subtext of the project seems to be to reassure the viewer that such youth are not a threat to the existing order. (50)

Hoeschmann and Low identify two problems with *Harlem Diary* that also emerge in *Trouble the Water*’s ending. First, as already described in the narrative of racial uplift, the burden is placed on the shoulders of the struggling subjects. In addition to bearing responsibility for change, the people on whom these films focus are also expected to
provide a positive counter-example to negative stereotypes. In Harlem, “[a]s designated spokespeople for black youth, the Crew bear the burden of ‘good’ representation” (Hoeschmann 53). In New Orleans, Kim and Scott are designated spokespeople for working class, black Katrina survivors, and they bear the burden of expressing “hope and optimism,” in order to “thoroughly def[y] the stereotypes we were seeing on TV at that time” (Deal and Lessin). What the filmmakers neglect in both cases is that whether it is the positive documentary version or the negative stereotypical one, these storylines have the same underlying logic: the burden (of being bad or good) is placed on the individual. Second, as Hoeschmann and Low recognize, presenting spokespeople such as these has the ability—and perhaps the intention—to “reassure the viewer that such youth are not a threat to the existing order,” the maintenance of which is ostensibly beneficial to the viewer. Like Booker T. Washington sought to do with his industrial education programs, these films placate presumably white, upwardly mobile onlookers with assurances that there is no danger to the structures that protect their privilege.

**Conclusion**

The means by which documentary genres stake their claims to truth-telling are constantly evolving, and *Trouble the Water* is only one example of a trend towards self-generated content in such texts. As Hoeschmann and Low put it:

> Hopes of giving voice to the disempowered have…long driven
documentary film production more generally. Recent decades have seen this commitment take the form of increasingly participatory structures in
which filmmakers give cameras to those who have traditionally been
objects of others’ representation and interpretation. (Hoeschmann 45-46)

Trouble the Water is perhaps most unique as an example of these emerging “participatory
structures” in that the powerful participation of its “objects of representation” is relatively
unstructured. Because Kim Roberts handed Carl Deal and Tia Lessin a camera, instead of
the other way around, the balance of power is productively disrupted from this film’s
inception. By including that disruption within the film itself, Deal and Lessin refuse to
take their directorial authority back, and instead turn a great deal of control over to Kim
Roberts as viewers watch.

Hoeschmann and Low also note, regarding the documentary trend toward
participatory structures, that the “assumption that access to the ‘tools’ [‘means of
information’] is automatically empowering…glosses over the intricate politics of
representation, of speaking and of listening, which inevitably shape all forms of cultural
production and reception” (46). In other words, it is incorrect to assume that seeing the
world through someone else’s camera lens is equivalent to an unmediated experience of
their life and worldview. In accordance with this caution, my analysis does not imply that
the mere inclusion of Kim Roberts’ footage in Trouble the Water results in viewers
seeing the traumatic events of Katrina as she saw them. However, I do contend that by
also incorporating some of the negotiations around that footage within the film’s finished
product, Deal and Lessin take innovative strides in the production of personal narrative
for public audiences. When they integrate, for example, Kim’s commentary about her
imagined audience, or scenes of Kim and Brian recording images unseen by viewers,
they ensure that the “intricate politics of representation” are not obscured: neither for the sake of their own credibility nor for the benefit of viewers’ comfort. The participatory structure employed in *Trouble the Water*, then, especially in these unique adaptations, is an important example of how documentary genres might ethically represent traumatic experience via personal narrative. It displays the potential of incorporating not just eyewitness testimony, but firsthand production of testimony along with critique of that testimony’s circulation. However, it also raises questions about the limitations of imposing a recognizable storyline in the framing of such testimony.

Although *Trouble the Water’s* ultimate resolution may make the film more appealing to audiences, thus ensuring broad distribution of these individual stories, it also runs the risk of reinforcing a dangerous dominant narrative about individual effort as the antidote to systemic discrimination. Linda Selzer explains that historically, “the emphasis on self-help in uplift ideology, though admirable, also worked to shift responsibility for black people's condition away from corrupt social structures and toward supposed personal traits” (Selzer 681). *Trouble the Water* echoes this ideology by uncritically celebrating the post-Katrina return of Kim and Scott Roberts to their working-class, African American neighborhood, in which the socio-economic conditions continue to place them at a disadvantage in terms of access to education, work, and social services. The film also portrays Scott Roberts’ newfound job in construction as an opportune outcome of his experiences, endorsing the tenet of uplift ideology that encourages working class African Americans to seek and be satisfied with “dignified” manual labor.

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51 And presumably their children, the first of whom was born at the Sundance Film Festival where *Trouble the Water* premiered.
Kim, meanwhile, is depicted as embodying the uplift narrative’s admonition to accumulate property as proof of deserving the privileges of citizenship.

In fact, *Trouble the Water’s* conclusion rather eerily reiterates what Marlon Ross describes as the implicit promise of uplift ideology in its historical manifestations: “Through the accumulated efforts of exemplary *individual* behavior, eventually their white countrymen would see the good character, patriotic intentions, and indispensable economic contributions of the *collective* Negro race and reward them with full citizenship” (xxvii, my emphasis). The film’s emphasis on the individual successes and “good character” of the Roberts family becomes, in this context, like a plea for audiences to recognize this “exemplary individual behavior” and reward the collective to which the Robertses belong—poor, black, New Orleanians, especially from the 9th Ward—with the benefits of citizenship denied to them in the course of Katrina’s events. As Kim’s cousin puts it at one point in the film, “when the storm blew in, it blew away our citizenship.”

The issue is that although Deal and Lessin do reveal the denial to Katrina survivors of those rights and privileges, they also position the audience in a way that allows them to make a judgment about how and to whom those rights should be granted. Although viewers sympathize with the plight of the Robertses, their sympathy is too easily aligned with the “white countrymen” described by Ross above. Instead of being put in a position to bear the “burden of change,” the audience is put in a position of evaluating whether or not the Robertses have earned the “reward [of] full citizenship.”

The uplifting conclusion of *Trouble the Water*, given the context of post-Katrina New Orleans, perpetuates a victim-blaming discourse that prevented immediate aid and
continues to forestall long-term recovery efforts. In offering a harmonious resolution, the ending of the documentary undermines its early examples of LaCapra’s “empathic unsettlement.” One criticism that LaCapra might level, that the film’s closure allows viewers to “derive reassurance or a benefit” from the traumatic experiences of the Robertses, would be relatively straightforward to address. Resisting closure would be as simple, for example, as concluding the film with a previous sequence, in which Kim gets approached by a police officer who instructs her to “turn the camera off” while she and her brother film a commemorative walk through their still deserted neighborhood on Katrina’s first anniversary. Such a scene would imply that the recovery of these individuals and their communities is still ongoing, often at odds with powerful forces, the representatives of which continue to thwart residents’ mobility, authority, and self-representation. Had the film ended in such a way, it would certainly have resisted a feel-good ending, though it may also have been less well received in professional and popular circuits.

The other criticism explicated here, however, has a less immediately obvious resolution or alternative. In resorting to the problematic ideology of racial uplift, Deal and Lessin keep the “burden of change” placed on Katrina victims themselves. One alternate option would be to shift this burden onto the social structures and institutions, which the filmmakers already do in their examination into Katrina’s response. For example, the tourism industry, the military-industrial complex, and politicians at every level all receive their fair share of criticism in the film’s evaluation of what went wrong post-Katrina. These criticisms allow viewers to feel righteously outraged, however,
which creates an emotionally satisfying response, enabling inaction. As I have argued above, the film’s most uncomfortable and effective moments are those that make the audience complicit with the actions of these structures and institutions. This distribution of responsibility rarely extends to the audience, however, as the film proceeds and Kim’s footage is no longer central. Perhaps texts that adapt personal narratives of trauma for public audiences can expand LaCapra’s notion of “empathic unsettlement” by extending the “burden of change” to be something that the audience must also bear.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

Narratives of Katrina, in both visual and verbal form, continue to persist in American discourse. Over seven years after the event has receded from the constant media coverage of August and September 2005, however, there are far fewer opportunities to reshape dominant patterns in how Katrina is understood. New stories surfacing now tend to be interpreted in the context of earlier, widely accepted narratives. This is evident not only in terms of popular discourse, but in terms of medical and legal discourse as well. For example, rebuilding healthcare in the city has favored models that place the burden of change on the individual. Despite “the rate of mental health conditions like depressive disorders and post traumatic stress disorder among New Orleans residents” ranking “several times the national average” (Clarkson and Fielkow 8.5), services related to “addiction recovery, developmental disability, and mental health” saw funding “reduced by several million dollars a few years after Katrina” (Clarkson and Fielkow 8.9). In the same year, on the other hand, close to ten million dollars in federal and city funding was allocated for the increase of “healthy food choices,” citing the problem that “New Orleans and Louisiana have particularly high rates of chronic diseases that are affected by food choice” (Clarkson and Fielkow 8.10). In an example of legal
discourse, in order for prosecutors in the Danziger bridge case\textsuperscript{52} to successfully indict NOPD officers for their murder of innocent civilians attempting to evacuate, they had to overcome the predominant belief that Katrina survivors were already criminals.

Just since the beginning of 2013, Katrina narratives have emerged yet again in popular discourses, ranging in iteration from the Oscar nominations of \textit{Beasts of the Southern Wild} to Michael Brown’s controversial Twitter comment during a mid-Super Bowl power failure at the New Orleans Superdome. Although the fictional \textit{Beasts of the Southern Wild} never explicitly situates itself in the context of Katrina, the hurricane and subsequent flooding that occur in the film are consistently read as representing that historical moment. Furthermore, the young protagonist of the fantastical tale is understood to be a heroic character in her battling of natural elements and her overcoming of adversity,\textsuperscript{53} similar to Zeitoun or to the Robertses. In the case of Michael Brown’s Super Bowl tweet, the former FEMA director’s commentary is inseparable from his reputation as the representative villain of Katrina’s official response. He wrote, “Someone just told me there was fighting going on in the NOLA Superdome. #shocked.” (Gentilviso). This quote evokes the discursive context of post-Katrina media coverage on multiple levels. First of all, Brown’s comment was immediately interpreted as sarcastic, although nothing in the wording alone precludes his “shock” from being sincere. This interpretation was evident in the way his language was reported and responded to, first in

\textsuperscript{52} Five former New Orleans Police officers were convicted of shooting unarmed civilians as they tried to evacuate the city—killing two people—and then covering up the evidence. They were not convicted until 2011.

\textsuperscript{53} See, for example, multiple \textit{New York Times} reviews, as well as an interview in \textit{Entertainment Weekly} with director Benh Zeitlin, where the young girl, Hushpuppy, is described in these terms.
the Twitter community and then elsewhere where it was reproduced. His perceived lack of empathy for New Orleanians pre-determined, for most readers, his tone as a dismissive one. What makes this Twitter incident newsworthy is Brown’s pre-existing relationship with the content of his message. Although reports of violence among Katrina survivors in the Superdome were eventually shown to be generally inaccurate and massively over-reported, those reports were used as justification by government officials for their slow response, which resulted in preventable death and suffering. Michael Brown, of course, was one such official who characterized rescue efforts as dangerous on this false basis. His Twitter comment, then, reinforces this erroneous and costly belief that New Orleanians are prone to violent, criminal behavior.

These examples are meant to illustrate the persistence and continued significance of narrative representations of traumatic experience in a post-Katrina context. Not only do survivors continue to insist on the relevance of their ongoing suffering, as I discuss below, but the stories that are in circulation about Katrina continue to wield discursive power. The preceding study, then, is an intervention in the deployment of that power, and an illustration of how it might be redistributed. My analysis of existing texts that portray survivors’ personal narratives reveals the role of survivors themselves in producing these narratives, and argues for a more explicit inclusion of their role in other similar contexts of production.

As my analysis of a range of texts demonstrates, the ways in which survivors’ stories are circulated matters to survivors themselves. For example, in SKRH, Shawn half-jokingly anticipates that listeners may be able to offer recovery assistance, or at least
positive publicity in the form of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. In early iterations of Abdulrahman Zeitoun’s story, Zeitoun makes repeated efforts to ensure he will be perceived as credible in relating his unbelievable experiences. In *A.D.*, Denise is concerned with how she may be seen as a stereotype of an angry black woman. In *Trouble the Water*, Kim Roberts foresees the potential of her footage to captivate audiences, both those close to home (her future children) and those far from it (“some white folks”). These concerns alone are sufficient reason to pay attention to means of circulation and to critique existing methods of producing such narratives. However, as my analysis also shows, it is not only the narrators’ fears or reputations that are at stake. Because these texts, when published and circulated widely, present individuals as the face of larger categories, these narrators are made to stand in for broader realms of experience. Furthermore, audiences’ reception of these narratives informs not only public perception of those categories, but also public response to the suffering that these texts project. Understanding the problematic way that these texts position their audiences is crucial in understanding the stakes in studying and altering the public production of personal narratives about trauma.\(^{55}\)

In Ernst van Alphen’s *Caught by History*, the author writes the following, describing how stories from the Holocaust had virtually no impact on him when he heard them in his youth, because of the way in which they positioned their listeners:

\(^{54}\) See Chapter 5 for full citations

\(^{55}\) In *Visual Methodologies*, Gillian Rose writes, “Images work by producing effects every time they are looked at. Taking an image seriously, then, also involves thinking about how it positions you, its viewer, in relation to it” (12). The same applies for serious discussion of verbal text, and my consideration of images and narratives depicting Katrina survivors explores positioning in this sense.
First of all, war and Holocaust narratives were dull to me, almost dulled me, as a young child because they were told in such a way that I was not allowed to have my own response to them. My response in other words, was already culturally prescribed or narratively programmed…The narration of this past had no ambiguities; moral positions were fixed.

(Caught 2)

Van Alphen’s assessment of such narratives is strikingly similar to the issues I have outlined in the preceding chapters with respect to publicized stories about Katrina. In adapting those stories for wide circulation, the authors, producers, and publishers opt for fixity rather than ambiguity. Thus, the revelation of Zeitoun’s domestic abuse comes as an utter shock, because his moral position as heroic has already been set in stone by Eggers’ narrative. Josh Neufeld’s graphic depictions of Katrina survivors are predetermined, or “culturally prescribed,” to be read as racial stereotypes, especially in the cases of Denise and Darnell. Tia Lessin and Carl Deal, despite including disruptions of fixity at first, conclude by re-programing Kim and Scott Roberts’ narrative to register with viewers as non-threatening racial uplift. The effects of such positioning are not limited to dullness or boredom on behalf of young audiences.

As van Alphen goes on to explain, “[a]s the person who was being told these stories I was not interpellated, to use Althusser’s term, as a human being with moral responsibility” (Caught 2). Similarly, audiences of popular representations of Katrina are not called upon to feel morally responsible for the suffering in the narratives they consume. They are lulled into complacency by the familiarity of the dominant narratives
that absorb particularities of survivors’ experience, and they are permitted to indulge in feel-good empathy. These are luxuries not permitted in the face-to-face narration of Surviving Katrina and Rita participants, who continue throughout the production of their narrative to question its developments, its effectiveness, and its reception. Narratives need not be shared in an interview setting to recreate this productive engagement, however; as early scenes of Trouble the Water demonstrate, narrators’ ongoing critique of their own processes of representation can be effectively incorporated into the very texts which circulate those representations.

This is an important corrective to current means by which authors, publishers, and producers seek to create fair and ethical representations of real suffering. As the aforementioned texts go to show, hyper-vigilance and conscientiousness are not sufficient to disrupt the power that dominant narratives, including those that confirm racist and classist stereotypes, continue to accrue in contemporary American culture. Eggers’ insistence on the veracity of his accounts, and their basis in Abdulrahman’s actual experiences, ultimately only serves to dull readers’ capacity for critique. Audiences accept the professed authenticity of this narrative as confirmation that because of their embrace of this male Muslim hero and their outrage at his treatment by American prison and military personnel, they are innocent in the perpetuation of stereotypical Western conceptions of Muslim masculinity—the selfsame conceptions that are later summoned to explain the allegations against Zeitoun of domestic abuse. Along similar lines, despite Josh Neufeld’s acute awareness, while creating A.D., of the history of stereotypical
representations of African Americans in comics, he is unable to render Denise and Darnell separately from that history.

Incorporating survivors’ negotiations with these and similar issues within the text of their narratives counteracts stereotypes and disrupts dominant narratives. In SKRH, for example, Patrice and Shawn contradict reductionist depictions of survivors as either criminal or helpless. Their insistence on their responsibility is not apparent solely in the textual products of their respective interviews, but in the interactive context of their storytelling. Studying this context reveals how Shawn is able to draw his audience in to the absence and discovery of knowledge through the course of his experiences in Orleans Parish Prison, and how Patrice’s ability to emerge as a competent narrator and actor changes based on the interactions between her and her interviewer. In the webcomic version of *A.D.*, Denise corrects misreadings of her emotional response to imminent danger, thereby complicating her depiction as a stereotypical angry black woman. In *Trouble the Water*, Kim challenges audiences to consider their own consumer interest in her narrative, as well as their participation in passive viewing of her plight and others like it as they unfolded in the national news media following Katrina. When these engagements are included in the texts whose production they characterize, they have the capacity to disrupt complacent empathy, implicate audiences in the suffering that they are observing, and perhaps even shift the burden of change to the shoulders of readers and viewers. Furthermore, the incorporation of survivors’ negotiations with popular representations can model the inclusion of their insight and objections within the discursive and material processes of rebuilding. As Carl Lindahl has argued in recent
years, “survivors [may] help the institutional world – doctors, academics, funders – recognize ways in which the healing, teaching, and self-sustenance strategies of survivor communities may aid in disaster recovery” (Lindahl). However, until survivors are seen as creators and agents of change in their own stories, their contributions to recovery will continue to be ignored, opting for the continued reenactment of the dominant narrative of disaster response, where the collective wound is dressed from without, rather than healed by new growth from within.

In part, the shifts I argue for here in terms of representation are drawn from theoretical concepts of reflexivity. In the social sciences and humanities, reflexivity has gained popularity as a methodological approach, especially to research with human “subjects.” In general, researchers are more apt now to disclose and discuss the implications of the impact of their own subjectivity as the tool of analysis. For example, Gillian Rose describes reflexivity as follows:56

[R]eflexivity is an attempt to resist the universalizing claims of academic knowledge and to insist that academic knowledge, like all other knowledges, is situated and partial. Reflexivity is thus about the position of the critic, about the effects that position has on the knowledge that the critic produces, about the relation between the critic and the people or materials they deal with, and about the social effects of the critic’s work.

(130)

56 Rose offers this definition in the context of discussing how critics interpret visual texts, and of critiquing their tendency to assume their interpretation is universal.
But reflexivity in this sense is primarily an academic concept, and not one that has necessarily taken root in cultural productions, where the tendency continues to be either lack of concern with the ethics of representation, or, more along the lines of Dave Eggers’ approach, a meticulously documented claim to authenticity. I am not arguing here for the adaptation of explicit reflexivity in all artistic or cultural expressions; such a claim would be not only futile but also obviously contrary to the goals and methods of plenty of artists. However, where the methods of production mimic the methods and claims to legitimization of academic research, I believe this critique and argument is warranted. More specifically, if texts purport to emerge from extensive interviews with real people, mirroring ethnographic research and methods, then those texts ought to also include the turn that ethnography has taken to the reflexive, the reciprocal, the dialogic.

Elaine Lawless has famously written about the necessity for this turn in the field of folklore studies. She advocates for “the critical importance of a new ethnographic approach that will not only direct our methodology, but also inform our interpretations and dictate the presentations of our conclusions” (Lawless 313). She continues, “if we insist upon interpreting other people's interpretations, at the very least, we are obligated to allow them space to respond” (Lawless 313). Lawless illustrates this approach, which she labels reciprocal ethnography, by publishing an article that includes the response to her own findings, as presented by one of the participants in her 1998 study on Pentecostal women, Sister Anna Walters. In short, after publishing and sharing the final product of her research, Lawless was surprised to hear from Sister Anna that she objected to and disagreed with some of Lawless’ interpretations. Therefore, in the subsequent article,
Lawless includes both her own interpretations and Sister Anna’s commentary on those interpretations, and Lawless argues for the adoption of this dialogic practice, at earlier stages in research, by others in the field. As she puts it, not only does “[t]he final phase of the hermeneutic circle…[demand] that we subject our interpretations to the interpretations of our subjects” (Lawless 313), but also those processes of interpretation must make their way to the audiences to whom the interpretations are presented. My argument is similar to Lawless’ in that I also argue for the inclusion of this dialogue in the final product. Besides the difference in the genres in which I advocate for this shift, another salient difference between Lawless’ argument and my own is that I argue not only for dialogue about content, but explicit engagement regarding the processes of production, circulation, and reception of texts. Whereas readers of Lawless’ article see Sister Anna’s objections to certain descriptions of her lifestyle, for example, they do not see any critique by Sister Anna of who might read these descriptions, how, and to what ends. Thus my claims, in comparison to Lawless’, are more focused on process than product.57

My proposition, then, is for a dialogic approach to processes of production, circulation, and reception, as well as for the methodological framework I have demonstrated in these chapters in order to study these processes. This means that analysis of texts will look not only for intertextuality in the formal features of a written or spoken product, but also for negotiations regarding the narrative’s distribution and consumption.

57 Katey Borland has also made a persuasive case for dialogism in ethnographic writing, in her article “‘That’s Not What I Said’: Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research.” Similar to Lawless, however, Borland focuses primarily on the end product of interview-based research, rather than its processes.
These may take the shape, for example, of implicit appeals to credibility, strategic deployment of generic conventions, or explicit invitations to or reproaches of particular audiences. On the flip side, this means that producers and distributors of texts would incorporate their dialogue, even when contentious, with the narrators whose stories they publish. Rather than attempting to ward off dominant narratives by erasing all trace of them and clinging to their polar opposites, these texts can better interrupt dominant narratives by making evident the means by which narrators themselves engage them. In taking up personal narratives and circulating them for public consumption, these distributors ought to be more aware of their mediating role. It is impossible, as many seem to presume, for them to disguise their influence on the stories they share. They can, however, recognize that in their recontextualization of a narrator’s performance, they have disrupted that narrator’s relationship of accountability with a particular audience. Instead of trying to recreate that relationship in a new context with what looks like transparency, they can assume their own responsibility—in a process that is more ethical, and ultimately more effective in terms of redistribution of social power—by including in their publications the processes by which recontextualization occurs.

Because I am arguing for a more dialogic approach to the circulation of personal narratives in popular cultural productions, it is appropriate to explain the reflexivity that informs my own production of this work. First, in my analysis of texts, I do not limit the scope of my study to the text itself; rather, I examine the interactive contexts of these narratives’ production, circulation, and reception. As a result, my thoughts as a reader and viewer are constantly in dialogue with the responses of other audiences, and I
incorporate these other interpretations throughout my study. For example, in my chapter on SKRH, I include the questions and responses of interviewers; my discussion of Zeitoun includes the responses of reviewers to that text, the chapter on A.D. integrates webcomic readers’ online comments, and my study of Trouble the Water describes the film’s critical reception. To further expand and challenge my own experiences of reception with respect to these texts, I have incorporated some of them into my teaching of undergraduate courses. Observing my students’ responses to Trouble the Water and A.D. helped to balance my own perspective as someone very familiar with the historical event of the hurricane. My students, by virtue of their age (generally between eighteen and twenty-two) and their geographic location (primarily American Midwest), were less likely to approach the texts with extensive prior knowledge about Katrina and New Orleans.

Furthermore, I have sought out dialogue with survivors of Katrina from New Orleans at all stages of my research. Given my own personal experience as an evacuee, as described in Chapter 1, I have had continuous access to friends, family, and acquaintances with whom I discuss my thoughts and test my conclusions, especially about popular conceptions or misconceptions regarding Katrina and concerning the reception of the texts I examine here. For example, the phenomenon described by Megan Nix in Chapter 1, of strangers asking for an impossible explanation, is an experience I have heard recounted numerous times, beginning my first weeks back in New Orleans in 2005. I gathered from those conversations, as well as from my volunteer work with elementary school children and my teaching of local college students, that New
Orleanians were frustrated with the difficulties they faced in trying to articulate their experiences. These frustrations were primarily attributed to misunderstandings on the part of listeners, rather than an inability to talk about what they had been through. This pattern contradicts a prevalent general understanding of trauma, which has it that obstacles to narration of traumatic experience essentially arise from within: because of the way in which traumatic events are disruptive to their survivors, those individuals struggle in making sense of them, narratively or otherwise. But the conversations I was having led me to re-examine this basic model, and ask what external, or social, conditions encouraged or restricted survivors’ narration. As a result, I arrived at this study of discursive contexts of narrative production, and the public circulation and reception of personal narratives.

Finally, as my research progressed, I shared and adjusted my interpretations in public venues, and especially in dialogue with the survivor-narrators of SKRH with whom this project begins. In October 2012, for instance, I co-presented on a conference panel in New Orleans with other participants from Surviving Katrina and Rita in Houston. I described the conclusions I was reaching, and invited discussion in response. I found that one claim that resonated particularly with the survivors who were present was their continued misrepresentation in public discourse, especially the news media. They agreed emphatically that part of the motivation to continue telling their stories was the belief that their experiences had not been accurately or justly translated beyond their own communities. They also expressed a desire to share their resilience, as well as their continued struggle, with others who endured disastrous events. For instance, to survivors
of the 2011 Japanese earthquake and tsunami who attended, Katrina survivors offered encouragement and commiseration.

As part of that same conference meeting, between survivors and scholars of disaster, participants took a tour of New Orleans’ most devastated neighborhoods. Ironically, at a time when city officials are finally responding to residents’ demands to shut down the commercial “Katrina tours” that they view as a voyeuristic obstacle to resuming normal life, these survivors were enthusiastic about leading our group on a tour of their neighborhoods. Because the guides were themselves survivors, pointing out their own flooded homes, this tour was premised on a different sort of relationship than those which bus in tourists to drive by and photograph a destroyed house, whose residents they know nothing about. This is not to say that our tour was free of any problematic insider/outside relationships or power differentials, but rather to point out that when survivors had the opportunity to narrate on their own terms, and engage with the story that was being told to those looking at their suffering, they welcomed that interaction.

Midway through that tour, our group stood outside the home of local musician Al “Carnival Time” Johnson (nicknamed for his 1960 hit song). As a survivor who evacuated to Houston, Johnson had contributed an interview to SKRH. I transcribed that interview, the majority of which Johnson spent lamenting the legal battles wherein he spent nearly forty years trying to regain the rights to the music he created as a young man. In that interview, Johnson did not say much about his experiences during Katrina, nor has he been a public spokesperson for the city’s troubles, as have some other local musicians. However, on a sunny Wednesday afternoon in October, on the sidewalk
outside his home, Johnson was ready and willing to discuss his ordeal. This example demonstrates for me the significance of context for narrative production. What was it about that setting that enabled Johnson’s narrative to emerge? Was it the physical location, the geographical proximity to the scene of his survival? Or the timing, the temporal distance from the remembered events? Or did it have to do with the audience, the interested visitors, including several survivors of another climate disaster from across the globe? Was it the stories that others were telling as we stood there, creating a discursive environment in which the language of his experience belonged?

These types of questions interest me, and they drive my analysis of the full range of texts included here. As a final reflection on that moment, however, I will add that in that moment, my own narrative about Katrina did not emerge. Those conditions that produced Al Johnson’s story were not the same conditions that would produce my story, and in the spirit of reflexivity, I consider why that might be. The stories being told in that setting sufficiently distanced me—successfully produced empathic unsettlement—so that I did not identify with Johnson’s narrative and feel compelled to share my own. Johnson’s specificity, his grounding in the particulars of the house—whose weathered sideboards were visible behind him as he spoke—did not invite a generalized reading of his experiences. His appeal to the Japanese survivors who were present was about the need to carry on despite being surrounded by signs of ongoing struggle; given my own relocation outside of New Orleans, this was not an appeal that applied to me. Thus, the narrative strategies he employed created a context of production that positioned me as an outside observer: any connection I might feel, rendered irrelevant by the framing of his
story. I am aware that this is not a feel good moment, a beautiful note of reconciliation, inclusion, and recovery on which to poignantly exit. However, I find that particularly fitting, because the distance and discomfort in that narrative interaction is far more indicative of my questions, my methods, and my conclusions than a more cathartic closing might be.
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