

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## Imagining the Anthropocenic City: The New Face of Urban Renewal in New Orleans and Josh Neufeld's *A.D.:* New Orleans After the Deluge

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### Abstract:

Following Hurricane Katrina, critics noted that most neighborhoods of New Orleans which failed to recover had previously been heavily populated by African-Americans and the working classes. Josh Neufeld's graphic novel, *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge* (2009), which depicts the experiences of six New Orleans residents during and after the storm, reflects this theorization. For instance, of Neufeld's characters only one, a rich white resident whose home lies on high ground, avoids flooding and displacement. *A.D.* presents a geography in which wealthier, white neighborhoods are less vulnerable to extreme climate events than African-American and/or lower-income neighborhoods. Yet this misses a key characteristic of the emerging geography not only of contemporary New Orleans but of the world of climate change in general: post-catastrophe recovery is becoming a function of who can afford it, not of who is most affected by the disaster. In the case of New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina provided white urban capital the opportunity to engage in one of the largest urban renewal programs in American history: the socioeconomic footprint of African-Americans and the poor was reduced in order to consolidate the world of the white middle- and upper-classes. In addition to Neufeld's narrative, which represents the emerging geography of climate change as one in which a white, monied world is spared the forces of the Anthropocene and made the *de facto* center of power, I argue that the United States' unequal geography of climate change is created through *de jure* political decisions and urban planning.

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In 2005 Hurricane Katrina wreaked havoc on New Orleans, where the disaster destroyed or severely damaged over 80 percent of the city's housing stock and the reconstruction of housing and household items was estimated to cost between \$27 and \$35 billion (Seidman 2013: 8). In the aftermath, a popular narrative of vulnerability emerged that noted how Katrina affected neighborhoods of the poor and communities of color more than white and wealthy neighborhoods. Josh Neufeld's graphic novel, *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge*, participates in this narrative of vulnerability, telling some of the real stories leading up to, during, and after the disaster of six New Orleans residents: Denise, Kwame, Leo, Michelle, Abbas, and the Doctor (Brobson). To create the work, Neufeld engaged in journalistic interviews with these residents - who he met or found through his own experience as a Red Cross volunteer, through mutual contacts, or through various media - and assembled their memories into a serial webcomic between 2007-2008, with *A.D.*'s narrative ending with post-Katrina follow-up interviews with these residents in February 2007 and February 2008. After this initial online publication, *A.D.* was published as a hardcover book in 2009 with an updated epilogue covering events in these residents' lives through February 2008. Commentary on *A.D.*, including Neufeld's own, has justifiably focused on the power of these individuals' stories and testimony (Neufeld 2008; Gustines 2009; Hoefler 2012; Coby 2015); however, Neufeld's narrative, both visual and textual, also provides a contemporary representation of the *Anthropocenic city*. More precisely, by recounting multiple different memories of the disaster Neufeld imagines the city in the Anthropocene as a geography of vulnerability in which the poor and communities of color disproportionately suffer the Anthropocene's destructive effects as a result of residing in more environmentally vulnerable locations. This narrative, however, misses a key element of the Anthropocenic city in the United States: 'environmental necessity' in response to climate change is being used by white supremacy and capital to consolidate and expand their worlds at the expense of the poor and people of color. By focusing on *individual memories*, without an examination of *social history*, Neufeld's narrative leaves the reader without answers as to *why* the Anthropocene affects some urban residents more than others.

## I

Since the publication of Jason Dittmer's 2010 article, 'Comic book visualities: a methodological manifesto on geography, montage and narration,' the field of comic book geographies has been rapidly expanding, with the 2014 collection edited by Dittmer (2014a), *Comic Book Geographies*, serving as a seminal text for the field. One of Dittmer's primary contentions is that the medium of comics is particularly positioned to represent the multiplicity of memories, experiences, and temporalities that characterize urban space. For instance, he employs the concept of the *urban assemblage*, the idea that a city unfolds at a range of scales and temporalities creating a geography marked by dynamism, becoming, and heterogeneity, to investigate how Chris Ware's *Building Stories* represents urbanity as a dense topology of overlapping, multiple, and distinct narratives (Dittmer 2014b: 485). As such, the city in Ware's work is defined as 'the archive of the past, a mineralized exoskeleton of urban assemblages,' in which aspects of the past are

brought to bear on present urban experiences (492). In other words, as Giada Peterle (2017) argues, the formal properties of montage, fragmentation, and disjunction provide comics with the ability to formally mirror the process of *assemblage* that characterizes urban space. Through the concept of assemblage, some within the field of comic book geographies have started to imagine how comics are particularly positioned to represent urbanity in terms of a multiplicity of distinct, yet overlapping, experiences and events.

*A.D.* would therefore appear to fit perfectly within the theoretical framework developed by Dittmer and others. By curating multiple narratives about the event of Hurricane Katrina, Neufeld represents New Orleans as the result of the interrelationships between various urban assemblages. Indeed, in the epilogue Neufeld himself appears as a character individually interviewing the residents and organizing their stories into a comic narrative. Neufeld's own position in *A.D.* is one of an assembler of multiple stories. While a full discussion of *A.D.*'s overlapping distinct narratives appears in the next section, this section is dedicated to the work's engagement with temporality: Neufeld represents the past in terms of the traces it leaves on the present. *A.D.*'s 'archive of the past,' to invoke Dittmer's words, is an assemblage of the collective memory of the creation of New Orleans, the 'Unnatural Metropolis' whose construction is the story of the fight against its natural environment and the varying experiences of this transformation of the Louisiana landscape (Colten 2005). In other words, this section argues that *A.D.* represents the traces of New Orleans's Anthropocenic past in the present.

Paul Crutzen's foundational definition of the Anthropocene emphasizes the global aspect of human-caused transformation of the climate, 'For the past three centuries, the effects of humans on the global environment have escalated...It seems appropriate to assign the term "Anthropocene" to the present, in many ways human-dominated, geological epoch, supplementing the Holocene' (Crutzen 2002). From this overarching global perspective, Anthropocene studies have noted how planetary transformations have had an effect on local environments. For instance, Hurricane Katrina is often framed as a consequence of global climate change (McKibben 2006: xv; Gore 2006). This argument is supported in the IPCC's 2014 report which claims that local heavy precipitation events such as Hurricane Katrina are more likely as a result of 'anthropogenic forcing' (53). Yet what should also be noted is Crutzen's focus on temporality: the Anthropocene is a consequence of three centuries of human activity. In other words, the Anthropocene might be described as the temporal category used to categorize the total consequence of the various events through which humans have altered the environment.

This relationship between the Anthropocene and the past becomes clearer in an examination of the localized anthropogenic land-use changes that have had a cumulatively significant global effect. For instance, individual localized transformations of landscapes have dramatically reduced the coverage of the planet's natural flood and hurricane defenses – wetlands, mangrove forests, and coral reefs (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005: 30, 51). As a result of the loss of these ecosystems, the severity of flooding on coastal communities has greatly increased: the number of 'great' disasters has quadrupled in the past 40 years, and economic losses have increased by a factor of

ten (30). New Orleans is an element of this altered landscape of the Anthropocene. Before Katrina, the city was divided into and commonly conceptualized by residents in terms of ‘wet’ and ‘dry’ areas (Boyer 2014: 150). This land-use division was a result of the history of managing, draining, and diverting water from wetlands and areas that were flood-prone or under water in order to make various neighborhoods throughout New Orleans habitable for humans (Colten 2005). This anthropogenic transformation of the Louisiana delta made New Orleans more vulnerable to hurricanes (xix). To give a few examples: since 1900, 1,875 square miles of wetlands, which previously acted as a natural flood-defense system, have been destroyed by corporate oil’s natural gas drilling and by flood-prevention engineering that interrupts the process of delta formation; and the creation of the Industrial Canal near residential neighborhoods increased flood risk for those residents (Bart 2000: 204, Johnson 2011: 195; Boyer 2014: 124). Even if Hurricane Katrina is not a result of global warming, one can say the disaster was an Anthropocenic event since humans’ transformation of the Louisiana landscape increased its destructive potential. The vulnerability of New Orleans’s residents to a hurricane was a consequence of its Anthropocenic past.

These two characteristics of the Anthropocene – local precipitation events caused by global warming and anthropogenic land-use changes – as well as their temporal dimension are embodied in Neufeld’s graphic novel. For instance, visualizing the effect of planetary transformations of the climate on local precipitation events characterizes *A.D.*’s opening visual narrative. In the first panel of *A.D.*, Neufeld presents the audience with a view of the planet from outer space (Neufeld 2009: 3). From this initial image of the earth, Neufeld slowly zooms in on New Orleans, moving from outer space to the coastline of the Gulf of Mexico and finally to an image of New Orleans itself (3-4). Neufeld then introduces Hurricane Katrina within this visual narrative. After closing in on further details of the city of New Orleans as well as the coastal town of Biloxi, Mississippi, Neufeld zooms out to track the course of Hurricane Katrina approaching New Orleans (6-9). *A.D.*’s opening montage represents a global-local interaction in the Anthropocene: New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina are imagined as local phenomena of the global climate. Although Neufeld’s narrative never mentions global warming, his representation of the earth and discussion of Hurricane Katrina place it within the world of the Anthropocene.

Furthermore, *A.D.*’s representation of the geography of New Orleans reflects its Anthropocenic past. For instance, Neufeld conceptualizes the city’s land-use pattern before Katrina in terms of a strict distinction between ‘wet’ and ‘dry’ areas (Figure 1): canals allow water to pass through neighborhoods without interrupting their status as dry (Neufeld 2009: 6), coastlines with roads between the Gulf and the city cleanly delineate the boundary between water and land (Neufeld 2009: 7), and a boat on land at a Biloxi museum testifies to a (false) human victory over water (7). Moreover, the city’s collective memory of fighting against water in the Louisiana delta is embedded in the geography of *A.D.* For example, the Gentilly neighborhood, where one of *A.D.*’s characters, Kwame, attends school (29), was first heavily populated in the 1920s as a result of intense drainage efforts (Colten 2005: 98). In *A.D.*, the geography of pre-Katrina New Orleans is an archive of humans’ dramatic transformation of the New



Figure 1.

Orleans landscape. *A.D.*'s narrative embodies an Anthropocenic imagination and collective memory.

While this Anthropocenic collective *memory* is embodied in *A.D.*'s geography, the *history* of the Anthropocene remains invisible. Neufeld represents New Orleans as the collection of Anthropocenic events in which humans transformed the Louisiana delta, but within his narrative the city is apparently built and maintained by no one: it merely *is*. For instance, the various agents and processes involved in the building and maintenance of the cement canals that participate in the production of 'dry' neighborhoods are unseen, unheard, and unmentioned in *A.D.*; their memory remains in the built environment, but the history of *how* this environment was built remains invisible. That the destruction of the city was a result of the failure of flood planning, the established interpretation of the event (and one fully endorsed in this article), is impossible to glean from the text. Here appears what will be the central contention with Neufeld's representation of Hurricane Katrina as well as Dittmer's work on comic book geographies. Both Dittmer and *A.D.* imagine the city as an assemblage of various temporalities that unfold simultaneously but at different timescales and in so doing illuminate the differentiated consequences of the past on the present. In other words, *A.D.* represents the effect of the Anthropocenic past on the present by assembling multiple, distinct stories of Katrina, all of which are a consequence of that past, into a comic book. Neufeld therefore prefigures a subtle shift later theorized by Dittmer: urban assemblages have *memories* rather than *histories* (2014b: 493-4). This shift, while giving voice to a dense topology of overlapping narratives by assembling 'pastiche of fragments of imagination and memory,' leaves the audience without any tools with which to examine the structural and political-economic means by which New Orleans was constructed both before and after the disaster. The audience sees the effect of failing to maintain the levees, but they see neither the multiple choices made by political-

economic actors to decrease funding for maintenance or the power structures that upheld these choices. As will become the broader argument in relation to Neufeld's representation of the geography of New Orleans, *A.D.* represents the consequences of the Anthropocene without identifying the causal agents and processes.

## II

As scholars have recently argued, natural disasters are by no means 'natural'; they are socially constructed through the interaction between natural and technological hazards and socioecological systems (Peacock et al 2014: 356). As a result, impacts of the Anthropocene are often unequally distributed based on the adaptive capacity of such locations' socioecological systems (Wilson and Piper 2010: 34). Thus, it is expected that Anthropocenic events will tend to cause more damage for poorer countries that lack the resources necessary for climate adaptation (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005: 30; Davis 2010: 37). In other words, the differentiated effects of the Anthropocene are a consequence of various events in the past – the construction of socioecological systems, the formation of resilient social structures, the distribution of resources – that affect present urban systems.

This unequal distribution of the effects of climate disasters in urban areas has been conceptualized by many in terms of *vulnerability*, which the IPCC defined in 2007 as 'the degree to which a system is susceptible to, and unable to cope with, adverse effects (of climate change) including climate variability and extremes' (Wilson and Piper 2010: 34-43; IPCC 2007: 6). In this theorization, marginalized populations are forced, whether through economics or policy, to live in vulnerable areas that are more likely to suffer the effects of and unable to anticipate, cope, and recover from risks associated with global climate change and anthropogenic transformations of the landscape (Peacock et al 2014: 356). UN-HABITAT emphasizes the differentiated significance of environmental vulnerability, '...it will be the poorest countries and people who are most vulnerable to [climate change] who will suffer the most. Current forms of urbanization are pushing the lowest-income people into locations that are prone to natural hazards, such that four out of every ten non-permanent houses in the developing world are now located in areas threatened by floods, landslides and other natural disasters' (2009: 5). For many, the unequal distribution of the Anthropocene's effects can be understood in terms of vulnerability, the geography of which is an archive of our Anthropocenic past. The Anthropocenic city is therefore understandable within this theoretical framework as an assemblage of vulnerabilities.

This framework of vulnerability has been applied to the differentiated impact of Hurricane Katrina (Harris-Perry and Harris 2014; Fussell 2015; Deitz and Barber 2015). Even a superficial glance at disaster statistics confirms this argument. In pre-Katrina New Orleans, African Americans made up 67 percent of the population and 76 percent of the disaster's flood victims, whereas whites made up 28 and 20 percent respectively (Campanella 2007: 714). Moreover, although scholars, activists, and city authorities have lamented the post-Katrina decrease in New Orleans's Black population, 'this loss has been greater for predominantly poor black women' (Deitz and Barber 2015: 8). In sum,

Hurricane Katrina tended to have a greater devastating effect for the poor, people of color, the disabled, the elderly, and women (Harris-Perry and Harris 2014: 162). In order to explain these differentiated vulnerabilities, some scholars have argued that the political and economic history of the city's settlement, in which higher-elevated and environmentally secure areas were made accessible primarily to wealthy white residents, resulted in the poor Black population, especially women, to disproportionately suffer the consequences of natural disasters (Campanella 2007: 705; Deitz and Barber 2015: 3). An argument can be made that Hurricane Katrina had a differentiated impact on New Orleans's residents based on environmental vulnerability, the geography of which is an archive of the collective memory of the city's development that left marginalized populations more vulnerable.

The body of *A.D.* participates in this narrative of vulnerability via its assemblage of the individual character's memories of Hurricane Katrina and juxtaposing their different experiences and stories: the poor and people of color suffer more than the white and the wealthy. The story of Denise, a Black woman living in Mid-City who stayed behind in order to care for her elderly mother (Neufeld 2009: 34) and whose voice was 'front and center in *A.D.*' (192), reflects this. After the Hurricane destroys Denise's apartment (67-71, 73-74), she meets her mother at the hospital where she is staying (108). Fleeing the 'fucked up' situation of the hospital, Denise and her mother are transported to the Morial Convention Center (61, 111, 114, 121), the site which would become infamous when Michael Brown, Director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) when Katrina struck, admitted that he was unaware that thousands of survivors were stranded there without food, water, or medical support (Russill and Lavin 2011: 5). Denise's experience reflects such horror: she and her mother had no access to functional bathrooms, food, medicine, or water (Neufeld 2009: 132, 136-7), police falsely reported that help was on its way while driving by in armored vehicles with guns pointed at the crowd (135, 142-3), babies nearly dehydrated to death (138-41, 145-6), and a deceased elderly woman was left in the open with simply a blanket covering her (152). Denise's memory of Katrina is one of depredation and loss.

The Doctor's memory of Katrina is the complete opposite. Wealthy and white, the Doctor lives in a house in the French Quarter, a touristy New Orleans neighborhood located on higher land. He decides not only to 'ride out the storm,' but to host 'a little party' at his house (Neufeld 2009: 39). While Denise nearly dies in her apartment during the storm (71), the Doctor asks his guests, who bluntly ask how he can be so calm, if they want more wine (62-3). The total damage to his house includes a few fallen branches, which he clears as the eye of the storm passes (Figure 2) (75). On August 31, as Denise is waiting for a bus to the convention center, the Doctor goes to a local bar, Johnny White's Sports Bar and Grill, which 'stayed open all through the storm' (118), to offer medical assistance to those who stayed behind (161-3). In contrast to Denise, Hurricane Katrina is a mere inconvenience in the memory of the wealthy, white Doctor.

Overall, *A.D.*'s assemblage of New Orleanians' memories represents Hurricane Katrina as having a more devastating effect on people of color, women, the elderly, and the poor. For instance, Kwame and his family, who are Black and resided in New



Figure 2.

Orleans East, as well as Leo and Michelle, who are white, not wealthy, and resided in Mid-City, all lived in vulnerable areas, as the damage to their residences shows (Neufeld 2009: 165, 169). The demographics of these areas are consistent with the expectations of the framework of vulnerability. Mid-City in 2000, though only slightly less white than the city average (Mid-City: 23.2 percent; New Orleans Parish: 26.6 percent), was poorer than the city at large (Mid-City average household income: \$43,277; New Orleans: \$59,427) (The Data Center 2016); and New Orleans East was predominantly African-American when the storm hit (Dixon 2014: 181-2). Although Abbas lived in the suburbs of New Orleans, his business, located in Broadmoor a majority Black neighborhood, suffered extensive damage.<sup>1</sup> At his business, Abbas lived through a harrowing experience with his friend Darnell – a Black resident of New Orleans who stayed behind to help care for Abbas’s store and whose apartment in Mid-City was on low-lying land - nearly dying (Neufeld 2009: 31-2, 124-5, 130, 158-9). Through its assemblage of multiple overlapping memories of Katrina, Neufeld’s narrative presents an urban assemblage in which wealthier, white neighborhoods are less vulnerable to Anthropocenic events than majority-Black and lower-income neighborhoods.

Neufeld’s work is particularly valuable in illuminating how vulnerability must be understood in terms of the vulnerability of *social networks*. New Orleans is often described as a city of neighborhoods, and pre-Katrina resource-poor, working-class residents, especially African-Americans, heavily depended on the rich social networks of these neighborhoods that were grounded in solidarities of space, place, and culture and that provided a robust support system (Fussell 2006; Campanella 2007: 708; Johnson 2011: 211; Arena 2012: 11). These networks were displaced and destroyed in heavily-damaged neighborhoods, and therefore poor residents in vulnerable areas were more affected by Katrina than the wealthy since they depended on these neighborhood support systems (Lipsitz 2006: 464-5; Adams 2013: 33). As such, vulnerability in New Orleans should be understood in terms of the intersection of individual social position, location in the city,



and the resilience of one's social networks, rather than being limited to whether one's individual house was damaged.

*A.D.*'s representation of the social assemblages that characterize each character's experience of New Orleans illuminates this intersectional aspect of vulnerability. For example, Abbas protects his store with the aid of his friend, Darnell (Neufeld 2009: 31-2); Denise stays in order to support her elderly mother (33); Leo and Michelle have a social circle centered around Leo's work with a local music zine and comics (27); Kwame's family is supported by the parishioners at the church for which his father is the pastor; and the Doctor is seen hosting friends during the storm and providing medical advice to local residents (63, 118). As Neufeld's narrative reveals, environmental vulnerability is therefore dependent not only on where one lives, but also on the vulnerability of one's social networks. Leo, tied to a national network of comics fans (184-5), and Kwame, supported by parishioners of his father's church who are distributed throughout New Orleans, are less vulnerable than Denise, whose social network is represented in *A.D.* as more limited and local, and Abbas, who is dependent upon the operation of his store and a pool of local clientele to guarantee revenue – both of which are eviscerated by Katrina. The Doctor, on the other hand, is completely insulated from the destructive power of the disaster as his social networks are untouched.

In *A.D.*, the Anthropocenic city is characterized by wealthy, white urban fabrics untouched by Anthropocenic events surrounded by the destroyed districts of the vulnerable. Neufeld's visual representation of New Orleans embodies this re-imagining of the city in the Anthropocene. Prior to the disaster, he depicts the skyscrapers of the central business district (CBD) in the city-center surrounded by orderly outlying areas and roads leading to the CBD in perfect linear perspective form (Figure 3) (Neufeld 2009: 4-5). A hierarchical, organizing logic of center and periphery, in which the order of the city directs traffic and lines of sight to centers of power, dominates the cityscape of *A.D.*'s pre-Katrina New Orleans.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, a highway cuts across the center of the page, providing a clean line of separation between the city center and surrounding areas. Neufeld's representation of the pre-Katrina city is characterized by a divided urban space. The consequences of this division are visualized in his representation of the city of New Orleans after the deluge. Following the catastrophic flood, the order of outlying areas based on linear perspective disappears: the formerly straight lines of the roads leading to the CBD are fractured and curved, houses are inundated with water, and the monument of the Superdome is cracked (Figure 4) (20-1). In contrast to vulnerable areas, however, the CBD in Neufeld's post-Katrina image of New Orleans, despite the smoke appearing in the background, remains intact. Following the ordering of space in Neufeld's visual narrative, Katrina destroyed vulnerable neighborhoods while sparing higher-elevation wealthy, white neighborhoods. Neufeld imagines the Anthropocenic city in terms of vulnerability through the spatial (dis)order of its panels.

This destruction of spatial order is also visually embodied on a micro-level in representations of residents' experiences of Katrina: the image of Denise's apartment during the storm is warped, furniture flies around chaotically, the floor is dramatically curved, and a large crack travels down her wall (Figure 5) (Neufeld 2009: 68-9); Abbas



Figure 3.



Figure 4.

and Darnell are stranded in stagnant water without any overarching spatial configuration (100-1); and upon learning that his house is flooded, Leo is fictionally imagined swimming underwater, suspended with comics floating by him (116-7). To communicate vulnerable residents' experience of Hurricane Katrina to the audience, Neufeld alters the spatial order of his panels so that they lack any center with which to ground the residents' experiences. The reader can *see* the experience of being vulnerable through the organization of panels in *A.D.*



Figure 5.

### III

As has been argued thus far, the body of *A.D.*, taking place between 20 August 2005 and 1 September 2005, assembles the memories of six New Orleans residents during Hurricane Katrina into a single narrative that represents the Anthropocenic city of New Orleans as a geography of vulnerability. Given that Neufeld focuses on experiences of the immediate disaster, it can be argued that questions regarding the agents and processes that created this geography are outside of the scope of *A.D.*; he is interested, one might say, in amplifying memories of Hurricane Katrina that may otherwise be ignored rather than examining the history of New Orleans. The post-Katrina part of *A.D.*, taking place in February 2007 and February 2008, however, removes us from the event of Hurricane Katrina and sends us into the aftermath of the disaster.

Now outside the immediate experience of the Katrina disaster, Neufeld continues his narrative of vulnerability and correlates characters' experience of recovery to their degree of vulnerability prior to the disaster. For instance, Kwame's house is rebuilt by his dad's church (Neufeld 2009: 180), and the collapse of Leo and Michelle's world is halted due to a kind landlord (a privilege that many did not have in post-Katrina New Orleans) and a national support system that replaced many of Leo's beloved comics (184-5). Abbas, on the other hand, states that he 'lost three years' due to the total destruction of his shop, and Denise was only able to move back to New Orleans after more than two years and even then said, 'In spite of it all, even though *the place will never be the same*, I am home' (186-7, emphasis mine). Denise recognizes that while she has returned home, a fact she celebrates, her world in New Orleans is not the same. In contrast to these experiences, the only thing that appears different for the Doctor, whose social networks remained untouched by the hurricane, is that the shrimp at his

favorite restaurant, Galatoire's, 'ain't as good as they used to be' (163). *A.D.*'s post-Katrina narrative implies that one can draw a straight line between the pre-Katrina environmental vulnerability of one's social networks and the post-disaster recovery process.

Embedded in this narrative is the assumption that differentiated pre-Katrina environmental vulnerabilities cause differing recovery experiences and that no significant political or economic events played a role in the recovery process. This is elucidated in the Doctor's discussion of the post-Katrina city, 'Well, once they got the water and power back on in the Quarter, things pretty much went back to normal for us' (Neufeld 2009: 163). In this phrase, the Doctor defines 'us' both spatially and temporally. Spatially, 'us' refers to members of the world of the 'Quarter,' but it remains unclear who this includes. For instance, whether he would consider his waiter at Galatoire's as part of 'us' is never clarified. Temporally, by saying things 'went back to normal' the Doctor defines 'normal' – a consumption-economy characterized by higher-value commodities – and equates normal after the catastrophic flood to normal beforehand; the political economy and geography of the Quarter, for the Doctor, experience no structural change in the wake of Katrina. Following the logic of his narrative: The French Quarter was a less-vulnerable neighborhood whose white and wealthy residents were spared the effects of Katrina, and therefore 'recovery' is merely the return to 'normal' by 'getting the water and power back on.'

*A.D.* critiques the Doctor's narrative by comparing it with the narrative of Denise's recovery. In contrast to the Doctor's life returning to 'normal,' Denise's is radically transformed: initially displaced to Baton Rouge, Denise has returned to New Orleans by February 2008, is living in a trailer on a dilapidated lot, and is working 'with battered women Katrina survivors' (Neufeld 2009: 186-7). If one follows *A.D.*'s narrative, Denise's position is a consequence of her vulnerability: as a result of living in an environmentally vulnerable neighborhood, having her social support networks washed away, and having no personal funds to finance her resettlement, Denise is forced to accept what little is available to her. Denise's story acts as a countersign to the Doctor's discussion of the return to normalcy by demonstrating how his 'us' is narrowly defined. The assemblage of post-Katrina New Orleans in *A.D.* mirrors the urban assemblage of post-Katrina New Orleans by representing and narrating multiple experiences of the city.

Yet, Denise's story as represented at the end of *A.D.* begs more questions than it resolves. If Denise owned her former residence, then why didn't insurance finance her resettlement? If Denise rented her former residence, then why were other rental properties not available? Where did her trailer in the final frame come from? Why is assistance to 'battered women Katrina survivors' provided via a grant awarded to a church rather than through state programs? If 'we're not all home yet' (Neufeld 2009: 187), to quote Denise's last words, why? All of these questions of *political economy* represent a dramatic shift from pre-Katrina reality and remain unexplained within the *A.D.*'s narrative of vulnerability. Against *A.D.*'s representation of New Orleans in terms of a geography of vulnerability, these questions can only be answered through an examination of the *history* of the transformation of New Orleans's geography by political-

economic processes and agents in the wake of the disaster, rather than exclusively of the *memories* of Katrina and its aftermath. In contrast to *A.D.*'s implication that recovery and vulnerability are correlated, the post-Katrina history of New Orleans demonstrates that this Anthropocenic city was created in order to consolidate the worlds of the wealthy and the white and destroy the worlds of the poor and communities of color.

Immediately after Katrina, comments by politicians, urban planners, and developers betrayed a persistent drive to displace the poor and communities of color and create a new, whiter, and wealthier city. For example: Joe Canizaro, a real estate developer in New Orleans who headed the first post-Katrina planning commission, the Bring New Orleans Back (BNOB) Commission, argued in 2005, 'As a practical matter, these poor folks don't have the resources to go back to our city just like they didn't have the resources to get out of our city...So we won't get all those folks back. That's just a fact.' (Johnson 2011: 193); Alphonso Jackson, President George Bush's Secretary of HUD, stated in 2005, 'New Orleans is not going to be as black as it was for a long time, if ever again' (Lipsitz 2006: 453); landlords in the immediate wake of Katrina began evicting low-income tenants throughout the Mississippi coastline and New Orleans (Davis 2005); and James Reiss, the chairman of New Orleans's Regional Transit Authority following Katrina, welcomed the opportunity to rebuild the city in 2005 'with better services and fewer poor people' (Cooper 2005). Andrés Duany, lead designer for the Unified New Orleans Plan released after the failure of the BNOB plan, expressed this attitude most succinctly in May 2006: 'The Gulf Coast offers the rare opportunity to start over from scratch, potentially with quick results...For a city to become a city that's planned, it has to destroy itself; the city literally has to molt.' (Pogrebon 2006: B1). Immediately after the disaster policymakers, planners, and developers desired to *re-create* an Anthropocenic city in order to remove poorer and non-white residents.

An obscene example of this willed destruction and re-creation through policy was the demolition of public housing in New Orleans following Katrina. Within three years of Katrina, eight of the nine housing projects of New Orleans were destroyed or drastically diminished, and the last, the Iberville Projects, was razed in 2013 (Adams 2013: 40). This destruction of housing projects led to the erasure of their residents' worlds, for, despite local media's negative portrayal of the projects, many public housing residents in New Orleans expressed a positive attachment to their neighbors and had organized their communities into supportive 'organic social groups' (Arena 2012: 9-11). Local newspapers and officials claimed that the demolition was necessary due to extensive damage, yet all documented evidence showed the contrary: much of the city's public housing stock had suffered little flooding and relatively no structural damage (Johnson 2011: 191; Arena 2012: 160). Paradoxically, viable housing was destroyed following Hurricane Katrina in the midst of a massive housing crisis - 134,000 houses and apartments and 71 percent of the city's occupied housing units were destroyed or damaged, a reduction in housing that exceeded the reduction of the city's population (Vigdor 2008: 147; Seidman 2013: 8). This paradox is clarified upon noting that, despite local newspapers and politicians framing the demolition of these housing projects as a spontaneous response to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, the evisceration of publicly subsidized housing was the culmination of a decades-long political project: the

city of New Orleans had been attempting to destroy housing projects since the 1970s (Arena 2012). That Hurricane Katrina provided the means to fulfill the political project of destroying publicly subsidized housing was made clear by Richard Baker, a congressman from Baton Rouge, who announced in 2005 after Katrina hit, 'We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did' (Harwood 2005). The destruction of the worlds of public housing was a consequence of the history of a political-economic project and not of environmental vulnerability.

The guiding force behind this desire to destroy the worlds of low-income and Black communities in New Orleans is the drive to consolidate and expand the world of white capital.<sup>3</sup> For instance, low-lying and flood-prone areas that were environmentally vulnerable were rebuilt if they had a whiter, wealthier population (Fussell 2015: 1238; Anguelovski et al 2016: 4-5). Furthermore, New Orleans's housing projects were targeted for destruction by developers since many were situated on prime real estate near wealthier neighborhoods and tourist districts, something noted by activists already in 2006 (Klein 2007: 524; Arena 2012: 29). To repeat the mantra of this section: the maintenance and dissolution of New Orleans's worlds after Katrina was not strictly bound to their environmental vulnerability. The replacement of the worlds of the poor and people of color with the consolidated and expanded worlds of the wealthy and white was a *historical* act of political economy in the wake of Hurricane Katrina (Slater 2008).

This conflict over the active consolidation and expansion of New Orleans's white worlds of capital is invisible in *A.D.*'s narrative of vulnerability. For instance, the French Quarter is depicted as a white space that tends to be wealthier and is spared from the effects of Katrina in the Doctor's memory. At a glance, this is true: in 2000, 89.8 percent of the French Quarter's residents were white (87.6 percent in 2010), and the average income both in 2000 and 2010 was well over the city and national averages (The Data Center 2016). These statistics, however, do not tell the whole story. One block north of the French Quarter's border was once located the Iberville Housing Projects, making them a common target for developers in the years leading up to Katrina (Long 2007). As Alecia Long summarizes, interaction between these two neighborhoods was common before Katrina, when '[s]ome of [Iberville's] residents walked to the nearby French Quarter and *worked hard but often invisibly*, as maids in hotels or as kitchen staff in the Quarter's many celebrated restaurants' [emphasis mine]. Immediately after the disaster, HANO and Mayor Ray Nagin's city government attempted to fulfill developers' dreams of replacing the housing projects with more profitable land-uses, but were initially thwarted by grassroots resistance. Indeed, at the time at which *A.D.* ends, the Iberville Projects were standing and a site of fierce political conflict: struggles over tenants' rights were being waged in the courts in 2006, tenants were slow to return to the Iberville Projects due to a lack of upkeep, and an Iberville resident noted in April 2006, 'When they fix New Orleans up, you ain't going to see too many black people living around here...They going to be pushed out' (Nossiter 2006; Fausset 2006). As this resident predicted, the city government was eventually successful, and the projects were destroyed in 2013. In contrast to *A.D.*'s representation of the French Quarter as a stable, white, and wealthy area, this area was marked by a history of conflict and struggle to make it into and maintain it as such a neighborhood.

In other words, for many connected to the world of the French Quarter, there was no return to ‘normal,’ to quote the Doctor. This was not a result of environmental vulnerability, *but was a direct result of the history of New Orleans*. Although one could claim that this is the Doctor’s narrative and not *A.D.*’s, the conflict and contestation over the space of the French Quarter and its bordering areas is absent in the latter as well. For instance, the Iberville Projects and the conflict over their preservation are never mentioned, despite being located in the same space as the Doctor. By focusing on vulnerability and the personal memory of Brobson, the history of structural and political-economic activities actively re-forming New Orleans in the wake of the Katrina is left unseen. Whereas *A.D.* represents the Anthropocenic city through recounting individual memories of New Orleanian residents as an assemblage of differentiated environmental vulnerabilities, the history of New Orleans’s pre- and post-Katrina planning efforts demonstrate that this Anthropocenic city was actively made through willed political-economic decisions.

Following the history of planning efforts between the storm and February 2008, we can now understand Denise’s situation as a consequence of willed decisions by policymakers, planners, and developers. If she previously owned her apartment and held insurance, it is likely that the insurance company would have denied her claim (Adams 2013). If she rented her apartment, it is likely that she would have been unable to find a new one due to rebuilding funds favoring homeowners (Adams 2013). Her new job providing assistance to ‘battered women Katrina survivors’ via a grant awarded to a church was likely made possible by a process of neoliberalization following Katrina in which government services were privatized in the ‘non-profit’ sphere (most famously, 107 of New Orleans’s 128 public schools were transformed into charter schools in fall 2005) (Dixson 2011). As the history of planning efforts between the storm and February 2008 demonstrate, the failure to return to ‘normal’ for many was a result of a history of political-economic decisions and not environmental vulnerability. These processes and agents who remade New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina remain unidentifiable within *A.D.*’s narrative of vulnerability, with its focus on overlapping temporalities and memory rather than political economy and history.

## Conclusion

Through assembling individual and differentiated memories of various New Orleans residents during Hurricane Katrina into a graphic novel, *A.D.* represents the Katrina disaster in terms of vulnerability - wealthier, whiter neighborhoods are spared its destructive effects, whereas the neighborhoods and social networks of the poor and communities of color are environmentally vulnerable. That said, post-Katrina displacement was also a result of the history of the uneven development of hurricane recovery based on who can afford it, not who was most affected by the disaster (Finch, Emrich, Cutter 2010: 199-200). Indeed, in 2005 Mike Davis was already identifying ‘a larger pattern of federal inaction and delay that seems transparently designed to discourage the return of Black residents to the city,’ and an Associated Press dispatch claimed in October 2005, ‘Hurricane Katrina will prove to be the biggest, most brutal

urban-renewal project Black America has ever seen.’ Although narratives of vulnerability make visible the *memories* of oft-marginalized voices and the differentiated experiences of the Anthropocenic city, they threaten to leave invisible the *history* of Anthropocenic urban spaces, in which decisions of political economy produce the inequitous distribution of the effects of ‘natural’ disasters. This tension between *memory* and *history* currently haunts the study of comic book geographies and comic book visions of the Anthropocenic city.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Although Neufeld only identifies Abbas’s neighborhood as ‘Uptown,’ he draws it next to ‘Calhoun Superette and Deli,’ which was located in Broadmoor prior to its closing in 2012 (Neufeld 2009: 30).

<sup>2</sup> Ordering the city based on a hierarchical logic of power relations has often been the function of linear perspective for city form since the Renaissance (Lefebvre 1991: 78).

<sup>3</sup> This follows the basic political history of post-1960 New Orleans in which public employment and public office opportunities for Black citizens are traded for the support of the land-use agenda of white capital (Davis 2006), hence why many claimed that urban planning after Hurricane Katrina was driven by white elites, despite having Black leadership in control of the municipal government (Arena 2012).

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