

# Generative Assembly after Katrina

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Although Hurricane Katrina precipitated considerable reflection across various media, a practice crucial to our capacities to apprehend and interpret the disaster has not yet been analyzed as such.<sup>1</sup> I call this practice *generative assembly*. I don't mean the events of emergency and political gathering that took place in response to the massive storm and fatal, preventable levee failures—although I will propose connections between different forms of assembly. Instead I mean a kind of documentary practice. That practice, which can be undertaken individually or in collaboration, and sometimes at anonymous remove, involves the work of *assembling* records and signifiers related to the disaster into particular kinds of media artifacts. Those artifacts—which take shape in formats as varied as comics, photobooks, paintings, films, exhibitions, and multithousand-item online archives—characteristically maintain the active appearance and interactive potential of selection and arrangement.<sup>2</sup> In exhibiting such qualities, or so I will argue, these

1. Katrina, as the disaster is frequently called, names both an August–September 2005 hurricane and the preventable levee failures that left over 80 percent of New Orleans flooded. These events, as well as the catastrophic government response to them, unfolded before television and internet audiences in near real time. Over 1800 people lost their lives, many of them African American residents of the stricken city. Hundreds of thousands of people relocated from New Orleans and the larger Gulf region, often permanently. Among the many books written on the disaster, see Douglas Brinkley, *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (New York, 2006), and Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* (New York, 2005). On the mediation of Katrina, see *Old and New Media after Katrina*, ed. Diane Negra (New York, 2010), and Bernie Cook, *Flood of Images: Media, Memory, and Hurricane Katrina* (Austin, Tex., 2015).

2. In what follows, I forgo the extensive discussion required to account for acoustic and moving image generative assembly. This is not for lack of examples. A paradigmatic instance of moving-image generative assembly after Katrina is the closing credit sequence of Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke* (2006). One after the other, the film's interviewees announce their names and their hometowns; each speaker either holds or sits behind a picture frame. See also Larry Andrews's pioneering animated film *OwnerBuilt* (2013).

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assembly-based artifacts support various articulable and often highly effective kinds of *generativity*. And thus, I will further suggest, these artifacts can constitute especially powerful means of intervening in prevailing conditions of representation and remembrance around events of environmental and social violence. Crucially, those material legacies of generative assembly can also fall short, fail, and deceive, and this is especially true of those assemblies that take digital forms. It is my contention, however, that we would be misguided if we thus entirely dismissed such assemblies or if we refused their potential for dissident reuse or generative reassembly.

### 1. Assembly and Generativity

Consider an early example of generative documentary assembly in response to Katrina, in this case through a combination of digital, photographic, and textual materials (fig. 1).<sup>3</sup> This small assembly appeared on the recently launched photo-sharing platform Flickr on 30 August 2005, one day after the landfall of the hurricane. Its author, working under the username *dustin3000*, compares two recent news photographs, both of them framing citizens, goods in hand, wading through floodwaters. The difference in captions is hard to miss: one, for the African American person, uses the word *loot*; the other, for the pair of white people, uses the word *find*. The author's own caption and title ("Racism") clinch the implication: as a blogger at the Daily Kos would put it, "It's not looting if you're white."<sup>4</sup> In terms of assembly, what we have here is not a narrative of that apparent reality of differential framing, understood as pervading government and media response to Katrina; what we have is a cogent documentary configuration that speaks of and through the evidence in the form of a transmissible unit. *Dustin3000*'s approach proved successful: "Racism" provided means and motivation for discussions of discrimination and violence across mass media and blogs; Kanye West would cite the comparison in his famous rebuke of the George W. Bush administration during a televised fundraiser.<sup>5</sup> In fact, so re-

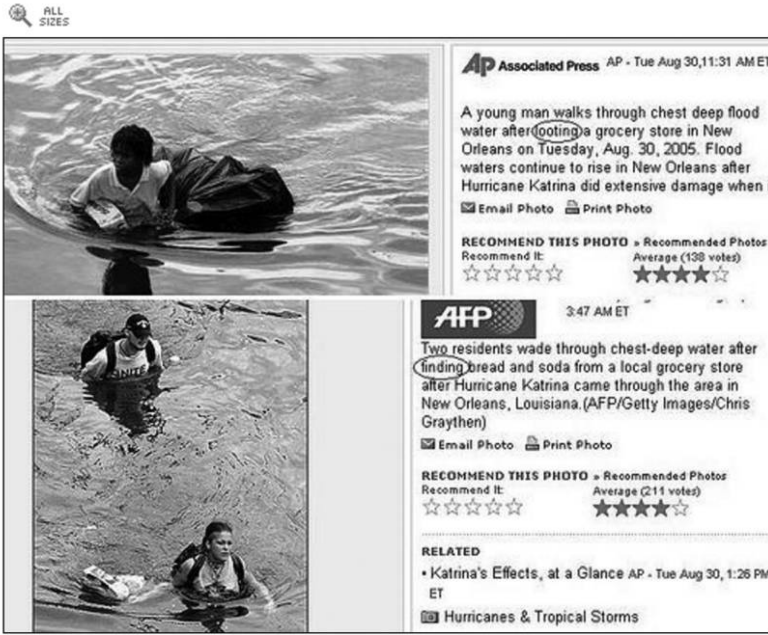
3. It is noteworthy that a number of scholarly texts on Katrina refer to this image/event.

4. Alexia, comment, 3 Aug. 2005, Daily Kos, [www.dailykos.com/comments/142664/3505929#comment\\_3505235](http://www.dailykos.com/comments/142664/3505929#comment_3505235)

5. Appearing alongside comedian Mike Myers on NBC's *A Concert for Hurricane Relief*, West stared into the camera and flatly stated, "George Bush doesn't care about black people" ("Kanye West off the Script," NBC News, 2 Sept. 2005, [www.nbcnews.com/video/nbc-news/9172802](http://www.nbcnews.com/video/nbc-news/9172802)).

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# Racism



Look at the two of these photos on Yahoo News - notice anything different between them? According to Yahoo, black people "loot" -- white people "find."

Originals:  
[news.yahoo.com/photo/050830/480/ladm10208301530](http://news.yahoo.com/photo/050830/480/ladm10208301530)  
[news.yahoo.com/photo/050830/photos\\_ts\\_afp/050830071810\\_sh...](http://news.yahoo.com/photo/050830/photos_ts_afp/050830071810_sh...)

FIGURE 1. dustin3000, "Racism" (2005). Flickr.

markable did this example of virality appear at this media-historical juncture that a *New York Times* story traced the juxtaposition's circulation and impacts, as well as the photographers' and news organizations' responses.<sup>6</sup> Though the original Flickr post eventually became inaccessible, copies of the visual-verbal assembly have persisted.<sup>7</sup> One such copy appears in the

6. See Tania Ralli, "Who's a Looter? In Storm's Aftermath, Pictures Kick Up a Different Kind of Tempest," *New York Times*, 5 Sept. 2005, [www.nytimes.com/2005/09/05/business/whos-a-looter-in-storms-aftermath-pictures-kick-up-a-different.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/05/business/whos-a-looter-in-storms-aftermath-pictures-kick-up-a-different.html)

7. Notably, as this essay went to press, the assembly once again recirculated, this time in response to Hurricane Harvey. See Colleen Shalby, "What's the Difference Between 'Looting' and 'Finding'? 12 Years after Katrina, Harvey Sparks a New Debate," *Los Angeles Times*, 29 Aug. 2017, [www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-harvey-20170829-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-harvey-20170829-story.html)

Hurricane Digital Memory Bank (HDMB), a 25,000 item participatory digital archive to which I return below (fig. 2).<sup>8</sup>

I foreground “Racism” partly because of what it emphasizes: Katrina was neither natural nor neutral, and dynamics of mediation and visibility mattered from the first, not only to journalistic representations, but also to on-the-ground decision making around rescue and policing.<sup>9</sup> (Indeed, although not at the same scale, disproportionate effects and race-inflected media framing extended to Vietnamese American and Latinx communities in New Orleans as well.)<sup>10</sup> I also foreground this example because it is emblematic of generative assembly; it presents in microcosm the workings and implications of that subset of documentary responses to Katrina that privileged the apparent transformational promise in assembling traces and data of disaster and recovery.<sup>11</sup>

Two further selections out of Katrina’s documentary landscape can support an argument for the terms and orientations embedded in the notion of generative assembly.<sup>12</sup> The first selection—Josh Neufeld’s 2009 comic *A.D.: After the Deluge*—is distinct from “Racism” along multiple lines: it appeared several years after the storm; it is not digital but physical; its imagery is not photographic but drawn; and it takes longer than a few moments to experience (fig. 3).<sup>13</sup> Alongside renderings of the storm and the flood, some directly mirroring iconic news photographs, Neufeld arrays drawings of interviewed citizens’ stories and reflections, starting before landfall and concluding a year later. The second selection—Richard Misrach’s 2010 photobook *Destroy This Memory*—differs from “Racism” in similar ways to *A.D.*, but it has other distinguishing features: it emerged in the context of contemporary art, and it nearly entirely devalues narrative in favor of the consolidation of affecting photographic imag-

8. See Lisa-Marie Ricca, “Online Image Contribution, Hurricane Digital Memory Bank,” Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, [hurricanearchive.org/items/show/112](http://hurricanearchive.org/items/show/112)

9. On the issue of media frames, see the frequently cited Kathleen Tierney, Christine Bevc, and Erica Kuligowski, “Metaphors Matter: Disaster Myths, Media Frames, and Their Consequences in Hurricane Katrina,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 604 (Mar. 2006): 57–81.

10. See, for instance, Karen J. Leong et al., “Resilient History and the Rebuilding of a Community: The Vietnamese American Community in New Orleans East,” *Journal of American History* 94 (Dec. 2007): 770–79.

11. On the widespread “impulse” to document Katrina, see Michael Mizell-Nelson, “Not Since the Great Depression: The Documentary Impulse Post-Katrina,” in *Civic Engagement in the Wake of Katrina*, eds. Amy Koritz and George J. Sanchez (Ann Arbor, Mich., 2009), pp. 59–77. Michael Mizell-Nelson played a crucial role in the development of the HDMB.

12. I adapt the term *documentary landscape* from Michelle Caswell and Anne Gilliland, “False Promise and New Hope: Dead Perpetrators, Imagined Documents and Emergent Archival Evidence,” *The International Journal of Human Rights* 19, no. 5 (2015): 615–27.

13. See Josh Neufeld, *A.D.: New Orleans after the Deluge* (New York, 2009).

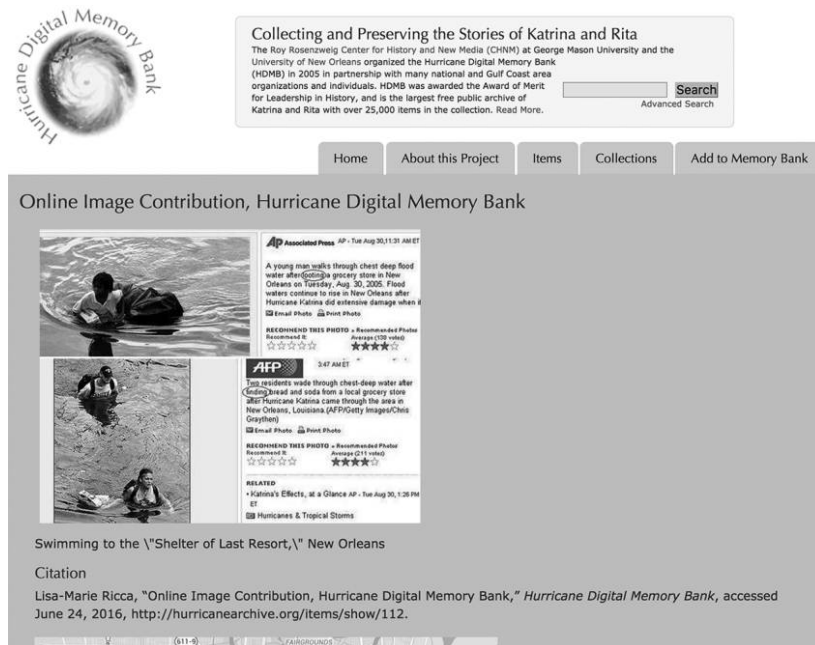


FIGURE 2. Lisa-Marie Ricca's contribution of *dustin3000's* "Racism" to the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank (2005).

ery (fig. 4).<sup>14</sup> Shortly after the storm, Misrach traveled around New Orleans and the Gulf region compiling several thousand images of devastated landscapes with a consumer-quality digital camera. Ahead of the five-year anniversary, Misrach selected sixty-nine of these images for an exhibition and a book. The book's images were printed in vertical rather than horizontal succession, each over a foot wide. All of them frame spray-painted messages on buildings as well as boats and cars but absent any people. The last of these messages, visible on the back cover, asks, "What now?"

If I'm correct, then *A.D.* and *Destroy This Memory* evince a convergent form of documentary practice, which, like the form behind "Racism," characteristically mobilizes the apparent promise in gathering and arranging records and registers of Katrina. Making sense of this practice requires more than recourse to terms like *archive*, *database*, or *curation*.<sup>15</sup> Rather,

14. See Richard Misrach, *Destroy This Memory* (New York, 2010).

15. In terms of analyzing heterogeneous media across the digital and nondigital, a close corollary is Lev Manovich's concept of the database as a cultural form in Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001). On links between curation and disaster, see Sophia Liu, "Socially Distributed Curation of the Bhopal Disaster: A Case of Grassroots Heritage in the Crisis Context," in *Heritage and Social Media: Understanding and Experiencing*



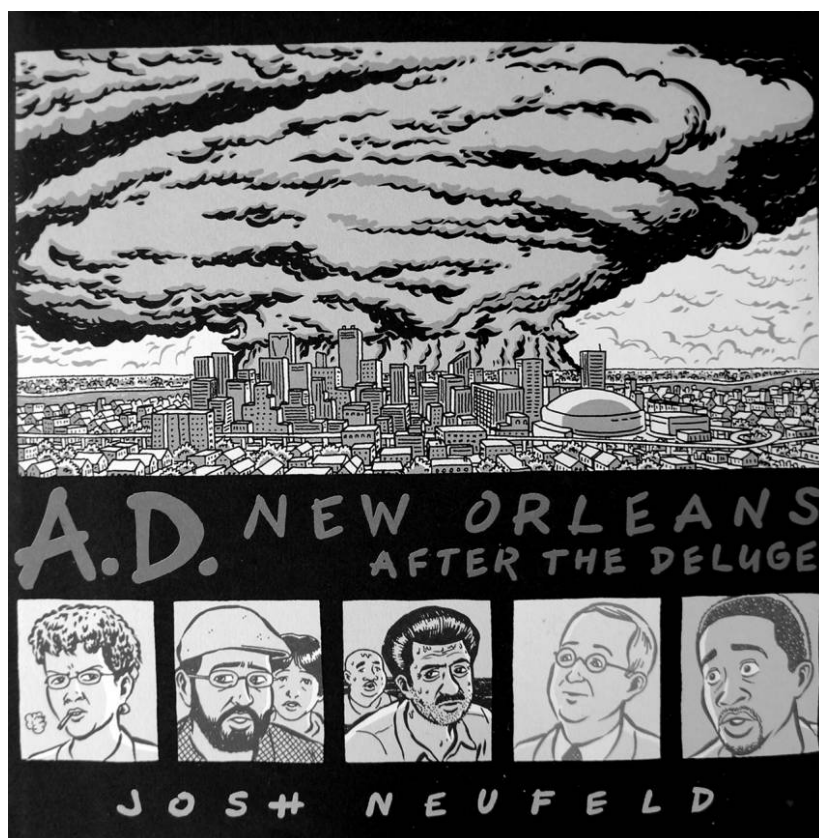


FIGURE 3. Cover of Josh Neufeld, *A.D.: New Orleans after the Deluge* (2009). © 2009 by Josh Neufeld. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

it requires lens switches. We need to think process over product, and we need to emphasize interaction and architecture over medium and format. For the pair of examples at hand, this means acknowledging that both of these media artifacts depended upon investments in assembling macro- and microhistories of Katrina through diverse signifying entities: in these cases, through photographic records, hand-drawn renderings, and writing; in other cases, examined below, through historical paintings, found comics, and user-generated tags.

Another way of saying this is as follows: as much as the development and circulation of the three projects involve divergent codes and contexts

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*Heritage in a Participatory Culture*, ed. Elisa Giaccardi [New York, 2012]. I address the term *archive* below.



FIGURE 4. Back cover of Richard Misrach, *Destroy This Memory* (2010). © Richard Misrach, courtesy Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

of cultural production, nevertheless the three *thematize disaster-centered documentary assembly*. Such thematization means, first, that acts of purpose-driven assembly of signifying entities define these projects' coming into being: in producing "Racism," dustin3000 encountered the two captions and arranged the provocative visual-verbal unit; in putting a comic into circulation, Neufeld recorded interviews and subsequently interwove drawn renditions of scenes and stories; in building toward an exhibition and a book, Misrach constructed archives of imagery that cohered around event and scene before devising an affecting sequence. The thematization of assembly has a second dimension apart from production; it also pertains to appearance and reception. That is, the meanings of assembly-based artifacts depend on their audiences' willingness and capacity to read visual and verbal languages of spatiality and arrangement. With "Racism," citizen users judge based on scanning and juxtaposition; with *A.D.*, citizen readers follow diegetic developments while also engaging the poetry in arrangements of word, image, and frame; with *Destroy This Memory*, citizen viewers interpret the analogies and differences in spray-painted messages and scan those messages' landscapes of loss and absence. Importantly, such acts of reception also take place in dialogue with larger configurations: the vast array of

material events gathered under the name Katrina; the actual, evolving documentary—and fictional and aesthetic and oral historical—landscape of that event; and the various prevailing conditions that impact, without determining, the disaster's representation and remembrance.

*Gathering, compilation, configuration, organization, arrangement*—why opt for the word *assembly*? First and foremost, *assembly* can act as an umbrella term for the network of spatial processes variously enacted in the kinds of projects convened here. But there are also distinguishing features of generative assembly for which the term is most appropriate. For one, unlike the art historical term *assemblage*, assembly invokes the qualities of the purpose driven and the functional: the processes of convening and configuring toward effective ends. The term also affords a productive affiliation with the theoretical notion of assemblage. That notion—first articulated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and subsequently elaborated in social theory and science and technology studies—indicates an in-process entity of heterogeneous elements, whether a book, a community, or a power grid.<sup>16</sup> Like these theorists, I am interested in how the figuration of assembly/assemblage proves enabling, whether for untested kinds of analytical comparisons; for thinking in terms of process and arrangement; or for the blurring of material and subjective acts and dynamics. Although *assemblage* is compelling, I do not use this term because it misses the senses of purposeful organization; because it obscures the roles of individual and group agency so important to disaster; and because it does not as readily bridge the analog with the digital.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, *assembly* primes us to observe the algorithmic and the archival as much as the authorial and the artistic, and indeed the exigencies of postdisaster discourse and remembrance compel us to think across such apparently unbridgeable media difference.<sup>18</sup>

*Assembly* has yet further impetus. It provides for productive association between generative, mediated assembly and embodied, political assembly.

16. Among the many relevant examples, see Jane Bennett, "The Agency of Assemblages and the North American Blackout," *Public Culture* 17 (Fall 2005): 445–65; Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (New York, 2006); Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, vol. 2 of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Massumi et al. (Minneapolis, 1987); and Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York, 2005).

17. Deleuze and Guattari employ the French term *agencement*. John Phillips discusses the difficulty of translating this term, which includes senses of arrangement, fitting, and fixing, in John Phillips, "Agencement/Assemblage," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 23, nos. 2–3 (2006): 108–9.

18. On "the exigencies of communicating in the wake of the disaster," see James Johnson, "Aggregates Unseen: Imagining Post-Katrina New Orleans," *Perspectives on Politics* 10 (Sept. 2012): 659.



At first blush, especially considering the force of actual, resistant, in-person gatherings, like those of the Black Lives Matter movement or #NoDAPL, such a linkage might appear misleading or superficial. But there is good reason to stay with the conceptual trouble.<sup>19</sup> While crucial distinctions between these forms of assembly must be maintained—the one is constituted by gatherings of signifying things, the other by gatherings of flesh and blood political actors—nevertheless by way of a shift in emphasis we can discern an essential and indeed generative connection between the two. I look to Judith Butler’s recent performative theorization of political assembly. Among other things, Butler calls our attention to the *signifying* functions of embodied assembly. Crucially, those signifying functions do not only derive from what is explicitly said by those who attend given assemblies. Instead, as she puts it, “forms of assembly already signify prior to, and apart from, any particular demands they make.”<sup>20</sup> That is, crucial signifying work is taking place through the very fact of embodied, plural, and frequently risky coappearance. Such coappearance is what Butler labels a plural performative *enactment*, which is to say it is a concrete, meaningful, and sustained gesture of convening together as vulnerable and embodied creatures, as “bodies in alliance” (N, p. 66). “Showing up, standing, breathing, moving, standing still, speech, and silence are all aspects of a sudden assembly,” Butler says. That sudden assembly is a layered, unpredictable, and frequently mediated political performance, and among its effects can be placing “livable life at the forefront of politics” (N, p. 18).

How do we get from assembly-based enactment in streets and on bridges to assembly-based enactment on canvas and *in silico*? We orient ourselves toward the signification in convening and configuring, and we open ourselves to the productive linkage between the political and the documentary. In particular, we see that generative documentary assemblies perform meaningful signifying work prior to and alongside what their words and images explicitly say, show, or enable. Put a different way, the very fact of the assembly’s appearance and circulation is itself an “expressive action” or “politically significant event” (N, p. 18). Thus, when audiences encounter artifacts like “Racism,” *A.D.*, *Destroy This Memory*, or the several others discussed below, they not only encounter ideas, stories, and images but also performative assertions, including the right to intervene in representation and memory. At the same time—and here I am echoing Ariella Azoulay’s

19. I am drawing “stay with the trouble” from Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* (Durham, N.C., 2016).

20. Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, Mass., 2015), p. 8; hereafter abbreviated N.

concept of the civil contract of photography—these assemblies do more than perform expressive actions; they also propose implicit and provisional politics or citizenries.<sup>21</sup> The multiple characters or perspectives; the varieties of faces or places; the architectures of arrangement and selection—together these formal expressions of generative assembly conjure a provisional and invisible gathering of audiences across time and space. Furthermore, these assembling expressions can act as provocations—however momentary, however flawed—toward future convening, whether mediated or live, around the ecological and social violence in question or around still other events and histories. Persistent legacies of generative assembly are there as background, impetus, and resource. They also signify an *ought*: distanced citizen audiences must work to recall and resist the very forces that occasioned the documentary gathering before them.<sup>22</sup>

What about the term *generative*? At one level, it provides a way of calling attention to the capacity to produce or to beget; it implies fecundity; it has a corollary in the term *regenerative*; and it has etymological connections with the term *genus* and therefore connections with arrangement-based thought. Just as importantly, the term orients us toward the multifaceted generativity of assembly. We see that assembly is a kind of doing; that doing is of especial importance in response to conditions of destruction and disarray; circulating artifacts generate the bulk of effects for assembly, but the process of production might matter as much as the artifact, which is to say there may be socially ameliorative effects in the very practice of gathering and convening signifying entities, effects that exceed the actual specificity of what is shown or how it is arranged. (Notably, Butler also links the terms *generativity* and *assembly*, albeit momentarily, in pointing to the “generative value” in the political relations that assembled bodies engender.)<sup>23</sup> In digital and networked contexts, generativity takes on yet further meaning. Certain technological formations, such as photo-sharing groups or participatory digital archives, provide opportunities for distributed assembly. In these cases, the generativity of distanced collaboration or conflict is at work. What others add generates new additions of material

21. See Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York, 2008) and *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (New York, 2015).

22. On photography as “civil intention,” see Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, pp. 106–7.

23. Butler writes, “So this movement or stillness, this parking of my body in the middle of another’s action, is neither my act nor yours, but something that happens by virtue of the relation between us, arising from that relation, equivocating between the I and the we, seeking at once to preserve and disseminate the *generative value* of that equivocation, an active and deliberately sustained relation, a collaboration distinct from hallucinatory merging or confusion” (*N*, p. 9; my emphasis).

and metadata. These assemblies can also undergo generative *reassembly*. They can also decay or disappear.

The term *generative* is appropriate for still further reasons. In multiple invocations of the term in modern thought, we learn that out of certain structural conditions come novel or transformative acts, whether through language, behavior, technology, production, or algorithm.<sup>24</sup> We also find that generativity is something to be seized. That is, it can be identified, valued, and facilitated, and, as we see in recent work by Donna Haraway, it can name that which is good, productive, and promising, if also unpredictable, fermenting, and fomenting, amid pervasive ecological urgency.<sup>25</sup> Following from these things, the term *generative* can indicate the following: the meaning and implication of any instance of generative assembly depends partly on audiences' production of something—of interpretation, imagination, affect, a new concept for a contribution, a new plan of action—out of some subset of documentary, informational, and architectural arrangements. That something can manifest in consistent ways, as with the takeaway that *dustin3000* sought. Other times there are unanticipated or esoteric ways of reading generatively, such as recognizing and valuing idiosyncratic associations within and among the frames of comics, or finding patterns that link scenes and writing across divergent sequences of photographs, or opting to share or remix fragments across social media platforms. The point is that any given assembly presents, at least in part, a structured and conditioned field of open interpretation. As much is true of nearly any media form, literature included, but the architectures and features of generative assembly especially encourage the coincidence of guided attention and inventive response.

24. In psychology, generativity names a theory of novel behavior, and in the work of Erik Erikson generativity names the fact or quality of social contribution; see Erik Erikson and Joan M. Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed* (New York, 1998). For Noam Chomsky, generative grammar indicates a theory of the infinitude of utterances from finite means; see Noam Chomsky, *Language and Responsibility: Based on Conversations with Mitson Ronat*, trans. John Viertel (New York, 1979). For Jonathan Zittrain, the generativity of technology lies in its capacity to facilitate unanticipated creative uses; see Jonathan Zittrain, *The Future of the Internet—And How to Stop It* (New Haven, Conn., 2009). In contexts of artistic production, the term generative indicates a work that involves the introduction of processes, like algorithms or chemical reactions, that partially or wholly determine the evolution of a piece. For Ron Eglash, “generative justice” is a social, ecological, and technological movement oriented around communities’ production and retention of unalienated value; see Ron Eglash, “Generative Justice: The Revolution Will Be Self-Organized,” *Tikkun*, 15 Apr. 2014, [www.tikkun.org/nextgen/generative-justice-the-revolution-will-be-self-organized](http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/generative-justice-the-revolution-will-be-self-organized)

25. The term *generative* is especially important for Haraway; see Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

## 2. Dynamics of Assembly

Having established terms and orientations for generative assembly, I devote the rest of this essay to mapping what that practice can *do*. My core proposition is that generative assembly tends to intervene powerfully in prevailing conditions of representation and remembrance. Such an analytical project quickly confronts potentially overwhelming heterogeneity. Somehow the critical arrangement of historical images in an exhibition context (such as Kara Walker's *After the Deluge*) must compare productively with the sequencing of contemporary photographs of place in a digital platform (such as Christopher Kirsch's *Floodlines*), and these in turn must compare productively with the distributed emergence of a digital archival repository (such as the HDMB). My suggestion is that we perform a kind of Wittgensteinian elaboration; we highlight the important family resemblances among assembly-based artifacts. These will be resemblances of function, effect, and implication that do not necessarily appear in all cases or at least not to the same degree.<sup>26</sup> They are what we can call the *dynamics* of generative assembly—particular ways of affecting representation and remembrance that practitioners can seek out or seize upon.<sup>27</sup> Out of a wide selection, I emphasize three: elemental witness, present blankness, and emergent archiving.

## 3. Prevailing Conditions

First, a brief note on *prevailing conditions*. The term does not name a dynamic of assembly; it names the broadly construed circumstances of knowing, communicating, and imagining in which those dynamics take place. In heuristic fashion, we can separate these conditions into two broad classes. For one, there is the familiar notion of collective or social memory, elaborated in the work of thinkers like Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora, and many others.<sup>28</sup> What gets remembered of public violence and by what means? What gets left out? How does the reality on the ground compare

26. Ludwig Wittgenstein characterizes family resemblances hence: "we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: similarities in the large and in the small" (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte [Hoboken, N.J., 2009], p. 36).

27. A proximate use of the term *dynamics* in relationship to media and images appears in the work of Georges Didi-Huberman, who writes, for instance, "To speak of an image without imagination means literally to cut the image off from its activity, from its dynamics" (Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, trans. Shane B. Lillis [Chicago, 2008], p. 113).

28. Selections from this vast literature include Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997); Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. and ed. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago, 1992); Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of Public Memory in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York, 2004);

with the storytelling that subsequently takes place? To what degree does spectacle reign over discourse? In analyzing documentary and fictional responses to Katrina, several scholars have identified such questions as integral, analyzing the ways in which the event has been retrospectively reduced or rationalized. For instance, Diane Negra argues that “after an initial frenzy of media coverage, efforts to impose conservative representational discipline over an event deemed ideologically problematic have played out over a sustained period of time.”<sup>29</sup> Bernie Cook, on the other hand, argues that “television news formed the foundation for the memory and understanding of Katrina” and that “documentary film and video both built upon that foundation and attempted to destabilize it by offering contrasting information and interpretation.”<sup>30</sup>

A second set of prevailing conditions is defined by capacity. The essential question is this: How do acts of representation—recording, writing, arranging—either manage or fail to address the reality and complexity of their subject matter? Once again, there is important precedent.<sup>31</sup> Hayden White, for instance, asserts our basic limitations before all histories, arguing for our dependence on genres of storytelling. White also marks certain events as especially resistant to cognition, imagination, and discourse.<sup>32</sup> I would suggest that disasters of radical breadth and intensity constitute one extreme manifestation of this basic condition of cognitive-imaginative struggle. At least two writers have expressed such a sentiment around Katrina. For James Johnson, “photography, exemplified by the work of [Robert] Polidori and Misrach, amplifies our ability to imagine both the disorienting situation confronting New Orleans after Katrina and the ways that people approached that situation.”<sup>33</sup> For Aric Mayer, “while the doc-

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and Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” trans. Marc Roudebush, *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7–24.

29. Negra, “Introduction: Old and New Media after Katrina,” in *Old and New Media after Katrina*, p. 5.

30. Cook, *Flood of Images*, p. 125.

31. In terms of the limits of historiography, see Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, Md., 1973); Keith Jenkins provides a useful overview in *Re-thinking History* (New York, 2003). In terms of the question of the unrepresentable in scholarship on trauma, the literature is vast, but one important contribution is Jean-Luc Nancy, “Forbidden Representation,” *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York, 2005), pp. 27–50. Butler offers a useful account of photography, violence, and “apprehension” in Butler, “Torture and the Ethics of Photography: Thinking with Sontag,” *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York, 2009), pp. 63–100. On links between photography and capacity, see Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, and Patrick Maynard, *The Engine of Visualization: Thinking through Photography* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997).

32. See White, “The Modernist Event,” in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (New York, 1996), pp. 17–38.

33. Johnson, “Aggregates Unseen,” p. 665.



umentary and photojournalist accounts were troubling to viewers, they were in fact more comforting than the reality of the city, which seemed to defy and elude the available means of media representation.”<sup>34</sup>

A discussion of prevailing conditions could detain us indefinitely. There is, for example, the crucial further question of what prevails *locally*, whether in New Orleans or the Gulf Region more broadly. (On this topic, I look to the “profane archaeology” of Shannon Lee Dawdy, who approaches any given city as a “churning assemblage[s] of human and nonhuman elements” and who argues that “New Orleans is an especially archaeological place,” where “residents are keenly aware of dirt and debris, of the processes of decay, burial, and demolition” as well as of “the creation of new landscapes.”)<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, for present purposes, the key thing to recognize is the following. When we are mapping dynamics of assembly, we are examining not only how they function but how they intervene—and this intervention concerns those conditions of representation and remembrance that have come to dominate, conditions that are constantly evolving and only ever partially gleaned.

#### 4. Elemental Witness

The first dynamic of assembly—what I put forward as elemental witness—is a particular kind of “historiographic experience.”<sup>36</sup> Elemental witness involves reading, watching, perceiving, and feeling—doing so in response to transmitted histories of disaster and recovery.<sup>37</sup> Crucial to this dynamic’s conceptual interest and interruptive power, elemental witness does not take forms we might readily imagine. It might involve fragments of stories, but it is not the structured engagement with an unfolding narrative. It might involve instances of viewing or listening, but it is not oriented toward mediating presence. Instead, elemental witness takes place alongside, prior to, and among such actions, and it thus has a distinct place

34. Aric Mayer, “Aesthetics of Catastrophe,” *Public Culture* 20 (Spring 2008): 180.

35. Shannon Lee Dawdy, *Patina: A Profane Archaeology* (Chicago, 2016), pp. 8, 2; hereafter abbreviated *P*.

36. I adapt this notion from Okwui Enwezor, “Archive Fever: Photography Between History and the Monument,” in *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, ed. Enwezor (New York, 2008), p. 11.

37. Space does not allow for a more thorough discussion of the analysis of trauma, visibility, and witness. Important texts include Shoshona Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York, 1992), and *Trauma and Visibility in Modernity*, ed. Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg (Lebanon, N.H., 2006). Hillary Chute and W. J. T. Mitchell raise important questions about the notion of the unrepresentable; see Hillary Chute, *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (Cambridge, Mass., 2016), p. 17, hereafter abbreviated *D*, and W. J. T. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present* (Chicago, 2011), p. 60.

in the broader ecology of citizen witnessing practices. One important conceptual precedent is the notion of constellation in the work of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. Martin Jay summarizes constellation hence: a “juxtaposed rather than integrated cluster of changing elements that resist reduction to a common denominator, essential core, or generative first principle.”<sup>38</sup> A general definition of elemental witness echoes Jay’s figuration: elemental witness is the reading and exploring of assemblies of minimally narrated and highly heterogeneous material elements—images, words, interfaces—and the diverse things these elements communicate—sensations, dimensions, facets, perceptions—all of these interpretable pieces born of and alongside given disasters and their aftermaths.

Three projects are especially appropriate for elaborating what elemental witness involves and why it matters. The first we have already encountered: Misrach’s photobook *Destroy This Memory* (2010). The second example is Kara Walker’s *After the Deluge* (2008). Already under a commission to assemble holdings of the Metropolitan Museum of Art into an exhibition, Walker reconfigured her project in response to Katrina (fig. 5).<sup>39</sup> Her subsequent book convenes historical visual material related to themes of muck, fluid, race, and failures of containment with selections from her own work and a single photographic image of an African American woman wading through oily floodwaters. The reader/viewer pages through the constituents of Walker’s assembly. The third example does not have a title; I will call it *Floodlines*. At the two-year anniversary of Katrina, New Orleans musician and artist Christopher Kirsch uploaded to his Flickr photostream images of scenes in New Orleans, many of these presenting sites where the high point of floodwaters remained visible. A selection of these entered the HDMB.<sup>40</sup> The subsequent assembly is a thirty-nine image photo sequence embedded within the overall archive. Should visitors find their way to this sequence, they will click from one image to the next, each appearing on its own page, each with the tags and captions from Flickr. Kirsch’s visual-verbal configurations are variously emotive, argumentative, and pedagogical.

Together these artifacts suggest that elemental witness takes two forms. The first form of elemental witness, instanced by Kirsch and Misrach’s projects, is epiphenomenal; that is, the production of such experience occurs alongside whatever other primary effects and ambitions of the work.

38. Martin Jay, *Adorno* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), p. 15.

39. See Kara Walker, *Kara Walker: After the Deluge* (New York, 2007); hereafter abbreviated K.

40. The assembly starts at [hurricanearchive.org/items/show/33222](http://hurricanearchive.org/items/show/33222). It concludes at [hurricanearchive.org/items/show/33260](http://hurricanearchive.org/items/show/33260). My understanding is that Kirsch did not upload these images himself; they were instead downloaded from Flickr by project staff.



FIGURE 5. “Kara Walker at the Met: After the Deluge,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Lila Acheson Wallace Wing, The Gioconda and Joseph King Gallery, 21 Mar.–6 Aug. 2006. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, N.Y.

With *Destroy This Memory*, a progression through its wide pages is a progression through tragedy, humor, and anger; it is also an encounter with indirectly preserved voices that might have otherwise fallen from attention. With *Floodlines*, a progression through the images is a progression through overarching themes—memory, environment, and loss—as well as through consistently indicated subcomponents and alternative paths; that is, hyper-linked tags lead outward to other stories and other images: rebuild, repair, renew, stucco, water, waterline. In both projects, any given image contains a radical density of information and sensory data—substories and subexperiences of the larger disaster—and given pairs or subsequences can expand and divert, or images removed from each other come into relationship through the contingencies of spectators’ interests and idiosyncrasies.<sup>41</sup> The two photographers’ assemblies thus enable the contemplation and apprehension of highly heterogeneous elements of Katrina’s reality and mediation; they catalog and consolidate ways of knowing and ways of telling, many of them things that could fall away in retrospective reduction and rationalization of the disaster. As witnessing viewers linger in those elements’ juxtaposition and recombination, the effects are both predictable and open-ended, evincing the conditioned creativity that is assembly-based generativity. Notably, the appearance of Kirsch’s images in Flickr

41. I adapt a notion of photographic density from Allan Sekula, who suggests that photobooks can allow photographs to “offer their density of meaning” (Allan Sekula, “Photography between Labour and Capital,” in Benjmian H. Buchloh and Sekula, *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures, 1948–1968: A Selection from the Negative Archives of Shedden Studio, Glace Bay, Cape Breton* [Halifax, 1983], p. 150).

enables further social-media-based generativity not possible within the structure of this digital archive. A close-up of rust and marsh grass, for instance, yielded a comment on the desire among residents to preserve “flood-lines” as “magic katrina symbols,”<sup>42</sup> arguably an instance of “Katrina patina,” in which, as Dawdy puts it, remnants serve as the “material archive of [residents’] historical experience” (*P*, p. 2). Also preserved in the comments for Kirsch’s post is a request to use the image, apparently for the post-Katrina HBO series *Treme*; there the image joins a new visual assembly, in the form of the opening credits’ photographic montage.

While the first form of elemental witness is epiphenomenal, the second is integral. Compilers of elements put into circulation sensory-semantic apparatuses that directly facilitate and thematize element-driven witness. As much is the case with Walker’s project. Consider the following selections from her introductory remarks:

The story that has interested me is the story of muck.

At this book’s inception, the narrative of Hurricane Katrina had shifted precariously away from the hyperreal horror show presented to the outside world as live coverage of a frightened and helpless populace (relayed by equally frightened and helpless reporters) to a more assimilable legend. Lately, the narrative of the disaster has turned to “security failures,” or “the question of race and poverty,” or “rebirth.” . . . And always at the end of these tales, reported on the news, in newspapers, and by word of mouth, always there is a puddle—a murky, unnavigable space that is overcrowded with intangibles: shame, remorse, vanity, morbidity, silence. . . . I have asked the objects in this book to do one more thing. Instead of sitting very still, “staying Black,” and waiting to die, I have asked each one to take a step beyond its own borders to connect a series of thoughts together related to fluidity and the failure of containment.  
[*K*, pp. 7–9; my emphasis]

Evident across Walker’s reflections is concern with prevailing conditions of representation and remembrance and the particular problem of reduction. Her project’s generative intervention is that of critical, element-driven historical connection. Movement through the assembly serves to build up a well of references, feelings, ideas, and thoughts. At the same time, Walker’s act of documentary-aesthetic configuration offers the means for problem-

42. AllenGraffiti, comment on, skeletonkrewe, “Flood Line – Zoom In,” [www.flickr.com/photos/skeletonkrewe/1252063529](http://www.flickr.com/photos/skeletonkrewe/1252063529)

atizing the ways we go about narrating, remembering, and visualizing histories of environmental and social violence, particularly those marked by what she calls “racist pathology” (K, p. 9). The book’s table of contents most acutely actualizes this duality of facilitation and critique: here is a semilegible arrangement of themes and events like “Murky,” “Middle Passages,” “Inundation,” “Superdome,” and “Portents”—and yet there is failure built into the very proposition, with no subsequent image in the book quite matching the ostensive categorizations (K, p. 3). Somehow, Walker suggests, the transit among traces, dimensions, and impressions has a place in witness as reparative work, while also being necessarily insufficient.<sup>43</sup>

Are there ways this dynamic of assembly goes wrong? For Roger Simon, there can be “practices of remembrance within which an assembled testament of words and images” do more than bear witness to violent histories.<sup>44</sup> Those practices also allow one to “experience a questioning of and transformation in one’s own unfolding stories and the frames on which one might argue for a possible future.”<sup>45</sup> It would seem projects of elemental witness can go wrong where they leave minimal room for such generativity and where they omit the realities of optimism, community, and invention that have followed disasters like Katrina.<sup>46</sup> Walker seems aware of these issues and aims to contest them. “In this book’s analogy,” she writes, “murky, toxic waters become the amniotic fluid of a potentially new and difficult birth, flushing out of a coherent and stubborn body long-held fears and suspicions” (K, p. 9).

## 5. Present Blankness

While elemental witness is an *experience* facilitated through generative assembly, a second dynamic of assembly is a formal *feature* available to practitioners and engaged by audiences. We can establish initial perspective through comics. There the formal dynamic of “present blankness”—I draw the term from comics scholar Hillary Chute—is fundamental (D, p. 35). Consider, for instance, a page from Neufeld’s *A.D.* (fig. 6).<sup>47</sup> The au-

43. For a close reading of *After the Deluge*, see Michael P. Bibler, “The Flood Last Time: ‘Muck’ and the Uses of History in Kara Walker’s ‘Rumination’ on Katrina,” *Journal of American Studies* 44 (Aug. 2010): 503–18.

44. Roger I. Simon, *The Touch of the Past: Remembrance, Learning, and Ethics* (New York, 2005), p. 4.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

46. See Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster* (New York, 2009).

47. For a close reading of *A.D.*, see Anthony Dyer Hoefer, “A Re-Vision of the Record: The Demands of Reading Josh Neufeld’s *A.D.*” in Brannon Costello and Qiana J. Whitted, *Comics and the U.S. South* (Jackson, Miss., 2012), pp. 293–324.





FIGURE 6. Graphic novel excerpt from Neufeld, A.D.: *New Orleans after the Deluge*. © 2009 by Josh Neufeld. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

thor establishes a scene of intense heat through the top left and top right panels; the succeeding middle panels indicate the sound of a vehicle; and the largest panel presents pleas and outrage at the arrival of policing over and against desperately needed supplies. Present blankness manifests in the gaps of white space between these frames; these gaps are instances of what gets called the gutter. Two things the gutter achieves are immediately evident. For one, it marks the passage of time, in this case an unspecified duration from waiting to arrival. Second, it indicates unseen action, action that the reader can imagine with varying levels of consciousness and intensity. Were we to stop at these functions for the gutter, we would have this to say of present blankness: within the broader field of concern around engaging Katrina, present blankness is an architectural feature in support of experience and communication; intensive, book-length mobilizations

of present blankness scaffold assembly-driven narrative; present blankness thus supports visual-verbal modes of disseminating histories of violence and responses to violence. Per the account of Chute in *Disaster Drawn*, however, there is more to the story. In any given comic, the interplay of gaps, drawings, and words will yield other effects. The gutter, Chute tells us, provisions space upon which the reader can “connect and project”; the gutter cues an alternative “psychic order” to narrative; and the gutter foregrounds the uncertainty of storytelling, that prevailing condition of limited access, a condition that Chute demonstrates the work of drawing centrally negotiates (*D*, pp. 63, 35). In disaster-centered comics of quality and scope, these various functions will run together. Any given instance of present blankness can support an array of intersecting, even competing kinds of generativity—narrative, affective, elemental, representational. I present this example for its accessibility but also because it displays the affecting and memorable recursion of emergency and documentary assembly and because it advances an emphatic memory of injustice in need of representational return while also implicitly acknowledging the inability to fully convey that injustice’s realities and effects. As Chute poignantly puts it, comics circulate as “dynamic texts inclined to express the layered horizon of history.” They do so in ways that favor both “visual efficacy and limitation” (*D*, p. 17).

More difficult to articulate, and likely to receive less attention, are the roles of present blankness in formats other than the comic. Photobooks offer an especially important site. Among the many produced after Katrina, an especially relevant example is *Still Here: Stories After Katrina* (2008) by Joseph Rodriguez. Broadly speaking, the book presents several dozen black and white photographs that document the lives of mostly African American people displaced by Katrina as they try to rebuild their lives, primarily in distant Denton, Texas. The images range considerably, although a marked quality of what the introduction calls “grit” persists throughout: there are intimate renderings of faces; there are scenes of life together at home; there is death and mourning; and there are glimpses of work and community.<sup>48</sup> From one perspective, any role of present blankness will seem beside the point: it is not the realities of suffering and perseverance these images assert; it is not the choice to use declarative captions and include diary entries; it is not the problem of long-term collective forgetting. But a lens of generative assembly insists on the relevance of present

48. Patrice Pascual, introduction to Joseph Rodriguez, *Still Here: Stories After Katrina* (Brooklyn, N.Y., 2008), p. 9.



FIGURE 7. Pages 82 and 83 of Joseph Rodriguez, *Still Here: Stories After Katrina* (2008).

blankness. That feature is a third variable for any given page; gaps of white sometimes appear around photographs, and pages without photographs, which make up nearly half of the overall assembly, often exhibit considerable blank space. Like the gutter, these blank spaces are not simply incidental, not simply unused segments; instead, they are sites of marked and consequential assembly-based generativity. Sometimes that generativity is the kind I have called structured openness: the blank spaces invite further interpretation and imagination—how the story in a caption might continue or what other images these lives might deserve. Other times, the generativity of present blankness is the provision of productive relationships. In one instance, a pool of empty space that crosses two pages calls attention to a juxtaposition: on one page, displaced citizen Katrina Robinson contending with FEMA forms; on the other, Robinson again, now watching as a charity staff member examines paperwork (fig. 7). In that empty space is, one might suggest, Robinson and others' displacement and resistance, their grappling with bureaucracy, persistent precarity, and the simple fact of being and responding—but it is also a measure of the gap between Robinson and distant witnesses. In still other instances in *Still Here*, the generativity of present blankness is precisely the lack of growth, production, and meaning. The emptiness is the reality of absence; it is all the care not provided. It is also the basic insufficiency of watching over acting. Such is the multivalence of generative assembly that no one effect of present blankness necessarily predominates.

## 6. Emergent Archiving

Neither an experience nor a feature, the third and last dynamic I address, what I call emergent archiving, instead pertains to *action*—to the ways in which generative assemblies come into being. Already, the category of action has been essential to this essay's account of generative assembly.

Indeed, action unites the examples I have aligned: each of them involves the assembling of records and registers of disaster; each maintains the appearance of selection and arrangement; and each thereby enacts and enables generativity. With this third dynamic, we witness a particular modality of action, which is to say a particular way of performing the work of generative assembly. This modality involves, as its name suggests, acts of assembling that deserve to be identified as archival. This can mean something more familiar and conventional is at work—acts of official memory, aimed at preservation, following normative protocols, whether analog or digital. But instances of emergent archiving can also take other forms: they can lack a mission of preservation while nevertheless keeping and maintaining; they can lack systems of official description while nevertheless invoking appearances of systematicity; and they can act as apparatuses based in citation and juxtaposition, even if their organizing principles are unclear or numerous.<sup>49</sup>

I look to the work of Mark Bradford as exemplary of emergent archiving at the individual level. Here is an artist who, until the storm and flood in 2005, had developed a pioneering practice at the intersection of abstraction and representation. Many of his works, paintings largely produced without paint, are built with merchant posters gleaned from his Los Angeles neighborhood. Katrina changed things. Bradford's practice became, as he describes it, more "confrontational."<sup>50</sup> Relative to emergent archiving and Katrina, two of Bradford's works are especially relevant, as both of them permute the archival and the emergent. In building the first—*Mississippi Gottdam* (2007), named for Nina Simone's forceful 1965 protest song—Bradford compiled comic-book pages, billboard paper, and other debris from the streets of New Orleans; attached them to his canvas in a grid structure; overlaid a layer of silver leaf upon that grid; then, enacting a

49. For some, this formulation might appear redundant with Hal Foster's category of "archival art." But archival art only intersects with emergent archiving; it is not coextensive. This is because, like the broader practice of generative assembly, emergent archiving can take place both within and beyond the sphere of contemporary art and because emergent archiving can take place beyond the individual or small group. Indeed, it can involve massive quantities of materials and considerable varieties of contributors, working across matrices of time, space, identity, class, race, and ability, among others. See Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* 110 (Autumn 2004): 3–22.

50. As much is evident in *Help Us* (2008), in which Bradford placed the eponymous words, first expressed from a rooftop in flood-stricken New Orleans, on the top of the gallery; or in subsequent pieces of explicit and trenchant material critique, not directly related to Katrina, like *Paris is Burning* (2010) and *150 Portrait Tone* (2017). Bradford discusses the "confrontational" in relation to Katrina with Tyler Green during the unedited version of the *Modern Art Notes Podcast* (Mark Bradford and Steve Roden, *Modern Art Notes Podcast*, 15 Mar. 2012, [manpodcast.com/portfolio/no-19-mark-bradford-steve-roden](http://manpodcast.com/portfolio/no-19-mark-bradford-steve-roden)).

method for which he has become well-known, sanded those materials partly back into appearance, in this case rendering a series of black, white, and grey flows (fig. 8). In building the second—the massive ship *Mithra* (2008), named for a god of truth and light, with etymological roots in binding and contracts—Bradford further relied upon the assembly of found paper, but he also amplified his material and aesthetic ambition: that paper adhered to an imposing ark, built of storm-resisting plywood boards and three sea containers shipped from Los Angeles, planted in the middle of the Lower Ninth Ward for Prospect.1 New Orleans in 2008 (fig. 9). In what ways do these projects instance emergent archiving? With *Mississippi Gottdam*, we witness the archival qua preservation (the found paper), arrangement (the overall grid and the comic book's archive-like frames), and citation (the titular protest song), and we witness the emergent in the typical marginality of those preserved things, in the lack of systematic organization, and in Bradford's subtractive revelation of some but not all of those constituent holdings. (For example, a character in one of the partly visible comics asks, "What if all these weirdos don't like people just dropping in?") With *Mithra*, we witness the archival in the preservation and arrangement of found things but also in the figuration of the ark, which serves to rescue

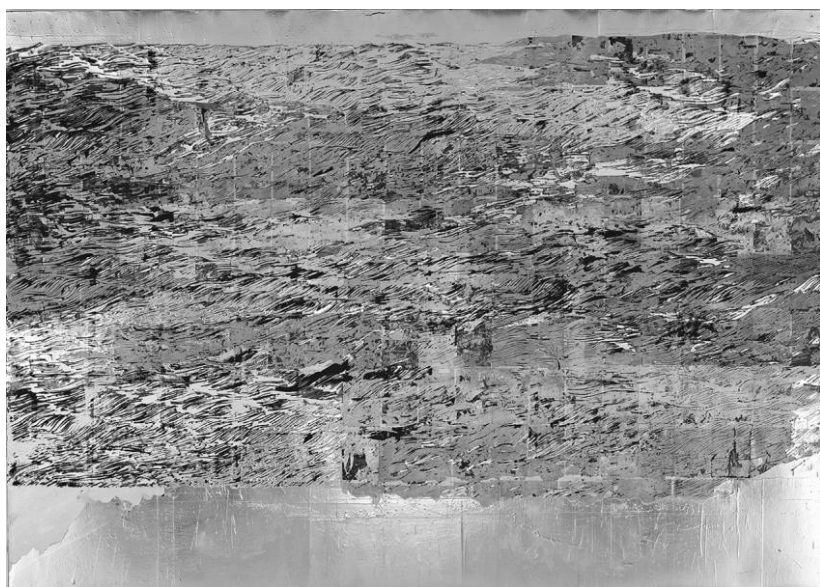


FIGURE 8. Mark Bradford, *Mississippi Gottdam* (2007). Mixed media collage on canvas. Courtesy of the artist and Hauser and Wirth.





FIGURE 9. Bradford, *Mithra* (2008). Plywood, shipping containers, steel. Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

and preserve against the flood.<sup>51</sup> We witness the emergent in similar ways to the painting, with the sides of the ship partly displaying and partly obscuring found materials; but we also encounter the qualities of provisionality and urgency—the ark occupies a place undergoing uncertain processes of change. The kinds of generativity these two assemblies enable are both shared and divergent. With the painting, it is the provision of reflective experience, a kind of partial elemental witness suffused by fields and subfields of present blankness. With the ark, it is an echo of the painting, but it is also an emphatically resistant assembly—a massive body in space—and it is of further significance that the project wove Bradford, for whom arts education is a deep commitment, into the communities of the Lower Ninth Ward, including continued work with a nonprofit organization. As Bradford himself puts it, the paper-laden ark constituted “material” in the process of “making some political gesture.” That political gesture—which served to place a “material archive” of plywood and found materials in figurative motion—aimed to be forceful. “I really wanted to make it feel like that

51. It is notable that this piece, which was eventually removed, left several legacies: the photograph, by John Mullen III, *Ark in Snow* (2008); the derivative installation *Details* (2009–2010), made for Bradford’s 2010 retrospective; and an associated Super 8 documentation of the building of the ark called *Across Canal* (2009–2010).

‘boom, boom, boom, boom,’” Bradford recalls. “I almost wanted it to feel like a battleship.”<sup>52</sup>

If Bradford’s works stand as the multilayered interventions of a key figure in contemporary art, then the example to which I now turn has a considerably more ambiguous status. Indeed, as I have noted, emergent archiving is not only the province of the artist, nor is it strictly material. Rather, emergent archiving can also take place in distributed fashion, with diverse actors working at a largely anonymous remove; it can also be highly virtual, dependent on code, database, and pixel; and it can involve emphatic concern for normative ends of preservation. The tag cloud of the HDMB presents an especially poignant, if also fraught, example of what such forms of emergent archiving can produce and perform and a fitting final exhibit for this account of generative assembly after Katrina (fig. 10). In a basic sense, the tag cloud serves as one among multiple means of access to the materials in the 25,000-item online repository, the other means being keyword search and a Google map. Like much of the material making up the archive, the tag cloud’s constituent tags are user generated, and they have not been subject to a controlled vocabulary—that is, the project leaders have not enforced a specific menu of terms based on newly established or preexisting standards. Are we to immediately accept such an assembly as a welcome expansion of access to histories of Katrina? Or should we follow the lead of some interpreters in establishing a basic skepticism of projects of distributed emergent archiving like *HDMB* and thus by extension dismiss this constituent artifact? As with any instance of generative assembly after disaster, it is necessary to adopt a nuanced approach. Like all the projects addressed so far, the tag cloud is a multivalent, multiformat, multimotivated media artifact addressing complex, mediated histories and open to numerous situated engagements, uses, and reuses—it is, in short, variously and precariously generative. Critiques might go something like this: the tag cloud is of a piece with reduction; it serves only to further abstract; it turns the disaster into so many discrete topics; it supports neoliberal tendencies toward social atomization; it favors documentation over discourse; it fails to mitigate, or even exacerbates, fault lines of belonging.<sup>53</sup>

52. Bradford, interview with Hamza Walker, in Christopher Bedford et al., *Mark Bradford* (New Haven, Conn., 2010), p. 101.

53. For the critique of the digital archive as a site of neoliberal “prosumption,” see Timothy Recuber, “The Presumption of Commemoration: Disasters, Digital Memory Banks, and Online Collective Memory,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 56 (Apr. 2012): 531–49. For a critique relative to politics of national belonging, see Courtney Rivard, “Archiving Disaster and National Identity in the Digital Realm: The September 11 Digital Archive and the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank,” in *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online*, ed. Anna Poletti and Julie Rak (Madison, Wisc., 2014), pp. 132–43.

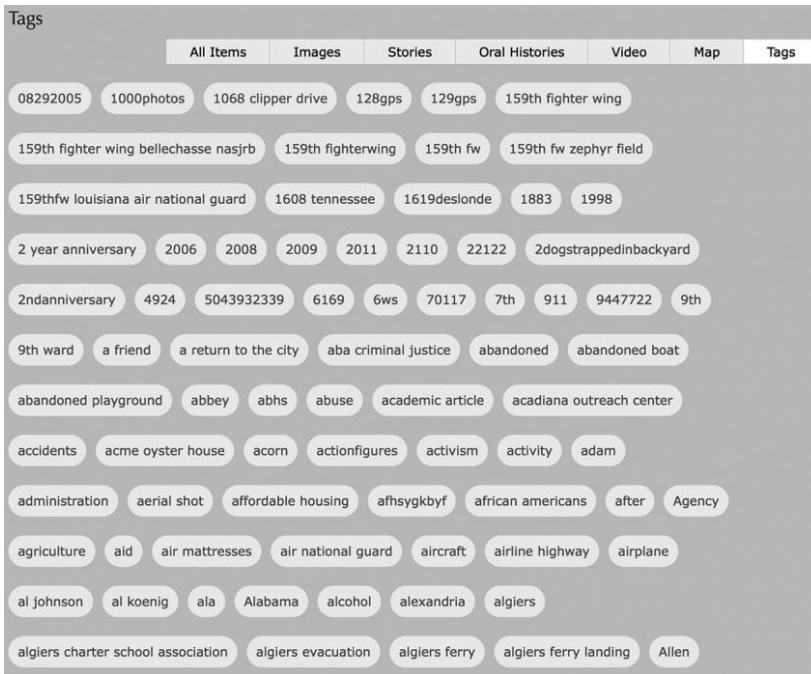


FIGURE 10. Detail of tag cloud, Hurricane Digital Memory Bank (2016).

More optimistic assessments would vary considerably. This is a generative subassembly; a machine for provocation and redirection. There is a peculiar force to the gathering of element after element, humor alongside suffering, the familiar alongside the eccentric: “actionfigures,” “affordable housing,” “air national guard”; “death,” “dedication,” “democratization”; “web dubois,” “web site,” “webcomic.” For all its functions in serving research toward determined ends, the tag cloud also suggests a lack of knowing and of paths not taken. It is also an expressive visualization. That visualization affords a sense of vastness, as one scrolls through an impossible quantity of potential concerns, issues, realities, and perspectives. The subassembly also embodies something essential—the potential for reassembly and redistribution. *HDMB* is constituted by schemes of transmissible data and media. Though there would be ethical, technical, and other challenges, an intervention in this archive’s contents as well as its architectures of display and dissemination could take place. Such a project, critically conceived, would self-consciously negotiate prevailing conditions of representation and remembrance; it would also look to legacies of smaller scale, discrete assembly for the kinds of dynamics it aimed to actively facilitate.

### 7. The Varieties of Assembly-Based Dynamics

Elemental witness, present blankness, and emergent archiving are three among a variety of ways in which generative assembly can enact and enable remembrance and witness. Further inquiry would more thoroughly investigate how generative assembly, especially digital generative assembly, can fall short, fail, or deceive. It would also elaborate upon other dynamics, including the performative dimensions of documentary assembly discussed above: artifacts' implicit claims upon the right to intervene in representation, claims which could be said to mirror those of political assembly. It also seems important to find ways to better account for the aforementioned specificities of New Orleans and the Gulf Region as contexts of historical violence and material remembrance. (On this count, I think of New Orleans's reputation as a city of haunting; "new ghosts," Dawdy says, "lurk around new ruins and sites where attempts at renovation have not erased the sense of rupture in local space-time" [*P*, p. 47].) In a related sense, it seems necessary to delve further into the question of the projects' contexts of production and reception. It matters, for instance, that Misrach's and Walker's projects emerged and circulated as contemporary art while Kirsch's appeared as a provisional and unofficial contribution to a digital archival assembly. Nevertheless, in mapping this trio of dynamics, these central claims have been at stake: that compilation and configuration take place in convergent fashion across diverse media; that such practices can generatively intervene in prevailing conditions of representation and remembrance; and that the legacies of these endeavors exist productively, if also sometimes precariously, in the broad and still evolving ecology of witnessing and interpreting Katrina.

### 8. Prospects

What can we discern of the prospects for generative assembly going forward? It seems fair to expect that other events will introduce still further permutations of disaster, assembly, and generativity and that the technological means for such practices will only increase. This has been apparent around other events of sudden, massive environmental violence, like the 2010 Gulf oil spill; the 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown in Japan; and Hurricane Sandy in 2012. Indeed, setting these events alongside Katrina and others, including the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, it becomes evident that a larger history of disaster and assembly could be told. That history would trace the shifting conditions of possibility for assembly-based responses to events of environmental violence, whether analog, digital, or digitized. Such an inquiry would have to address, among other things, the availability of methods of recording and disseminating; shifting cultural norms around the mediation and remembrance of such events;

and, indeed, historical fatigue and saturation around the visibility of certain kinds of violence.

Katrina was a sudden and highly documented catastrophe, the effects of which were tragically visible, if not therefore fully apprehensible or ever properly acknowledged. In enacting and analyzing generative assembly going forward, it will be essential to recognize the ecological and media conditions in which we find ourselves. We face the ever-more-violent reality of climate change, which is both an ongoing disaster and many more disasters still to come. We face the now more frequent revelation of what has been called slow violence, such as the history of lead poisoning in Flint, Michigan.<sup>54</sup> And we face the immediacy with which documentation, information, and interpretation around such violence—including materials that actively deceive or damage—can proliferate through social media. Generative assembly will provide one way of responding to these conditions; it could matter significantly to available means of mediation and memory and potentially to litigation and activism. For would-be audiences, critics, and producers—for any stakeholders of disaster discourse and representation—an array of new dynamics will be in play, dynamics to which I have only gestured. These include the role of instantaneity in the production and dissemination of media artifacts defined by the confluence of assembly and generativity, as well as the aesthetics and politics of data and data visualization and the emergence of artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and machine vision. However things unfold, the many instances of generative assembly after Katrina will continue to propose crucial modes of intervention, and this tragedy will continue to deserve collective remembrance and response.

54. See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011).