

Communicating crisis research with comics: Representation, process and pedagogy

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INTRODUCTION

The move towards creative research outputs within academia has seen a recent and rapid uptake of mediums such as comics, zines, film, podcasts and theatre to translate and engage the wider public in academia (Arevalo 2020). These mediums can both be powerful and enlightening ways to communicate research findings, though they also come with distinct challenges (Hall et al. 2021). In this chapter we discuss the process and potential of communicating crisis research in creative forms, using the example of comics. More specifically, we draw upon our own experiences of developing creative research outputs and explore this process by looking at the comic, *“After Maria: Everyday Recovery from Disaster”*. This comic translates Gemma’s ethnographic research on how low-income Puerto Rican families recovered from the impacts of Hurricane Maria, which devastated the Caribbean island in September 2017. Our aim is to use the *After Maria* example as a means of developing critical discussions about the representational politics, pedagogy and process of translating crisis research into comic form.

We argue that communicating crisis research via comics is a highly democratic process because it ensures your research is accessible to your participants as well as the wider public. Relatedly, the production of comics also enables a more participatory research process whereby participants can shape how their story is told. Comics are also uniquely positioned to produce a politics of representation that challenges reductive, dehumanising and apolitical narratives about crisis affected people that often circulate in mainstream media (Scott 2014), and in academic research (Tuck 2009). Furthermore, comics offer powerful rhetorical power as they are uniquely able to distil complex ideas into engaging and highly learnable forms (Chute 2017).

We begin by outlining the communicative capacity of comics, before giving further details on the development of *After Maria*. We then detail practical issues, learning spaces and representational challenges, before offering some conclusions.

COMICS

A comic is generally an illustration that employs metaphor and/or storytelling to clearly communicate an idea to a broad audience (McCloud 1994). Comics that centre on and tackle political, social and economic issues are known as “serious” comics. These developed in the

1960s and '70s, largely in New York and San Francisco, and were independently created and produced. They have origins in underground and politically left movements that sought to challenge mainstream ideas and understanding of social and political issues (Chute 2017). With “serious” comics, creators shifted away from the notion that comics had to be action-packed, silly, formulaic, or even slightly inclined toward children through their focus on superheroes and villains for example. Serious comics produce complex, textured, and even absurdist storylines. They are avant-garde; they are political; and they are taboo-shattering. They tackle issues such as disaster (Neufeld 2016); war (Sacco 2003); sex (Road 2012); migration (Mandaville 2018); genocide (Stassen 2006, Mandaville 2020); mental health (Bechdel 2007); inequality (Sulaiman 2017); illness and disability (Bell 2014); queerness (Tamaki 2014); and civil rights (Lewis and Aydin 2016).

Inspired by the notion that comics can deal with ‘serious’, real-world issues, an increasing number of academics have communicated their research in comic form. In public health research, comics have long been recognized as an effective tool for reaching lots of different populations for education on subjects like cancer (Krakow 2017), fitness (Tarver et al 2016), and diabetes (McNicol 2014) to name only a few. There is also a comics series focusing on “graphic medicine” - both by and for doctors, nurses, and patients (Graphic Medicine n.d.). Other examples include *Positive-Negatives* (Positive Negatives n.d.), *A Vision for Emberá Tourism* (Theodossopoulos 2019), *Lissa* (Hamdy and Nye 2017), *Gringo Love* (Carrier-Moisan 2020), *Mentawai!* (Pendanx and Juguin 2019) *Love in a Time of Precarity* (Taylor 2019), and *Little Miss Homeless* (Earle-Brown 2020). We now outline how Gemma came to use comics in her research, and provide more detail on the *After Maria* comic.

THE “AFTER MARIA” COMIC

For many years Gemma has read graphic novels and comics that tackle ‘serious’ issues, and was intrigued about their political potential in research. This included an appreciation of the sensitivity of the storytelling power of comics and their ability to synthesise and communicate complex social narratives into understandable, engaging and beautiful stories. In collaboration with the London-based illustrator, John Cei Douglas (see www.johnceidouglas.com), Gemma produced a twenty-page comic based on her one-year ethnographic research project, which explored the recovery of low-income Puerto Rican families that were affected by Hurricane Maria in 2017 (Sou and Cei Douglas 2019). This project investigated the everyday social, cultural, political and economic factors that shape family recovery during the first year after a major disaster (Lindell 2019).

She collected data in the neighbourhood Ingenio, a community of 4,415 persons across 1,529 households with a 66% poverty rate (US Census Bureau, 2018). Ingenio is a peri-urban, coastal community in Toa Baja municipality, located 13.5 kilometres from Puerto Rico’s

capital, San Juan. Hurricane Maria caused major structural and water damage to the majority of houses in Ingenio and recovery from state actors was limited (see Sou et al forthcoming). Data collection began on 16th October 2017 (27 days after Hurricane Maria hit) and concluded on 13th September 2018 (almost one year after the hurricane). Data were collected through five visits that were equally spaced throughout the period. She carried out in-depth semi-structured interviews with each household head during each visit, and she also interviewed local and national government officials, as well as domestic and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Extensive observation and visual methods (i.e. photography and videos) were also conducted, and she consulted pertinent disaster recovery policies and data, as well as census data. The comic tells the story of a fictional family, yet the narrative, dialogue and experiences of the characters are entirely based on the data collected. As such, *After Maria* ties together the main findings and experiences of all of the Puerto Rican families that Gemma spoke to. The comic also includes ten extra pages with further reading about the causes and recovery of disasters, discussion points, references and information about the authors.

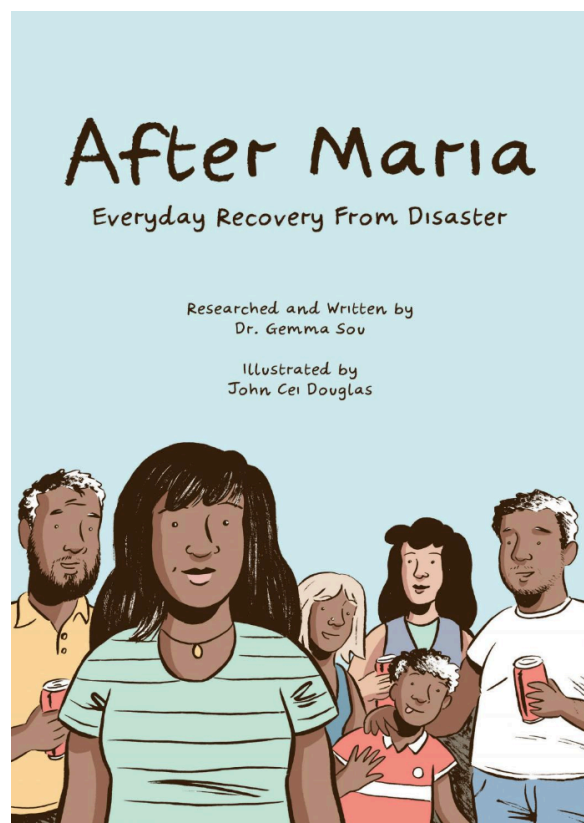


Figure 1: Comic, '*After Maria: Everyday Recovery from Disaster*'

It was surprisingly simple to find a graphic artist. Gemma pitched her comic idea on a Facebook page for UK based graphic artists and was met with many inquiries. She asked two

of her favourite artists to sketch a scene that she had scripted, and from there she decided to work with the very talented John Cei Douglas. Using her in-depth ethnographic data, Gemma wrote the script, which included the dialogue, narration, perspective, information about what is happening in the scene, characters' emotions and even the mood/ambience, which all helped John to create the visual story¹. The script was written to ensure that each individual page communicated at least one major finding from the research. For example, the gendered impact of disasters; loss of identity and sense of home; weak state capacity to support household recovery; the increase in community solidarity. Although these are weighty topics, graphic illustration is well-suited to distil complex ideas into six or seven panels of images as we will discuss later on. Once the script for the first 16 pages was complete, John began final illustration.

The *After Maria* comic shown in Figure 1 was made freely available online (in English and Spanish) in May 2019, and over 1500 physical copies were sent to educators and academics across the world. The comic has received significant international attention, being featured in the Guardian UK newspaper, numerous blog spaces, interactive exhibitions, festivals and Gemma has enjoyed being invited to speak about the comic on several podcasts and events. Educators working at high school, undergraduate and postgraduate level in over twenty countries have also used it as a teaching resource. Disciplines are varied and include geography, anthropology, development studies, gender studies, media studies, and English literature. Individuals working in NGOs have also used it as a resource to facilitate discussions with communities affected by disasters when conducting participatory workshops.

WORKING WITH ARTISTS AND PARTICIPANTS

Unless you are a talented artist, producing a comic is an inherently democratic process because it requires researchers to work collaboratively and dialogically in order to effectively translate research findings into an engaging and accessible visual narrative. Though, as a researcher it is fundamental to ensure the integrity of the research and of those being represented and to avoid ethnographic errors. In other words, it is critical that the accuracy of the research findings is not lost through their translation into a visual story. As such, researchers must relinquish some control over their research outputs if they are to take full advantage of the visual narrative form of comics.

Further to this, a central aim of producing the *After Maria* comic was to ensure an ethical portrayal of research participants by foregrounding nuanced representations of their experiences and personalities, as we discuss below. Working with these principles, collaboration with an artist stimulates a creative dialogue between the researcher who

¹ To write the script, Gemma found Kneece (2015) absolutely invaluable.

gathers and analyses data, and the artist who must distil and communicate these complex ideas in accessible as well as engaging ways. Reconciling these two approaches was challenging and exciting in equal measure. This process also allows researchers to work more creatively themselves, which can be a welcome break for academics for whom sharing findings can often be reduced to writing articles, chapters and books – a relatively lonely activity for many.

Initially there was a lot of back and forth between Gemma and John concerning the script, which is made up of text – what is read (dialogue, captions, thought and sound), and visuals – what is seen (the action of the story, the artwork, the layout). These two components work together to generate energy within the script and thus within the story. Gemma wanted to ensure the integrity of the research findings and the voices and personalities of the people she spoke to. At the same time, John brought his expertise in visual storytelling and was fantastic at suggesting what dialogue to leave out, or what perspective to draw a scene from to take advantage of visual storytelling. Gemma's first attempt at scripts/storyboarding depended heavily on dialogue and captions to drive the narrative. This is not surprising because as academics, we are accustomed to words and text being the primary way that we communicate and receive ideas. Yet, collaboration with an illustrator pushes researchers to make shrewd decisions about which findings we want the public to engage with and understand as focusing on a select number of findings will ensure the comic works narratively and aesthetically.



Figure 2: 'After Maria' comic, page 6, panel 8

An artists' expertise in graphical storytelling is invaluable as it ensures that the visuals and the spatial organisation of information, rather than the text, drive the story. For example, a character's emotion, whether anger, fear, shock or delight can be communicated through facial expression, body language, shading, or even the angle and perspective of the image, rather than explicitly stating this in dialogue or captions. For instance, in Figure 2 (see above), the central family in *After Maria* have just discovered the extent of damage caused by Hurricane Maria. The characters' feelings of vulnerability and despair do not need to be didactically spelt out for the reader. Instead the image conveys this through the body language (embracing one another, slumped shoulders) and facial expressions of characters, set in a landscape of destruction. The wide, birds-eye view perspective also makes the characters appear small, which cleverly signifies the family's initial sense of helplessness in relation to the enormity of the problem they faced after the hurricane.

The ability to be economical with text is a key benefit of visual storytelling (Aiello and Parry 2019). Therefore, it is critical to collaborate with an experienced artist who is sensitive to your research findings and who has the skill and intuition to know how to distil ideas into images. As such, it is important to work with an artist who feels comfortable in making these suggestions to you as a researcher. This can result in a healthy dynamic where researchers and artists share, push, pull, and compromise as necessary in the pursuit of a visual representation of research. Artists require sufficient freedom so that they can communicate the researchers' script and ideas in the most appropriate and effective way for their particular artistic medium.

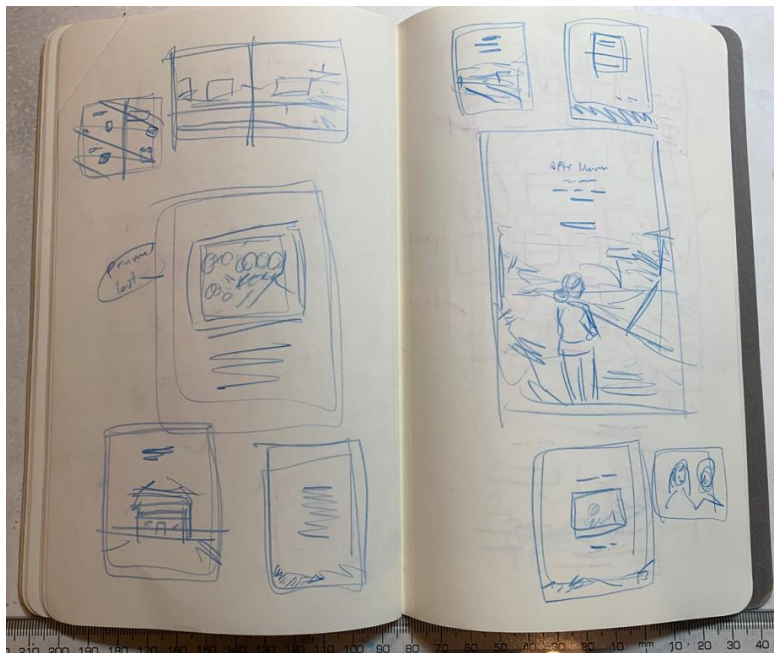


Figure 3: Rough sketches of the 'After Maria' comic

Another exciting element of producing a comic is that they offer a more democratic opportunity for research participants to influence and understand the work of academics. For instance, Gemma consulted with research participants to receive their feedback and input on the text, dialogue, images, narratives and purpose of the comic. In practice, after each field visit to Puerto Rico, Gemma would write a script for approximately four pages of the comic, or three months of the one-year ethnography. John would then roughly sketch these four pages (see image 3), and Gemma would show this to research participants on her subsequent field visit. This allowed her to gather feedback from those who were directly affected by Hurricane Maria, and amend the comic accordingly.

Research participants felt more comfortable directing, critiquing and suggesting ideas for an output that visually conveys environments, events, dialogue, experiences and people they are familiar with and recognise. When people can literally “see” themselves, they are more likely to feel invested. In contrast, academic jargon and theoretical obfuscation often found in journal articles and books may quickly marginalise research participants from engaging in meaningful feedback (Detweiler 2014, Pinker 2014). Moreover, it is not widespread academic practice for researchers to gather research participants’ feedback on traditional academic outputs. As such, producing comics can subvert the traditional and asymmetrical researcher-“researched” relations, as research participants become active collaborators in the process of knowledge production and communication. Moreover, a comic may also be far more useful to research participants than a research report, book, or journal article. There is also something about the physicality and durability of a print copy of a comic that lends both legitimacy and

longevity to the research it presents. It is less likely to be lost somewhere in the wilds of the endless Internet, or trapped behind the pay wall of an academic journal, but can be found on a shelf for future generations to discover.

LEARNING ABOUT CRISES WITH COMICS

Historically, there has been an association between comics and a kind of subpar literacy, as if comics reading could not be “real” reading. This is because of the widespread notion that visual literacy, is somehow less complicated than verbal literacy, which comics also require (Glasgow 1994). In this line of thinking, which is prevalent today, the visual is immediate, sensual, and obvious. Contemporary comics, however, ask us to reconsider several dominant commonplaces about images, including that visuality stands for a subpar literacy. Comics in fact, are mediums that involve a substantial degree of reader participation and visual literacy to decode narrative meaning and stitch together meaning. Comics are site-specific forms of literature that have their own vocabulary: gutters, panels, tiers, balloons, bubbles, bleeds, splashes, perspectives, shading. These are all elements that carry meaning and which exist meaningfully in relation to one another in the space on the page. To produce them requires learning a new syntax, a new way of ordering ideas. And the visual content of comics that once signaled a “lesser-than” literacy is now an integral part of our contemporary daily lives, as so much of our primary media intake, especially online, combines the verbal and the visual, often with complexity we have learned to navigate quickly (Avgerinou and Pettersson 2011, Hattwig et al 2013).

For instance, blank spaces are central to comic storytelling—they are where the reader fills in the blank between pictured moments, participating imaginatively in the creation of the story. And different readers do this and experience this blank space differently. Too much text and being bluntly told exactly what is happening can kill the reader’s imaginative engagement with the narrative (Kneece 2015). Comics provide enough text and images so readers will imaginatively connect parts of the story. Comics are as much about what can be pictured, and what cannot be or will not be pictured, which is left to the reader’s imagination. The images are also able to make their own contribution to the making of the story, as an image is always capable of provoking a narrative response in the mind of the reader. In other words, the reader is supposed to infer the story not only from the textual and verbal indications that are given, but also from the elements of the image (Baetens 2008). For a reader navigating the space of the page, reading comics can feel less directive and linear than reading most prose narrative. This way of reading stimulates both analytic and creative activity in the brain, a process that has been shown to enhance understanding (Mayer and Sims 1994). Not only can this process potentially augment learning, it can also facilitate empathy between author and reader by offering a portal into the individual’s experience (Williams 2011).



Figure 4 'After Maria' comic, page 16, panels 2, 3 and 4

As such, comics offer new pedagogical avenues that can contribute to and support traditional teaching from academic texts. They combine the power of ethnographic research, with the unique aesthetic elements of illustrations, as a sequential art, using pages, panels, visuals, dialogue, captions, and lettering to tell a story. Comics also use the visual medium to express non-human environmental elements in a form that is not overly didactic. This approach makes comics excellent for critical analysis, because readers can use their wider understanding of theories, concepts and ideas they have learnt in class, or elsewhere, to unpack the stories images, text, dialogue, and narratives. For example, in Figure 4, Natalia, the protagonist is thinking about how she misses the way life and her home were before the hurricane (shaded panels denote daydreaming and memories). Readers familiar with Blunt and Dowling's (2006) notion of home will recognise how the loss of material items such as furniture and family photographs, as well as familiar sounds such as the radio and television, rupture Natalia's sense of homeliness, familiarity, normality and even sense of identity. This undermines her material and emotional attachment to home as well as disrupting her sensory experiences of home (Burrell 2014, Sou and Webber 2019). By critically reading visual texts, students become more careful observers (Naghshineh et al. 2008). This way of teaching is appreciated by students, who increasingly request different and more visual approaches to teaching.

The visuality of comics is also one of the main reasons why they are so engaging and accessible to 'non-experts'. This is significant because academic writing is often criticised for being overly complicated and impenetrable to anyone outside of a small circle of experts (Kamler and Thompson 2014). Yet, an effective comic can convey complex ideas in an

accessible form without oversimplification. Their visual narrative form can illuminate obscure concepts, and create a metaphor that can be much more memorable than a straightforward text-based description of the concept itself. In fact, pedagogical and psychological studies show that the comic form has significant impact on players' knowledge acquisition and content understanding (Sousanis 2019). This is not only because comics are engaging, but also because they are uniquely able to present complicated ideas in a more accessible and understandable way because of their visual storytelling form, regardless of the reader's prior knowledge of the particular topic at hand. This is especially important in the context of crises, when personal experiences, vulnerabilities and sensitivities are at stake, and arguably it becomes more important for researchers to share these findings to highlight the injustices that crises expose.

REPRESENTING RESEARCH ON CRISES AND HUMAN VULNERABILITY

Media representations of crises, whether in TV, film, news outlets and NGOs' fundraising or advocacy campaigns, tend to rely on aesthetics of suffering and highly emotive imagery that depicts crisis-affected groups as defeated and broken (Lewis et al 2014, Sigona 2014). A common trope is to focus on the misery of children, women, the elderly and those who are injured or sick, which convey ideas of helplessness, as they tend to be internationally recognised as "symbols of distress" (Manzo 2008). This is because they are deemed to be passive and having less agency, and are therefore "more deserving" of our sympathy and support (Johnson 2011). This reifies and reproduces essentialist and reductive narratives about crisis-affected populations, who are often the most low-income and socio-politically marginalised groups in society. A notable and infamous illustration of this approach was the photo taken of the dead body of Aylan Kurdi, a small Syrian boy who washed ashore in Turkey.

However, over-reliance on documenting the suffering of people, results in apolitical and ahistorical narratives that decontextualize and simplify the causes and experiences of crises, and how they can be addressed. Crises are simply seen to exist as there is marginal engagement with the broader structural factors that insidiously and gradually create crises and shape people's unequal experiences (Hattori 2003, Hojer 2004, Scott 2014). There is also a reliance on images of large crisis-affected groups, which portrays people as lacking any individualising features, because people are aggregated into large abstract groups e.g. refugees, dying hospital patients, disaster victims. This homogenises people, and denies their unique personalities, voices, personal experiences and identities (Chouliaraki 2013).

Tuck (2009: 409) also argues that scholarly research on crises and marginalized groups are often guilty of narrowly focusing on documenting the agony and troubled lives of crisis affected people, or what she calls "damage centred research". This surreptitiously invites

vulnerable and oppressed peoples to speak but to “only speak from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, an unfulfilled longing. Only speak your pain” (hooks, 1990, p. 152). This kind of research reinscribes a one-dimensional notion of people as depleted, ruined, and hopeless. Tuck urges researchers to reformulate the ways research is framed and to reimagine how findings might be translated; calling for researchers to focus on documenting not only the painful elements and suffering of crises but also the wisdom, hope, vision and lived lives. Such an axiology can depathologize the experiences of crisis-affected communities and upend commonly held assumptions of ignorance, and paralysis within crisis-affected peoples (Hattori 2003, Hojer 2004, Chouliaraki 2006, Scott 2014).

The technological form and subversive culture of comics are particularly well placed to construct narratives that challenge the reductive and dehumanizing representational practices that circulate in mainstream media and damage-centred research. In *After Maria*, a priority was to construct nuanced representations of the families in Puerto Rico, by bringing through their voice, personalities, personal relationships and hidden everyday personal experiences of disaster that are seldom revealed in mainstream media or much academic research. This is an inherently ethical endeavour that directly challenges the focus on damage, pain and suffering in mainstream media and crisis research. Comics afford this because they focus on character-driven narratives and the creation of three-dimensional characters who express their emotions and unique personalities, which drive the narrative without being too intrusive. For example, *After Maria* portrays families in Puerto Rico as complex human beings who have pasts, presents and imagined futures, as dignified in work clothes, as members of families, neighbourhoods and churches, as simultaneously serious, humorous and energetic. Comics enable researchers to avoid fetishising damage and homogenising suffering, as they are equipped to celebrate the wisdom, heterogeneity, hope and ingenuity of affected groups (Vizenor & Lee 1999, Grande, 2004, Brayboy, 2008;). We propose that comics are a powerful medium to steer academic and public representations of crises away from essentialist narratives of damage, passivity and victimhood.



Figure 5: 'After Maria' comic, page 9, panels 1 and 2

For example, in image 5 we see two characters joking and laughing about their son tiring of humanitarian relief food. These small moments, and some might say, insignificant moments, are unlikely to be covered in mainstream media or many studies of disasters; yet, comics celebrate and lend themselves to the inclusion of “unspectacular” moments (Chute 2017). Inclusion of “unremarkable” moments foreground the unique personalities of characters and allow one to represent research participants as far more than a “miserable” and defeated victim of disaster. The ability to showcase nuanced representations of research participants also allows researchers to highlight the ability of crisis-affected people to navigate adverse contexts. In fact, the culture of comics insists on narratives that place individual characters’ agency and capacity at the forefront (Kneece 2015). This allows comics to challenge the reductive idea that people are passive and helpless victims of crises. In this sense, the comic form allows researchers to construct much denser representations of research participants and their contexts than is possible in text-based mediums (Sousanis 2019).

However, when representing crises in comics it is important researchers do not fall into the trap of romanticising people’s “resilience”. Overly focusing on the capabilities of people (or lack of) as the analytical explanation for the causes, impacts and recovery from crises, moves responsibility for risk towards affected populations, whilst the broader political, economic, social, and environmental structures that shape crisis are obscured. Such a narrative is apolitical and ahistorical, and opens up a space for neoliberal policies that shift responsibility away from the state and towards families (Felli and Castree 2012, Harrison 2013). We insist that crisis comics must highlight the ways in which crisis affected groups are routinely and systematically marginalised from formal state support, which is succinctly illustrated in two panels from *After Maria* found in Figure 6.

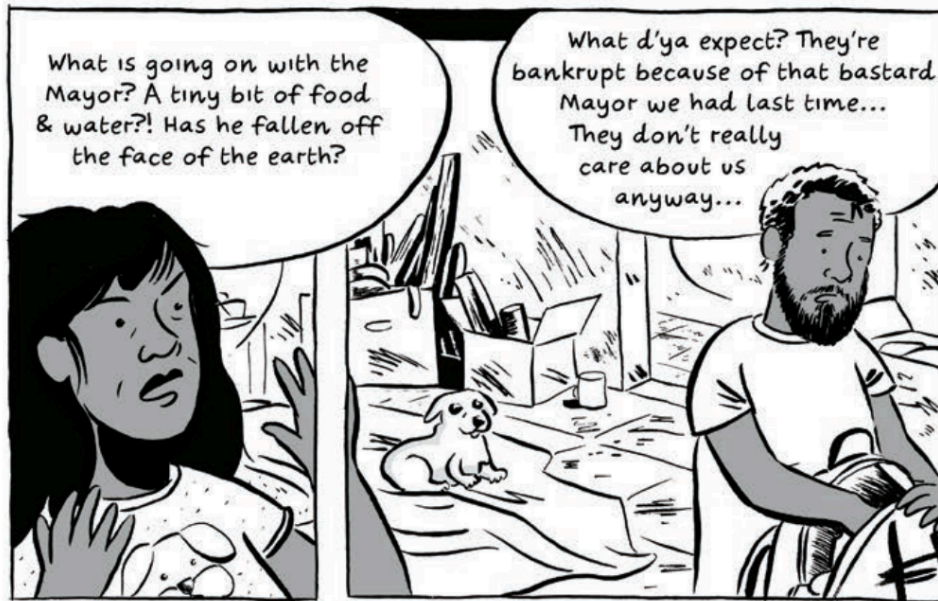


Figure 6: 'After Maria' comic, Page 3, panels 1 and 2.

CONCLUSION

The outputs of crisis research do not typically consist of creative outputs such as comics. Yet, our discussion highlighted how the respective crafts of illustrator and researcher can intersect really well in the translation of crisis research into a visual story for broader uptake beyond academia. As researchers of crises, we are used to unearthing, interpreting, and analysing stories, then communicating these via journal articles, book chapters or perhaps even blogs. That is, via mediums that are principally text based. Comics provide a new and intriguing register to translate and distribute research findings. They allow us to engage our creative sides, stop us in our tracks, and force us to consider what aspects of our research we think the general public should be aware of. It is a revelatory process that creates a space for researchers to engage research participants in research communication.

Communicating crisis research is an inherently ethical endeavour, which places participants at the very heart of the research process, allowing them to maintain control over how their story is told. We suggest it is important that academics learn ways of communicating findings about crisis research that are appropriate and enjoyable for their participants, and comics represent one such avenue. The storytelling form of comics also provides ample opportunity for researchers to create more ethical representations of participations which move away from reductive portrayals of participants as faceless and voiceless victims of crises. Finally, while comics are still sometimes blanketed as escapist - today it is clear that many comics gesture toward the opposite: a participatory, even slowed-down practice of consumption that allows readers to access complex ideas via an engaging and highly learnable form.

The illustrator John Cei Douglas, can be found at www.johnceidouglas.com

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