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The swarm of disaster

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A B S T R A C T

In this essay the author responds to the contributors of the form on “The Coloniality of Disaster” and addresses the unfolding earthquakes and “disaster swarm” facing Puerto Rico and the contemporary Caribbean.

I am grateful to Ben Anderson, Kevon Rhiney, and Gustavo Garcia-Lopez for their generosity of time, spirit, and intellect and for the numerous threads they each pulled from my essay. I am unable to address all of their many insights but am thankful for their engagement with the main questions that concerned me, namely: How can we think of disaster as structure, rather than event? What is the temporality and affective tissue of an ongoing emergency? How does resilience operate as a political technology? What is the relationship between self-reliance and self-governance? And how can we envision recovery as a form of post-colonial repair?

When I presented my plenary lecture at the AAG meetings in Fall of 2019, I had no way of knowing the twists and turns that would unfold in Puerto Rico in the months to follow. I ended my remarks on a hopeful note by suggesting that perhaps the politics of emergency might generate new political possibilities. Little could I have imagined that in the summer of 2019 Puerto Ricans would make history by forcing their governor to resign through a mass movement that was in many ways shaped and made possible precisely by the wait of disaster.

The protests were sparked by a series of leaked messages between the governor and his close advisors that contained insults, profanities, possible illegalities, and (perhaps most unforgivably for local residents), a deep disregard for the pain and trauma of a society battered by a devastating hurricane, a profound economic crisis, and centuries of colonial rule. While Puerto Rican residents were suffering through months without electricity and/or running water, and while many still remained without roofs, the governor and his advisors seemed more concerned with image management and personal gain than with the actual task of governing (Bonilla, 2019).

The political response to the scandal was powered in great part by

the forms of “resilience” created during hurricane Maria. The community organizations, neighborly bonds, and autonomous organizing that had allowed residents to tend to themselves in the face of government abandonment also emboldened them to topple their governor. The slowly building forms of sovereignty described in my essay as *auto-gestión* seemed to have spurred a new democratic ethos that would not wait for the ballot box (or the uncertain outcomes of a formal impeachment process).

For a moment at least it seemed like the politics of resilience could, as Rhiney ventures in his comments, result in something other than a reestablishment of the status quo, leading instead to new forms of political transformation. The very same political forms which I describe in my essay as lacking the shape of a nationalist movement unexpectedly morphed into what felt like a revolution: a rapid transformation in the social and political order of things. The slowed down and expanded space-time of disaster suddenly gave way to the sped-up time of a social struggle. Once again Lenin’s oft cited phrase became pertinent: there are decades where nothing happens, and then there are weeks where decades happen. In little more than a fortnight over a million Puerto Ricans had taken to the streets in massive protests and peacefully managed to force the governor to step down—despite his initial claims that he would survive the scandal because he was “resilient.”

Many noted that the temporality of the protests reminded them of the temporality of Maria: the suspension of quotidian life, the indeterminacy of what would come next, the heightened sense of time that made sleep impossible and “normality” a distant memory, and the uncertainty over when and how it might all end. One local radio personality made a poignant comparison on twitter stating, “these days have me worn out, I wake up exhausted, I lose track of time, it’s the same feeling as during

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those shitty days after María; except that now we are the hurricane.”¹

For many, the summer movement was not just an echo of María, but its catharsis. All the anger and sorrow they had held in, the grief that had been swallowed, and the mourning that had been impossible in the frantic frenzy of survival came rushing out in one large collective outpouring. Protests were dominated by references to María, particularly to the dead. Performances and wake ceremonies were held in front of the government’s mansion and the number 4645—the statistical projection of the death count produced by researchers from Harvard and Albizu university (Kishore et al., 2018)—appeared across signs and graffiti everywhere taking on a semiotic charge of its own.

In the aftermath of the governor’s resignation a new temporality set in. There was a sense that his stepping down was not an ending, but a beginning. There was perhaps even a nascent feeling of recovery. Even as streetlights remained broken, federal aid stayed held up in Washington, and a disturbing number of residents continued to sleep under blue tarps, something felt different. Recovery in the sense described by Annie—as a way of feeling fully human—began to seem possible. There was pride in what had been collectively achieved; the affective terrain suggested that change might be on the horizon.

But then, when least expected, a new disaster struck. January of 2020 began with what has been described as an earthquake “swarm.” In just one month over 2500 seismic events have been registered in the southern coast of the island with over 272 “felt events” of magnitudes between 2.0 and 6.4 (López, Vanacore, Stephen Hughes, Báez-Sánchez, & Hudgins, 2020). Once again residents were left to their own devices to navigate these challenges. In the absence of coordinated government effort, thousands have found themselves living in informal campsites, with no sense of when, how, or even *if* they might be able to rebuild their damaged homes. Once again, scandal broke out over mismanaged aid and government indifference: after residents had spent weeks sleeping in their cars, in tents, or on park benches, warehouses of un-distributed supplies were discovered (Rosa & Mazzei 2020).

And once again a migratory wave ensued as governmental lag led to infrastructural failure. This time it was not the power grid but the school system which collapsed: a month after the earthquakes 62% of the island’s public schools remain shuttered with no indication of when or how students might regain access to public education (Nuevo Día 2020). Even in schools that have re-opened, inspections appear to have been shoddily executed and parents fear they are sending their children into death traps—particularly given the fact that daily seismic activity is expected to continue for months, and sporadic aftershocks are expected for decades to come (van der Elst, Hardebeck, & Michael, 2020).

Following these events protestors filled the streets once again. They no longer simply mourned those lost, but actively denounced what they describe as a “genocidal state.” In other words, the forms of necropolitics which, as Garcia-Lopez suggests, have long undergird the colony, became undeniable. Signs and graffiti proliferated during the protests denouncing the politics of death in no uncertain terms—across San Juan walls screamed out: “Genocidal State,” “Assassin State,” or simply: “*Nos Matan*” (They’re Killing us).

In mid-February, as I complete this response, the earth continues to shake. Suicide rates have spiked, most schools remain closed, and hundreds of make-shift encampments house the most vulnerable: the young, the elderly, those with special needs, and those with nowhere else to go. Meanwhile thousands flee an island in which they feel it has become impossible to live.

As Anderson suggests in his remarks, this context far exceeds the idea of a disaster as a discrete event. He productively asks what the analytical

purchase, and limits, might be of employing the event-driven language of disaster—especially since this is also the language of statecraft, emergency management, and privatized recovery. However, as he also recognizes, there are few other affective frameworks with which to make sense of collective damage and harm beyond notions of crisis, trauma, and disaster.

In my larger work, I have sought to engage with this conceptual apparatus while still attempting to denaturalize its assumptions. I have, for example, found it useful to move away from the frameworks of tempests and hurricanes—the archetype for thinking about Caribbean disasters—embracing instead the language of seismic events. Long before the earthquakes of 2020, I had begun to use the language of seismic activity to talk about the unruly temporal bounds of all disasters.

On the first anniversary of María I gathered scholars, artists and activists to think about what I described as “the aftershocks” of María. As we know, most of the casualties of the hurricane were not a product of the wind and the rain, but of the *infrastructural* aftershocks that followed: the failed power grid, the collapsed medical system, and the inadequate government response. In the publication that ensued I argue, along with my co-editor Marisol LeBrón, that the language of aftershocks helps highlight that disasters are never singular events but always a series of unfolding processes (Bonilla & LeBrón 2019). That is, all disasters can be imagined as involving a series of aftershocks: the repetitive jolts that happen when state agencies fail, when disaster capitalism rolls in, when individuals are displaced, and trauma is compounded. Building on this idea, the book *Aftershocks of Disaster* leaves it up to the reader to decide whether Hurricane María should be considered the “mainshock” at all, or if the storm and its effects are best understood as the compounded results of a longer history.

The current earthquake “swarm” in Puerto Rico pushes us to expand this conceptual frame even further. Unlike the imagined orderly sequence of pre-shock, mainshock, and aftershock, the earthquake “swarm” constitutes a disordered jumble of seismic events of disordered magnitudes, depth, epicenters, and consequences. Here there is no clear “main event” with smaller precursors and successors that follow. The main shock is not necessarily the most impactful, and the one with the greatest magnitude is not necessarily the most deadly.

What Puerto Rico, and many of its neighbors, are experiencing might thus best be understood as a “disaster swarm”—with economic crisis, imperial violence, hurricanes, earthquakes, toxic dumping, climate change, privatization, profiteering, and other forms of structural and systemic violence all acting as a disordered jumble upon a collective body that cannot discern a main event or a discrete set of impacts, only repetitive and enduring trauma.

In the face of all this, Rhiney’s questions about the possibilities of challenging naturalized forms of dispossession, and the inevitable efforts to capitalize on endurance and resilience, take on a new urgency. Rhiney suggest that Puerto Rico has become an emblem for the “repeating disaster” of the Caribbean (Bonilla, 2019), yet I am struck by the fact that the Puerto Rican earthquakes began precisely as the 10th anniversary of the 2010 Haitian earthquake drew near. Sadly, the Haitian context which has been so central to thinking about political imaginaries in the Caribbean, is also an essential reference point for thinking about our post-disaster futures. Haiti continues to serve as a vanguard—not in an idealized or romantic sense, but in the very literal sense of charging first into the fires of the environmental, political, and economic crisis that threatens the region as a whole.

The questions that Garcia-Lopez leaves us with regarding alternative ways of thinking about national sovereignty also need to be thought through the context of Haiti—particularly in regard to how the politics and cosmologies of marronage challenge European models of national sovereignty. In my previous writings about non-sovereignty in the Caribbean, I have suggested that we might want to turn to alternative concepts rooted in notions of marronage—such as that of “strategic entanglement”—to rethink our relationships to borders, citizenships, and more-than-human environments (Bonilla, 2015). We know that the

¹ Guzmán, Melissa [guzabra]. (2019, July 16) “Sé que a muchos les tiene que estar pasando igual, pero todo esto me tiene los días descojonao, me levanto acabá, se me pierden los días, es la sensación esa de los días mierda after María; solo que esta vez nosotros somos el huracán.” [Tweet] Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/Guzabra/status/1151330682913927169?s=20>.

post-war project of decolonization was built on a provincial model of imperial sovereignty as a technology of conquest and dispossession (Bonilla, 2017). To think beyond the political disasters of empire we must thus find new tools and epistemic ground from which to not just repair the damages we face, but also re-envision the futures we wish to build.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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