

## **Introduction: (Un)Natural Disasters**

**By Lorna Pérez**

In the summer of 2019, when we were laying the groundwork for this issue, I felt strongly that we were entering into a state of disaster and crisis. Little could I have anticipated that the spring and summer of 2020 would present us with a series of events that would amplify the disastrous spaces and moments we were already inhabiting. That summer, I was not thinking of Covid-19, or the economic catastrophe that would follow, or the moral crisis of pervasive and systemic racial injustice and the devaluation of Black life that would rip through our cities in the summer of 2020.

Rather, at that time, I was thinking of very specific sites of disaster, both natural and unnatural. I was thinking of the border. Of family separation. Of children in cages. I was thinking of draconian and immoral policies that were meant to inflict psychological and physical suffering enacted by our government on the border. I was thinking of places like Nuevo Laredo, where the border camps that have popped up as a result of the Trump administration's "Stay in Mexico" policy has made the area one of the most dangerous places on earth<sup>1</sup>. I was thinking of Hurricane Maria and the ripple effects the hurricane had on Puerto Ricans both on the island and the mainland. I was thinking of what Marisol LeBrón and Yarimar Bonilla have dubbed "The Aftershocks of Disaster" and the way that the disaster of the hurricane was followed by a series of other disasters, heightened and informed by the unnatural disasters of colonialism, economic collapse, and corrupt government. I was thinking of the femicides that continue to plague our border and Latin America. I was thinking of what the Trump administration called "Tender Age Camps" for infants taken from their families. I was thinking of the ways that the violences of our collective pasts—violences of racism, slavery, colonialism, xenophobia, misogyny, and heteronormativity—were continuing to emerge in hate crimes perpetuated on the bodies of black and brown people, most specifically on the bodies of queer black and brown people. I did not know in 2019 that the moment we now find ourselves in would only heighten these tensions, not lessen them. In 2019, things looked bad. In 2020, they look worse. Disastrous indeed.

As scholars of Latinx literature and culture, our work, our writing, our teaching, and our creating has long been attuned to these disasters, both natural and unnatural. Yet now, in the summer of 2020, we are confronted, perhaps in a way more profound than anything in living memory, with a conflux of disasters. The global pandemic we are in the midst of has disproportionately impacted black, brown, and poor communities; farm workers, medical workers, child-care workers, elderly-care workers, grocery store clerks, pharmacy workers, and so many others, do not get to work from home. They are on the frontline of the virus, often without adequate access to medical care if they do become ill. The economic precarity of our communities have made them more susceptible to this illness, and more likely to die from it. (Un)Natural. The continued devaluation, and indeed, the continued extermination of black life at the hands of state power is crystalized by the death of George Floyd on a Minneapolis street, but the deaths of black and brown people is a part of our collective history that has been ever present. Moreover, the deaths of women of color like Breonna Taylor and Vanessa Guillen are linked intimately to state structures of violence and systems that failed to protect them. Meanwhile, the deaths of queer folx of color throughout the US, including the deaths in Puerto Rico of transwomen such as Lalya Peláz Sánchez, Serena Angelique

Velázquez, Angélica María Méndez, and Neulisa Luciano Ruiz are testaments to the persistence of femicide and sexualized violence faced by marginalized communities who most often lack protection under the law.

There are so many names we have to remember to say.

And while our work has long been attentive to recuperating, remembering, and resisting paradigms of domination that devalue the lives of the most vulnerable in our communities, what 2020 has made abundantly clear is that this work is more pressing and urgent. As YouTube videos and social media posts pop up explaining structural racism in cute cartoon graphics, and as more of our nation is engaged with questions of how to be better allies and do anti-racist work, I cannot help but be struck by the circulation of booklists and podcasts as methods of unpacking the complexities of these structures. Suddenly, our nation seems to be having a conversation about the urgency of our literatures and our voices, an urgency we have long-advocated for.

In this issue, then, we bring together scholarship and creative work that tackles these issues head on. Mary Bloodsworth-Lugo and Carmen Lugo-Lugo examine rhetorics of infection, and the way discourses of infection have been deployed as part of a long and systemic xenophobic and anti-immigrant agenda. Karen S. Christian's work considers the way that blackness, and Afro-Latinx identity has been articulated by poets and writers, arguing for a reading of the work of Nelly Rosario, H.G. Carrillo, and Adrian Castro in light of post-memory and the haunting spectres of slavery that emerge in their work. Ironically, as we moved towards publication, after Carrillo's death in April, it was revealed that he was not Afro-Cuban, as he had long asserted both professionally and personally, but rather was African American. This complicated relationship to passing and authenticity in Carrillo, the author will undoubtedly deserve greater critical treatment in the future but, at present, highlights the messy conjunctions between African American and Afro-Latinx identities. Roberta Hurtado and Omara Rivera-Vázquez's work on (De)Naturalizing Survival, considers domestic violence in the aftermath of natural disasters like Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, in light of the decidedly unnatural structures of colonialism that create narratives that either victimize Puerto Rican women leaving them devoid of agency, or dismiss the violence they endure entirely. They propose a counter model that is attentive to the complicated intersections of agency and victimization in light of a decolonial paradigm. Luis R. Alvarez-Hernández's "Borikén Libre" is a reflection from the diaspora of returning to Puerto Rico after the summer of protests that ultimately led to the removal of Ricardo Rosselló from the governorship of Puerto Rico. In wandering the streets of Old San Juan, Alvarez-Hernández reflects on space, history, and resistance, and what this means from the position of the diaspora. Elías Miguel Muñoz's "First Voyage" from his novel in progress, is an example of the best work of sci-fi. Rendering the familiar strange, this time travelling piece features a historian from a dystopic future travelling back in time to the Caribbean, in the historic era that immediately precedes the colonization of the Spanish. Our protagonist encounters an intact Taíno civilization—one he knows will soon vanish under the force of world-shattering violence—even as his experience of the past is predicated on what we would view as a disastrous future. Diana Burbano's short play "Las Maris" also envisions a dystopic future, set in the US Borderlands, where the natural world, and humanity's place within it, is questioned. The sense of containment, and loss is palpable here. Finally, Tania Romero's poem "Criminantes" closes our edition. Set on the contemporary Mexican border, the speaker of the poem asks us to consider an alternate future, one that is hopeful yet elusive.

In all of this work, we see the tensions between the natural and the unnatural responding to various sites of disaster. As this current moment continues to unfold in unpredictable ways, what seems certain is that we are far from through these moments of disaster. Toni Morrison reminds us that it is in times of crisis when the artist must get to work. We know this is true, as the body of Latinx literature, and the histories it emerges from, have long wrestled with the disasters of racism, sexism, colonialism, imperialism, and genocide. And in this moment, we continue that work, defiantly, fearfully, and hopefully.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Pulitzer Prize winning episode of *This American Life*, “The Out Crowd,” Nuevo Laredo is ranked by the state department as a level 4 security threat, the same as Iraq and Syria. In the same episode, which explores, in part, the prevalence of kidnapping, the health and sanitary conditions of the camps are also explored, with one volunteer nurse noting that the camp is the worst she has ever seen—worse than camps in the Middle East and Africa.