Teaching (Mis)adventures: "Tropical Paradises and Natural Disasters / Fictions of the Contemporary Caribbean"

Mariana Past
Dickinson College

It is difficult to deny the reality of climate-related challenges and that such problems are increasingly affecting all living beings. Some folks, of course, embrace such a denial and higher education is coming under fire by those who believe it impractical, overly liberal, and/or out of touch to concern ourselves with such problems. As such, instructors of all stripes have a common interest in keeping things real by engaging questions and concerns in the rapidly expanding fields within the environmental humanities (EH), which directly face today's ecological challenges from a plurality of perspectives. Within the sciences, it is broadly agreed that key climate change data are already in, and simply requires continuous updates – but this is not enough. Humanistic disciplines must find ways to help change people's hearts and minds and to encourage thinking and action that may prevent worst-case outcomes for our planet. Time is of the essence; yet few faculty in the humanities, including my own world of classical and modern languages, have specialized training within the EH. Nevertheless, we must utilize new approaches and explore provocative pedagogies to engage our students, most of whom are overwhelmingly concerned with our planet's future. My own first foray into EH pedagogy took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, and while it yielded uneven results, the outcomes were illuminating. I'm seizing this occasion to share what would have been helpful to know beforehand and to consider what might be helpful in the future.

Into the Fray

In Fall 2021, I was charged with developing a new topics course (in English) that would give undergraduates practice with writing a literature review and thereby be better prepared to successfully complete their senior theses. As a Caribbeanist scholar, I chose to cast a wide net. While exploring options, I chanced upon a short essay by Annette Joseph-Gabriel on the "Black Perspectives" website, published by the African American Intellectual Historical Society (AAIHS).[1] The title, "Natural Disasters, Tropical Paradises and the Caribbean's Great Camouflage," caught my attention, along

with the author's brief discussion of writings by Martinican intellectual Suzanne Césaire, who observes that the region's striking beauty belies its profound vulnerability. Joseph-Gabriel notes that this inherent tension brings opportunity: "Destruction and creation co-exist, as evidenced by [Césaire's] evocation of the major natural disasters that periodically put the Caribbean on the radar of international news. Yet these moments emerge…not as an invitation to further a colonial agenda in the region, but rather as moments to express a Pan-Caribbean solidarity and imagine new civilizations."[2] Believing this relation between destruction and creation to be compelling, I embraced it as the focus for my course, which sought to challenge reductive colonial discourses about the Caribbean by emphasizing connections between islands, their cultures, and their histories in the wake of disasters that were largely man-made.

Outside the academy, the Caribbean tends to be seen superficially, as an ostensible paradise, an exotic place of escape, and/or a product for consumption. Unsurprisingly, in college courses, those discourses reliably appear in the context of word cloud icebreakers that I assign. Even at the university level, students are too often surprised to learn that the region has well-established literary traditions, as well as art, history, and politics. But the Caribbean is unquestionably on the front lines of climate change and on the receiving end of predatory economic practices imposed by the Global North, as evinced by golf resorts, Disney tours, and the like. To me, these issues beg being addressed in the classroom—but where to begin?

A comparative approach seemed ideal. I was familiar with scholarly and creative work on Haiti's devastating 2010 earthquake, and I recalled that in September 2017 my students in a U.S. Latinx-Caribbean literature seminar were appalled to learn of the extensive, enduring damage wrought by hurricanes María and Irma. They clamored to discuss the unfolding news coverage at the start of each class, and I wished that we had time to aptly address the history of Puerto Rico's fraught relationship with the U.S. These "natural" disasters represented singularly entangled problems of "post"-colonial circumstances. As I continued reading, I understood better how writers' and performance artists' responses to such disasters reflect at once specific struggles and regional socio-political concerns including climate change and migration, which in turn shape identity discourses related to race, class, gender, and sexuality.[3] Fiction, theater, and art are deployed as tools for social change, seeking to convert trauma into healing for communities facing catastrophic conditions, productively mobilizing audiences and resources both at home and on the mainland (in the case of Puerto Rico).

I found an exceptional resource in the online Puerto Rico Syllabus project, launched by Yarimar Bonilla and (my former colleague) Marisol LeBrón, offering a rich archive of materials about the 2017 storms, the debt crisis, and related interventions across multiple disciplines.[4] Further inspiration came from Bonilla and LeBrón's edited collection, *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm*, which contains a trove of personal and critical essays, poetry, interviews, and chapters on photography and art installations.[5] I was struck by the words of contributor Carlos Rivera Santana: "Hurricane Maria laid bare a material reality that Puerto Rican contemporary art is trying to make sense of through the productive frame of disaster."[6] One of Rivera's interviewees declared, "'If I couldn't do art, I'd leave the island,'" and the author notes that this statement doesn't only speak of "the psychological healing capacity of aesthetic discourse.[7] It also expresses the sociopolitical capacity of a grounded aesthetics to provide the means to defy and resist colonization, capitalism, and all other dangers facing the vulnerable island."[8] To my mind, the notion of "danger" alongside the "productive frame of disaster" was helpful for thinking through cultural production and my own pedagogical enterprise. Particularly post-tenure, faculty are encouraged to take bigger risks, and to risk failure. So, I did – incorporating artwork, photography, popular music, and short documentaries alongside works of fiction, poetry, essays, and interviews.

Hybrid teaching led to some technological fiascos the first week, but my new course had broad appeal. Glad for the student interest, I allowed it to be overenrolled (this was a mistake). Students' majors spanned four departments—English, Spanish, Africana Studies, and Latin American, Latinx, and Caribbean Studies (LALC)—and they shared little common ground. That a majority wanted to practice Spanish when in class was another sticky wicket, since other students understood none (this was resolved via small-group work, with questions discussed in one language or the other —admittedly optimistic for Zoom breakout rooms). Only three students had previously studied anything related to the Caribbean—it happened that they were from the Caribbean and knew quite a lot—but relying on them as "native" voices was of course inappropriate. Nevertheless, we dove in.

Wading in and Looking Back (and Forward)

Many of the readings I selected could be made available electronically. Students were asked to purchase two modestly-priced books whose proceeds went directly towards hurricane relief: the previously mentioned *Aftershocks*, and Edgardo Miranda-Rodríguez's comic anthology *Ricanstruction: Reminiscing & Rebuilding Puerto Rico*, featuring "La

Borinqueña": a female heroine, the embodiment of Black femininity and strength, who wears the Puerto Rican flag as she who travels back and forth from the island to New York, saving countless people in collaboration with Wonder Woman and other DC comic heroes.[9] I had not previously taught a graphic novel and was a bit apprehensive about doing so, but students of all majors readily embraced the format and enthusiastically analyzed the images and text.

Another productive discovery came from *Aftershocks*: the interactive play *¡Ay, María!*, directed by Maritza Pérez Otero. In the context of unfolding social and political disasters in 2017, this dramatic piece became a powerful coping mechanism. Producer Mariana Carbonell sought to create a show:

> …about the hurricane and present it all over Puerto Rico, using theater to relieve some of the population's anguish and trauma through entertainment.…The work centered around our experiences before, during, and after the crisis. The tragicomic vignettes and songs depicted the struggles shared by everyone. The lack of supplies, including water, gasoline, and batteries, the floods, the humiliation of Trump's visit, the failures of the local and federal agencies, and the constant battle with mosquitoes.[10]

¡Ay, María! was performed in 78 towns across Puerto Rico, often outside. The actors went around in an RV painted with the Puerto Rican flag, self-sufficient, so they would not impose on communities. Spectators were invited to step up and add their personal difficulties, which became a cathartic experience at a time when attention to health care and mental health were completely lacking. And the play went viral, with additional performances staged in New York; it remains a powerful piece, affording opportunities for new critical interventions—and writing literature reviews.

A final course segment involved works of visual art, an area in which I have no training whatsoever. I assigned reflections on photographs and art installations, relying on images to introduce main course ideas. The insights proposed by *Aftershocks* contributor Marianne Ramirez-Aponte in "The Importance of Politically Engaged Artistic and Curatorial Practices in the Aftermath of Hurricane Maria" resonated particularly well with students. Ramirez-Aponte writes, "With the island's true situation revealed as never before, art—whose remarkable capacity for interpretation makes it a space of democratic participation—has been fundamental in creating a counternarrative, outside the ambit of officialdom, that is essential for understanding Puerto Rico after Maria. Artists have responded with images

that not only capture the destruction caused by these meteorological events but also make visible circumstances, conditions, racial and economic legacies, and communities that have long been invisible or silent…Learning to understand the meaning of images in a hypervisual world is a political act."[11] Simply put, art is not tangential, but central: "it engages, informs, and activates people—as a vehicle for resilience and resistance of Puerto Rico."[12] Having not typically included visual images on previous course syllabi, I realized that they are among the most powerful texts we can teach.

In the post-Maria context, for Puerto Rican audiences on the ground, these artworks provided social catharsis, "helping encode the story of the effects of the hurricane in its fullest complexity."[13] Rivera suggests that:

> This is an aesthetic process in which people can collectively express the complex or contradictory social, cultural, and political situations that confront them. [This happens] through the successful transfiguration of complex or contradictory realities …into another intelligible form or medium … Every cathartic activity requires a genre or narrative frame that facilitates the purge and liberation of a given affect, especially in the case of traumatic experiences. The narrative frame of much posthurricane art is an "aesthetics of disaster," which here refers to ugliness, to representations of a natural disaster's effects—its chaos, destruction, and decadence—and to effects of the societal disasters of colonization and capitalism."[14]

This unit on visual artwork concerning disaster in Puerto Rico helped illuminate the complex story of the entanglements among hurricanes, capitalism, and colonization. It also helped students appreciate the stark differences between externally-produced images about disasters—circulated by international news media—and those created by people who lived through the disasters, making meaning for themselves.

In a final, jam-packed course unit on Haiti, students read meditations by Haitian writers on the 2010 earthquake. Essays in *Haiti Rising* expose predatory patterns on the part of international "rescuers" rushing in to "assist" the world's first Black republic at a time of crisis.[15] The book also presents more positive images and narratives from the island—overlooked by outside media—about how communities helped one another, or how people emerging from the rubble were able to empower themselves through singing. I intended to also teach *Melovivi* (2009), a "premonitory" dramatic piece by Haitian intellectual Frankétienne, which examines issues of neocolonial exploitation. The play features two individuals trapped in a dilapidated space without an exit, devastated by an earthquake; survival of their

imprisonment stems from their heated discourses about shared woes caused by external predators. We ran out of time, and I had to perform some quick surgery on the syllabus.

As readers of this essay may have imagined, the "fictions" in the course title were not literally novels and short stories, but discourses about the Caribbean as "paradise" and disasters as "natural"; they are anything but. One English major wished that the course had covered more actual fiction (fair critique!). An Africana Studies major said Haiti had been given short shrift in the course compared to Puerto Rico (spot-on!). Several Spanish majors complained about team writing assignments (too bad! I'll organize them better next time). A final student simply vented, saying that he despised me as well as a particular scarf that I wore (which I continue to do, in his honor). In retrospect, including both Puerto Rico and Haiti as case studies proved ambitious, given the need to contextualize the islands' disparate colonial histories—Caribbean history is simply not taught widely enough for faculty in the (mainland) U.S. to assume previous knowledge of the subject on students' part. Advanced courses somehow also end up being intro courses. Regardless, my students recognized the value of studying this overlooked region through a humanistic lens. A self-identified first-year student's comment drives home the point: "I fully intended on strictly studying STEM but this course has made me realize how powerful cultural components are when balanced with pressing issues today that are related to the global climate crisis." I am eager to find ways to continue contributing to expanding Environmental Humanities initiatives at my institution and elsewhere.[16]

Despite my initial apprehension about my lack of expertise, and some bungling along the way, this experiment with EH pedagogy left me wanting to do more. In the coming years there will likely—and unfortunately—be more disasters that can serve as examples, and students will be able to do research on knowledge gaps surrounding coverage of Caribbean events. Equipping them to thoughtfully observe such disparities and productively listen to such silences is something we can collectively do. My brief overview of texts highlights the overlapping, entangled histories and cultures of the Caribbean and the global diaspora, resisting exoticized and limited images associated with the region. They provide departure points for addressing broader questions of visibility, citizenship, and belonging, and they are spaces for imagining new futures and new forms of solidarity. Art, literature, and theater about disasters can also provide entry points for students suffering from post-Covid trauma, climate anxiety, microaggressions, and other kinds of hostility on campus. Disaster is a productive frame for

aesthetic reflections and for teaching; one can learn a lot amidst the wreckage. Next time I teach this course, I intend to fail better.

---

[1] Annette Gabriel-Joseph, "Natural Disasters, Tropical Paradises, and the Caribbean's Great Camouflage," *Black Perspectives* (October 13, 2017), online at www.aaihs.org/natural-disasters-tropical-paradises-and-the-caribbeans-great-camouflage/.
[2] Gabriel-Joseph, "Natural Disasters."
[3] These are powerfully treated in Angelique V. Nixon's *Resisting Paradise: Tourism, Diaspora, and Sexuality in Caribbean Culture* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi Press, 2015).
[4] Yarimar Bonilla and Marisol LeBrón, eds., *Puerto Rico Syllabus Project*, online at www.puertoricosyllabus.com/syllabus/resistance-and-new-imaginaries/.
[5] Yarimar Bonilla and Marisol LeBrón, eds., *The Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2019).
[6] Bonilla and LeBrón, *The Aftershocks of Disaster*, 188.
[7] Ibid., 188.
[8] Ibid., *The Aftershocks of Disaster*, 188–89.
[9] Edgardo Miranda-Rodríguez, ed., *Ricanstruction: Reminiscing & Rebuilding Puerto Rico* (Brooklyn, NY: Somos Arte, LLC, 2018).
[10] Bonilla and LeBrón, *The Aftershocks of Disaster*, 39–41.
[11] Ibid., 162–63.
[12] Ibid., 164.
[13] Ibid., 179–80.
[14] Ibid., 189.
[15] Martin Munro, ed., *Haiti Rising: Haitian History, Culture, and the Earthquake of 2010* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2010). See also Mark Schuller and Pablo Morales, eds., *Tectonic Shifts: Haiti Since the Earthquake* (Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press, 2012).
[16] In lieu of conventional writing assignments, I developed "Tasks as Interesting Problems," borrowing from John Bean and Dan Meltzer's *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2021). Projects included (1) writing a critical review of the podcast "La Brega," and (2) crafting a research-based rationale to help defend a hypothetical high school teacher in Florida who had become the target of parent complaints for teaching "La Borinqueña." If anyone is guessing that my underlying skills-based course objective of writing a literature review was subsumed by overfocus on readings, they would be correct. I packed the exercise in by semester's end with a final project called "The Caribbean and Crisis." Students selected a natural disaster occurring in the past 50 years and examined news coverage about it—representing a literature review of sorts. In the introduction they related it to something in their lives; then they generated a proposal to bring a guest

speaker to campus to talk about the Caribbean and climate change. Who's an expert in the field? Which of their works would be most interesting to a wide range of students in different disciplines and could be read in advance? (I encouraged them to think big and pretended that funding was guaranteed.) Along the way an exploratory essay was required, so I could understand their process and point them in new directions when necessary. Students came away realizing that "Hurricane Sandy hit the Caribbean first." And "islands receive differing levels of attention in the international media." While the interdisciplinary nature of this course could seem overwhelming—and at times it felt that way—embracing new texts via time-honored approaches like close readings helped students grasp a great deal of texture and nuance, as well as appreciate the power of narratives and the importance of crafting creative, convincing arguments. I am glad to exchange ideas about EH pedagogy and share course materials with anyone interested.