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## The Affects of the Disaster

How might attention to the affective lives of disasters, to how disasters become through urgency, abandonment, hope and many other affects, help us understand how they relate to existing and emergent forms of power? I pose this question in response to a moving, complex, piece that, as with much recent work on disaster, pushes us to connect the immediate disaster of an event (the two back to back hurricanes in Puerto Rico, September 2018) with the ongoing, intertwined, disasters and crises of a set of enduring event-conditions (here named as climate change, the governmentality of debt, and colonialism, amongst others). In entangling the punctual onset of a named event with a set of dispersed event-conditions, Bonilla expands the spatial and temporal boundaries of what we might call the 'disastrous present' in Puerto Rico from the immediate aftermath of the hurricanes to the ongoing 'wake' (Sharpe 2016) of event-conditions which endure and intensify, sometime conditioning the background of life, and sometimes crossing a threshold to take on renewed affective and material force in the present.

Bonilla's expansion of the disastrous present and the attention to the affective life of the event are, on my reading, enabled by two different ways of relating to and making sense of disaster - both of which have long historical precedents. First, the hurricanes and their aftermath are treated as *revelations*; of the piling up of past disasters, of the indistinction between disaster and the everyday as disastrous effects live on and linger as they become part of the fabric of a place, and of racialized forms of neglect and impoverishment. Eschewing a search for effects, the emphasis is on what a disaster reveals - that is, what it shows residents and us, or compels residents and us to feel and attend to. The disaster is related to as something that "laid bare," and engendered an "affective reckoning." After the disaster, things that were always there can no longer be ignored - they have crossed a threshold and become felt presences and recognised situations. Second, and following from the moment of revelation the disaster becomes an occasion for hope, albeit a troubled, cramped hope that finds its way in the midst of fragile, enervating conditions. These hopes

centre around the hesitant emergence of other ways of imagining and practicing repair and recovery, which bear a family resemblance to the practices that are valued under the category of 'resilience'. This double mode of inquiry – which treats the event as revelation and the event as occasion of hopes – recalls other ways of relating to the kind of (event)conditions that we make sense of through terms like disaster, catastrophe, emergency, and crisis. For example, we might think of how the apocalyptic as a genre intimate with disaster and catastrophe has long emphasised the process and moment of revelation (see Keller 1996). What is striking is that both modes of inquiry are hopeful: laying bare forms of harm is, perhaps, designed to generate action that will ameliorate those conditions, whereas the emphasis on practices of hope demonstrates how traces of different and better ways of being are already present. We might, though, ask some questions about these modes of inquiry and their more or less explicitly hopeful tone and disposition, recognising the multiplicity of other modes of inquiry we might bring to bear on disaster, or any other topic of inquiry (as well as obviously an explanatory mode of inquiry orientated to causes). How to combine an emphasis on the event as revelation with a descriptive mode of inquiry that attempts to follow the effects of the event as it reverberates throughout forms of living, becoming with and changing through their diverse bundles of practices and future oriented trajectories? What do we describe when we describe what a disaster does and becomes? Can we, should we, ever give up hope as a way of relating to and disclosing disasters (after Povinelli's (2011) comments on where critical work locates potentiality). For example, what would happen if we met that which emerges through disaster with a practice of pessimism that refused to find potential for something different and better? Or, to give another example, how might a paranoid disposition, in Sedgwick's (2013) sense of a practice of hypervigilance orientated to the worst, make sense of the practices of hope that emerge in the wake of an affective recognition of ongoing abandonment?

This combination of modes of inquiry produces a strikingly complex, at times deeply sad and enraging and at times cautiously hopeful, 'affective map' of a spatially and temporally extended disastrous present. We find traces of affect throughout the piece; the "heightened awareness" and the urgency of the interval of

emergency, the transition from “feeling confident that there was a plan for dealing with this” to a “feeling of stalled time” linked to “a frenzied state of repetition in which each day felt eerily like the previous one”, alongside the pervasive “affective reckoning” with structural violence and neglect that was forced on residents as it was suddenly “made clear that Puerto Rico was one of *those* islands” (original emphasis). Whilst Bonilla gives a narrative to this process of revelation and then hope, as a consequence of the aforementioned modes of inquiry, these affects don’t add up to a neat, coherent, story about how the disaster of the hurricane intensified the already existing and ongoing disasters of colonialism, the governmentality of debt, and climate injustice that Bonilla shows are deeply embedded into the fabric of Puerto Rico. They show the disaster surfaces as an incoherent bundle of affects, that charge and change relations with the imperial and local state, between citizens, and with lost and barely present futures, as well as senses of what Puerto Rico is. As such, the piece can be placed in the context of other attempts to understand the affective lives of situations where lines between the disaster and the everyday are, at best, blurred and, for many if not most, have fallen apart and are absent, if they were ever present in the first place. I’m thinking in particular here of Berlant’s (2011) concept of ‘crisis ordinariness’ (see also slow disaster (Knowles, 2015), quotidian disaster (Sharpe, 2016), and chronic urban trauma (Pain, 2019)). For Berlant, ‘crisis ordinariness’ is “incited” by the traumatic event, but happens through “the spreading of symbolizations and other inexpressive but life-extending actions throughout the ordinary and its situations of living on”. As an event “spreads”, it folds into and becomes with “modes, habits, or genres of being”. What I love about this work is that it makes the question of what an event is, how events take form as they fold with people’s practices of living, into an open-ended research problem. Likewise, Bonilla tracks how the affective impact and effects of the disaster of the back to back hurricanes in Puerto Rico shifted as the ‘interval’ of emergency extended. Emergency endured, as the providential state, that part of the state that offers and promises protection from harm, never materialised. Urgency was met by a “rushing wall of inaction”, as Bonilla puts it, resulting in an “enduring feeling of abandonment and ruin prevails”. Nothing changed, as both those in Puerto Rico and

those in the diaspora inhabited an extended, agonised, “state of suspension”, before a myriad of practices of hope gradually emerged between people.

The paper therefore evokes and describes the tangled relationship between the shifting form of the event – rupture, suspension, endurance and so on – and shifts in the affective life of a place always-already living in the wake of other disasters. I want to conclude by asking some questions about what Bonilla describes as an ‘affective map’. How to make present in such a map the affects of other disasters which don’t take the form of the punctual event – that is, of a rupture followed by a state of suspension? As with other recent work, the terms ‘crisis’, ‘disaster’ and ‘catastrophe’ are extended to event-conditions that bring harm, damage and loss but do not only take the form of a punctual event. The “true disaster”, Bonilla shows, was what was laid bare by the storm. We might ask some questions about this, in a similar manner to how Roitman (2013) warns critical social science about the over-extension of the term crisis, and with colleagues I’ve wondered about progressive use of the concept of emergency (Anderson et al 2019). Why are catastrophe and disaster the best genres for understanding ongoing harm and damage that materialise through a range of fast and slow temporalities? Is it because of a wager that the rhetorical force of these descriptors will help generate the attention and political and ethical action that is so often missing? Or is it because a claim is being made that colonialism has the mode of eventfulness of disaster or catastrophe or crisis, or some combination of all three? If so, and over and above the scale and intensity of harm or damage, what characterises a disaster or catastrophe, if emphasis shifts from rupture to ongoingness? What, if anything, is lost when terms used by the state and other actors to govern marginalised and abandoned populations are deployed in critical work, even if each term has a set of complicated histories that extend beyond the state? I don’t know the answer to these questions, in part because other genres to make sense of harm and damage have yet to be invented, circulate as common resources, and gain affective force. Disaster and catastrophe are almost all we have to name, make sense of, and generate urgencies around event-conditions that are so woven into the fabric of life that they so often lack a recognisable scene of impact. But what are the limits of their use, what might

they not do? Putting these questions to one side, the paper hints to how colonialism exists and lives on through affects. But when the lingering effects of colonialism are invoked, the paper shifts to the material, principally “the neglected infrastructure of an island in crisis, the economic cleavages of a society marked by profound disparity, the naked disdain of an imperial state, and the forms of structural neglect and social abandonment that had already come to characterize this bankrupt colony”, for example. Now, there are hints here to affect – the “naked disdain” of the imperial state, for example, or the invocation of a place as living ‘in’ crisis with its sense of turbulence and uncertainty. But, in the main, the analysis makes present the affects of the immediate aftermath (which are, of course, one way in which colonialism lives on), but has less to say about the way in which the effects of (neo)colonialism (neglected infrastructures and so on) were affectively present before the disaster, and were changed, refracted and so on through the hurricanes and in the state non-response that followed. The idea of the hurricanes catalysing an “affective reckoning” implies that before that event the affective legacies of colonialism lingered in other ways (in that it took the hurricane to reveal to Puerto Ricans that Puerto Rico was one of *those* states). Likewise, the initial waiting for state response and the expectation that the time of emergency would shift to the time of recovery, implies that there was some kind of attachment to the promise of a state that offered protection, even if that attachment was fragile or fraying and perhaps only available to and inhabited by some parts of the population. How, then, might an ‘affective map’ of the present expand the spatial and temporal boundaries of the affective present to include these and a myriad of other “minor affects” (Ngai 2005) through which colonialism in Puerto Rico lives on?

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