CHAPTER 7

Art and Politics Facing Disaster in the Caribbean

Defining a New Cultural Diplomacy

VANESSA SELK

Lwa Goudou is the name that terrified millions of people during the Haitian earthquake on 12 January 2010. Shaking the earth from beneath with its crab-like hands, unleashing the terse but terrifying guttural sound of soil and debris ("goudougoudougoudou . . . "), the folkloric character Lwa Goudou has been haunting the imagination of Haitians for centuries. It is represented as a giant subterranean creature, a cross between man and fish, in Edouard Duval-Carrié's painting, commissioned by the Winthrop-King Institute for French and Francophone Studies in 2020, commemorating the tragic event. Memory, folklore, and traditions nourish Duval-Carrié's artistic practice, which showcases the rich and varied history and culture of the Caribbean on the international contemporary art scene. Lwa Goudou is also that Black, resilient, sometimes unconscious force that has been carrying the colonial pressure for too long and episodically needs to explode to shake existing structures and reassert its autonomy.

The need to express political discontent to a colonizing power is exacerbated in situations of disaster, such as earthquakes or hurricanes. Disasters can be defined as natural or human hazards impacting the environment or habitat of people by disrupting their daily lives through the breakdown of essential functions of society (Campbell 2016). In situations without environmental or human implication, "there is no disaster regardless of the actual occurrence of a hazardous event (e.g., an extremely violent and large tornado occurs in a totally uninhabited area of the country)" (Selves n.d.). Therefore, considering the impact on human lives and property, "all disasters are political." Two examples illustrate disaster politics and the attempts to reaffirm political autonomy in the Caribbean. First, the "disaster diplomacy," initiated by the US when offering disaster relief to Cuba after the

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Figure 7.1. *Lwa Goudou,* 2020, mixed media on paper in artist frame, 52x52 inches. © Edouard Duval-Carrié.

passage of Hurricane Michelle in November 2001, appeared like a reassessment of the US's "usual enemies," which seemed less harmful after the 9/11 terrorist attack (Kelman 2001). But Cuba, refusing to rely on American assistance, made a counteroffer calling for the normalization of trade relations—turned down by the US—and eventually asked for assistance from Venezuela and Russia. A second example is the need for self-organization and civil solidarity in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria in 2017. Artist-led initiatives such as Beta-Local coordinated relief efforts as a direct response to the difficult recovery of the island, already worsened by Puerto Rico's ongoing economic crisis and colonial status. To keep more Puerto Rican artists from fleeing to the mainland, Beta-Local developed specific programs to generate a critical dialogue with the international art scene, and to address Puerto Rico's efforts to achieve material self-sufficiency and challenge the disaster narrative in the US media (Dawn Lyle 2018).

However, cultural considerations are more often neglected in situations of emergency. Political authorities are expected to have one priority: security, so as to ensure the safety of the population. The activation of

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security protocols and safety measures does not only concern government forces within their own borders, it also implies diplomatic services in a foreign country that collaborate with local authorities, neighboring countries, or international allies to ensure their citizens are safe. A comic drawing in a study led by Michael D. Selves shows different roles and needs in terms of reconstruction after a hurricane: carpenters, bakers, plumbers, doctors . . . and finally, the politician, whose presence might be perceived here as counterproductive ("we don't need more wind"), but who is expected to intervene at some point (2003: 77). Though the list might not be exhaustive, the absence of one professional category is not surprising—indeed, it is revealing of conventional disaster management theories. These are the creatives or cultural practitioners. Culture can be divided in this context into two components (Kulatunga 2010): first, material culture consisting of physical or tangible creations that members of society produce, use, acquire, or share, and which includes arts, crafts, and historic buildings (UNESCO 2003); and second, nonmaterial culture, including abstract, intangible creations shaping a society, such as beliefs, values, language, norms, political systems, and family patterns. Visual and performing arts can be considered as a segment of the material culture, contributing however to a larger intangible culture.

On an international level, cultural and political systems can meet through cultural diplomacy, defined as crossborder "actions [that] are based on and utilize the exchange of ideas, values, traditions and other aspects of culture or identity, whether to strengthen relationships . . . [or] promote national interests" (Institute for Cultural Diplomacy 2022). Cultural Diplomacy is therefore a constituting tool of *soft power*, conceptualized by Joseph Nye (1990) as a noncoercive capacity to influence other nations' decisions, in contrast with *hard power*, which means ordering actions or using force. The three pillars of this noncoercive power—political values, foreign policy, and culture (Nye 2004)—precisely meet in cultural diplomacy through a set of cultural assets used in a foreign country, such as language and education, protection of cultural heritage, exports of a film industry, and the organization of an artistic performance or show abroad. Implemented through bilateral (from country to country) or multilateral (among several countries within a regional or international organization) channels, cultural diplomacy can reflect three types of intentions: realistic, when the goal is to defend a national, private, or collective interest; idealistic, if the objective is merely to enhance cooperation to equally enrich both sides; or colonial/postcolonial, if the actions represent a form of continued cultural or political domination.

In either situation—realistic, idealistic or colonial/postcolonial—cultural diplomacy is being challenged. First, through the diversity of new

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actors: practiced by the public sector, the private sector, or civil society, cultural diplomacy is not the monopoly of the state anymore, contrary to hard power attributes such as police or military forces, which are supposed to remain in the hands of a functioning government. Second, it is questioned in its supposedly noncoercive nature. In fact, the use of certain cultural tools, language, or representations can be experienced as violence or domination by a population. Third, the long-term crisis of the cultural sector due to shrinking government subsidies is enhanced not only by a pandemic and global lockdown but also by "the global movement for social justice, forcing cultural institutions to assume greater accountability for the historical exclusion of underrepresented communities" (Flores 2020). This global movement is particularly affected by sanitary and environmental disasters, which accelerate the claims to decolonize cultural practices.

But these challenges also represent a windfall for cultural diplomacy, a chance to reinvent itself and develop new tools to better cope with a permanent crisis situation. As disasters keep coming back in a Sisyphean mode, as hurricanes become more regular and stronger because of global warming (Freeman 2013), or as they keep progressing in a silently threatening mode (e.g., sea level rise), long-term material and nonmaterial assets of the cultural sector can play an increasing role in lasting disaster prevention and management. This chapter therefore will examine how culture can become a political priority during a catastrophe, and how art can be a matter of emergency, by analyzing the potential role of cultural diplomacy in various disasters. After exploring the situations where cultural diplomacy interacts with disaster politics, this paper will focus on specific case studies of disasters in the Caribbean, first by presenting some examples of multilateral cultural action, then by showing how artists, through their visual, audiovisual, or poetic language, can adopt a posture that has similarities with a diplomatic approach. Artists convey a message related to a sociopolitical concern or country, and they try to foster change or influence the way we act and think.

When Culture Meets Emergency: How Cultural Diplomacy Evolves from Soft Power to Hard Power.

Culture as a Healing Tool in the Aftermath of a Disaster

Culture is an element for the survival of communities after catastrophes and has been widely acknowledged as playing a constructive role in the immediate aftermath of a disaster (Kulatunga 2010). In terms of healing

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and recovery, culture can help overcome psychopathologies, mental health issues, trauma, or posttraumatic stress disorders resulting from natural disasters such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and hurricanes. It is a precondition for any recovery: "An understanding of cultural values and factors is the basic first step in understanding what the patient is going through" (Bhugra and Bhui 2018: 110). Recognizing the victim's "cultural baggage," such as ethnic background, cultural environment, dietary habits, family pattern, or religion, so as to identify the sources of distress, can illuminate the pathways toward healing or more efficient treatment. For health professionals, such recognition also implies becoming aware of one's own cultural background and social biases that may be perceived as hostile or as a barrier to the patient's opening up.

Trauma can be generated by the loss of cultural pillars that do include neighborhood and housing but also artistic goods or habits, such as seeing the same artwork in a street for years, as it has become part of one's visual imaginary and artistic culture, or going to a museum. Meeting with the Haitian artistic community after the 12 January earthquake, journalist Bill Brubaker (2010) commented on the impact on the artistic scene of the destruction of Haiti's cultural landscape, already vulnerable and rare. The earthquake reduced to rubble the biblical murals of the Holy Trinity Cathedral, painted by several Haitian artists in the early 1950s; destroyed or damaged thousands of paintings and sculptures belonging to museums, galleries, collectors' homes, or ministries; cracked the Haitian Art Museum at College St. Pierre; and crumbled the renowned Centre d'Art, which gave birth to Haiti's primitive art movement. The violent and sudden disappearance of such significant artistic landscape causes deep grief that needs to be acknowledged and healed like any other loss.

From a public policy point of view, recognition of loss can be communicated through commemorative practices—official speeches, dedicated monuments or statues, ceremonies, celebrations, and holidays—that can be implemented through national policies or cultural diplomacy. Ten years after the 2010 earthquake, the United Nations (UN) decided to commemorate the tragic event with a memorial sculpture titled *A Breath*, created by Italian artist Davide Dormino in 2011 with pieces of rubble from the Christopher Hotel in Port-au-Prince, and finally installed at the UN Headquarters in New York in January 2020. The breath evokes the instant before the earth started shaking, showing a stack of sheet metal fallen to the ground, and naming the 102 international UN employees who lost their lives. In this case, the memorial serves an internal memorial goal rather than expressing direct empathy with Haiti. Selecting an Italian artist rather than a Haitian raises further questions about the decision process within the UN.

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From an individual point of view, the healing process can be triggered by expressing loss through artistic survival reflexes. "My future paintings will be inspired by this terrible tragedy," admitted Haitian artist Préfète Duffaut (Brubaker 2010). For local art professionals such as gallery owners Nader Jr. and Toni Monnin, the imagination of Haitian artists can be stimulated through disasters, as they are "continuing to create, sell and survive through crisis after crisis" (Brubaker 2010). Inspired by Frankétienne's constructive thought on catastrophes—"Great changes and metamorphoses," Frankétienne's observed, "often happen in dark, chaotic, and painful phases"—Martin Munro studied the personal testimonies and creative productions of several authors after the seismic disaster. He raised questions about the temporary and enduring effects of disaster on political, social, and cultural structures by analyzing the roles of artists and writers in particular (Munro 2014: 1). As a matter of fact, language is part of the cultural framework that has to be taken into account when supporting the survivors. The choice of language in the healing process is not neutral, specifically in a postcolonial context. Combined with medical or technical language, language brings to the surface other types of trauma (Bhugra and Bhui 2018). In a similar way, Haitian author Edwidge Danticat (2017) examines the power of language and words when facing the ambiguity of death. On the one hand, death is an exceptional event "that surpasses all existing words and deed"; on the other hand, it is trivial and happening "all the time." She wonders how to find the right tone when narrating death, whether authors should use humor, cold dissociation, or spill their hearts: "How do we write about them without sounding overindulgent, self-righteous, self-piteous, melodramatic, sentimental, or a combination of some or all of the above?" (50.) The response lies in the horror of disaster itself, which constitutes "a basis upon which to create a new language" (55.) And while building a new language through tragedy, people learn how to speak to the dead, to say goodbye and move on: "Hundreds of people . . . kept vigil near a pile of rubble and spoke to their trapped loved ones as they slipped away" (48.) Danticat concludes that art and language are the only way out, writing that "poems, essays, memoirs, stories, and novels can help fill depth gaps in a way that numbers and statistics can't" (49.)

Culture as a Matter of Security

Cultural property and heritage have been identified early on as objects of necessary protection by security forces in specific contexts, such as armed conflict or war. In 1954, the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, recognizing "that cultural property has suffered grave damage during recent armed conflicts" and

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that it represents "damage to the cultural heritage of all mankind," called on countries to anticipate possible armed conflict and to prepare "for the safeguarding of cultural property situated within their own territory." In the 1970s, the protection of cultural property and heritage was extended to the prohibition and prevention of illicit trafficking of cultural property (UNESCO 1970) and to the protection of the world's natural heritage (UNESCO 1972).

But the shift to incorporating culture as a security matter during disaster happened only forty years later. In 2015, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) adopted a strategy for the reinforcement of the organization's actions for the protection of culture and the promotion of cultural pluralism in the event of armed conflict. In that year, UNESCO notably established the Heritage Emergency Fund to enable the organization to quickly respond to crises resulting not only from armed conflicts but also disasters. The fund aims to help states incorporate the protection of culture into humanitarian action, security strategies, and peace-building processes through targeted financed actions. What is particularly notable is that such support includes not only movable and immovable material culture but also intangible cultural heritage, cultural services, and underwater cultural heritage.

Two years later, two other diplomatic steps were taken to further incorporate culture into security matters. For the first time, the Security Council of the United Nations, which controls the hard power at the UN by taking decisions about military interventions or peacekeeping missions (versus the soft power of the General Assembly representing all 193 states and able to adopt nonbinding resolutions), clearly recognized, by the adoption of historic Resolution 2347, the protection of cultural heritage as an issue for peace and security. "Defending cultural heritage is more than a cultural issue, it is a security imperative, inseparable from that of defending human lives," declared former UNESCO director-general Irina Bokova in March 2017 following adoption of the resolution (Lofstead 2015). In November of the same year, the General Conference of UNESCO decided to strengthen its strategy on culture in emergencies through the adoption of an addendum concerning disasters caused by natural and human-induced hazards. UNESCO pursued two objectives: on the one hand, strengthening countries' ability to prevent, mitigate, and recover the loss of cultural heritage and diversity resulting from disasters; and, on the other hand, incorporating cultural considerations into disaster risk reduction and humanitarian actions by engaging with experts from the security sector. This addendum fills a critical policy gap as culture can finally be treated by disaster experts as a priority. But why did it take the international community so long to join culture and

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security in this way? It seems that the diplomatic community needed another disaster as trigger. In fact, over the course of 2017, a high number of disasters, in particular devastating hurricanes in the Caribbean, highlighted the vulnerability and exposure of culture and the insufficient preparedness of the international community to cope with catastrophes (UNESCO 2017). However, in 2018, less than 8 percent of available funds were actually allocated to Caribbean states (compared to 35 percent to Arab states), 57 percent of which was implemented in conflict situations and 43 percent in disaster situations. So, there is still a long way before culture in the Caribbean actually becomes a diplomatic priority. In the next section, however, specific case studies will stress when cultural diplomacy deployed concrete tools to cope with disasters in the Caribbean, before exploring how Caribbean artists have dealt with the same situation through artistic and political language.

Case Studies: Multilateral Cultural Diplomacy versus Individual Artistic Diplomacy

Earthquake

How to Revive Language When Nothing Is Left

Context: Haiti, 12 January 2010, earthquake of 7.0 magnitude lasting less than thirty seconds; 3 million people are affected, 250,000 lives lost, 300,000 people injured, and 1.5 million persons displaced internally.

On a multilateral level, about $1.5 million was dedicated by UNESCO for the restoration of more than one hundred historic buildings (including the Palace of Sans Souci), the creation of cultural jobs, and technical missions to protect cultural artifacts. UNESCO also decided to help with the organization of the famous Jacmel Carnival, recognizing that performing and live arts may be as important as cultural historical preservation by playing a vital role in the recovery of the Haitian people. On a civil society level, public organizations and cultural institutions such as the Smithsonian Institution launched their own effort to help restore damaged Haitian cultural property, establishing a "cultural recovery center" at the former headquarters of the UN Development Program near Port-au-Prince" (Brubaker 2010).

Guy Régis Junior (1974, Haiti), Playwright and Director

"Listen to the silence, the fear[,] . . . it's ready to extinguish us again," says a surviving woman in Guy Régis Junior's theater play *And the Whole*

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Figure 7.2. Guy Régis Junior, *And the Whole World Quakes: The Great Collapse*. Reading at the Martin Segal Theater, directed by Kaneza Schaal, Caribbean Theater Project ACT, December 2019. © V. Selk.

Figure 7.3. *Tout Saintes*, 2010, acrylic canvas, 36x24 inches. © Michael Elliott.

World Quakes: The Great Collapse. The playwright narrates the trauma provoked not only by the catastrophe itself but also by the foreign humanitarian actors intervening in the wake of the disaster. Two women, sitting on a hill overhanging a city in rubble, reflect on the permanent "coming and going of catastrophes and people" while observing the general agitation of the international community in their devastated homeland: "Missionaries deciding what works or not[,] . . . they are analyzing our situation[,] . . . the specialists," as Haiti has been labeled an international "priority zone." "Let them accomplish their mission on our back," replies the older woman, resigned and exhausted, "until they find another place to help" (Régis Junior 2019). But the younger woman refuses to accept the situation, trying to escape and hope for a better future while chasing shooting stars in the dark sky. The coming and going of missionaries, diplomats, NGO representative, and so forth is experienced as a second violence after the disaster, like the return to an infantile state of assistance after having proudly fought for independence. The grief added to the humiliation of sovereignty makes the situation unbearable: at the end of the play, the two women have to hurt themselves physically to forget the

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psychological pain and find a way out. *Omnia mors aequat*, death equalizes everything, is the inscription carried by an angel on the reading setting directed by Kaneza Schaal. Through this play, which was presented at the Avignon Theater Festival in France in 2011, and read for the first time in English at the Martin Segal Theater in New York eight years later,[1] Guy Régis Junior, speaking from his home country, acts like a cultural diplomat. He expresses a national feeling of sadness and anger by addressing the international community, not to ask for help or support but to explain. His play turns into a political declaration.

Michael Elliott (1979, Jamaica), Visual Artist

"Even the earth seems to be angry, perhaps angry at what we have done to it and each other," reflects Michael Elliott, commenting on the "catastrophic events involving flooding, hurricanes, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions." In his hyperrealist painting *Tout Saintes*, produced in the aftermath of the Haitian earthquake in a gesture of empathic grief, Michael Elliott adopts a public posture with the goal to convey a message, not only of solidarity but of political power. For Michael Elliott describes his productions as "socio-political paintings," depicting the harsh daily realities of Caribbean societies, distressed not only by environmental disasters and colonial structures but also social inequalities and gun violence. "I believe it is my calling to use my art as a tool to raise social awareness and I would like to see Jamaican art as a tool for change that makes our society think and do better," Elliott writes. His paintings and photography are the mirror of a permanent disaster society, a permanent state of emergency: dead insects, sick birds, soldiers in war, drowning migrants, fossilized hands, human robots or explosives—each work functions as a memento mori reminding us of our fragile existence and the need to fight for it every day. Life is a battlefield when it's not already too late. The skull that depicts Haiti appears like a double signature of helplessness and acceptance. But it is not the end stage yet; four years later, Elliott painted another human skull that is decomposed and disaggregated, acting as a metaphor for humankind, which after death still continues its self-destruction. But rather than a scream of despair, the universality of Elliott's work, encompassing a large variety of human-provoked disasters, is actually an example of empathy and solidarity across the globe. What is true for Jamaica may happen somewhere else in the world. We are all in the same sinking ship, whether we are migrating to a new home or in a comfort zone enjoying royal tea. Jamaica is not worse off than the United Kingdom: *Omnia mors aequat*, everyone is equal before death.

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Hurricane

Starting from Scratch: How to Break Sisyphean Cycles.

Context: Category 5 Hurricanes Irma and Maria, September 2017. Respectively, 134 and 3,059 deaths. Costs estimated at $77.16 billion (Irma) and $91.61 billion (Maria).

In 2017, Dominica was the first country to benefit from the new cultural postdisaster needs assessment of the United Nations' emergency strategy associated with disasters. The Heritage Emergency Fund helped restore Morne Trois Pitons National Park and other historical sites and cultural industries. On a regional level, joint efforts were taken in Sint Maarten[2] and in Suriname[3] in the following years to establish and reinforce a regional network of experts in Caribbean cultural heritage protection. In May 2019, the Understanding Risk Caribbean conference took place in Barbados,[4] gathering five hundred disaster experts, government representatives, and international organizations to share best practices on disaster risk reduction in the region, including through art. The organizers partnered with cultural institutions such as the Barbados Museum and Historical Society to explain the risks related to natural hazards through video installations, as well as with cultural spaces such as Fresh Milk Barbados to conceive creative projects scattered across the University of the West Indies Cave Hill Campus. A large sculpture, titled *Risky Timelines*,[5] to which several Barbadian artists contributed—Alanis Forde, Anna Gibson, Kia Redman, Akilah Watts, Kraig Yearwood—presented the timeline of natural disasters happening in thirty-three Caribbean countries from 1900 to 2019, and included data on the human and economic impact of each catastrophe ("Fresh Milk" 2019). The active participation of cultural practitioners in a conference dedicated to risk management represents a symbolic step in fostering the role of art in disaster reduction, and it enabled creatives to play their part as cultural diplomats to communicate with policymakers through a visual language.

Deborah Jack (1970, Netherlands/Sint Maarten), Multimedia Artist

For multimedia artist Deborah Jack, hurricanes act as a repeating catalyst for the historical trauma on Caribbean bodies and identities. Her installation *Shore*, presented at the Big Orbit Gallery in Buffalo, New York, in 2005, includes visual references to Atlantic hurricanes, serving as a natural memorial for bodies lost at sea during the Middle Passage. The use of water and salt in her work echoes the bodies made of water and hints at the corrosion affecting Caribbean borders. In her 2018 video *Drawn by Water:*

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Figure 7.4. *Imagined Spaces*, photography series, 2002. © Deborah Jack.

(Sea) Drawings in (3) Acts, Act One: Wait (Weight) on the Water, Deborah Jack further reflects on the aftermath of hurricanes through more implicit messages. She mixes the sounds of a Methodist church, representing a colonial structure, and a song about a lighthouse, suggesting both the emotion and fear of a drowning seaman and the hope and necessary vigilance in the dark when the storm is close. By representing the shorelines as shared, temporary, and abstract borders between Sint Maarten and the Netherlands, Jack highlights a shared vulnerability (the risk of disappearing) and questions the political domination of the Netherlands over its overseas territory. Her reflection on border porosity also concerns the shared frontier with the French territory Saint Martin in the north of the island. The freedom of movement, permitted for both sides of the island since the 1648 Treaty of Concordia between the Dutch and the French, was suddenly interrupted in 2017, so as to keep French citizens from fleeing to the Dutch side. Three years later, during the coronavirus pandemic, the situation was inverted by Dutch protest against the closure of the French border that aimed at blocking Americans from importing the virus through the Dutch territory (Steel 2020). The colonial

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Figure 7.5. *La Perla After Maria*, 23 minutes, Puerto Rico/Venezuela/Germany, 2018, film still. © Clari del Pilar Lewis.

situation contributes to turning disasters into a political debate about class, culture, and race. It further becomes a diplomatic competition between two territories in the race for reconstruction, hence exacerbating existing tensions (Semple 2019). Through her installations and videos presented in various countries, Deborah Jack participates in this political debate about race and culture, between Sint Maarten, Saint Martin, the Netherlands, and France, and her visual language becomes a diplomatic tool of discrete but firm criticism.

Clari del Pilar Lewis (1971?, Venezuela/Puerto Rico), Filmmaker and Storyteller

In Puerto Rico, too, the colonial power relation with the United States seems to have exacerbated the impact of Hurricane Maria and the feeling of abandonment by the Puerto Rican population. "No Civil Defense forces came here, nor the National Guard . . . nobody." "No federal assistance. . . . If we don't take care of this, nobody else will." These are the words of the residents of the small coastal town La Perla in Puerto Rico, which was deeply affected by the hurricane in 2017, who narrate their loss in the short documentary *La Perla After Maria* (2018), directed by Clari del Pilar Lewis. But after observing that perceived lack of support, the director decides to insist on the social links built during reconstruction, leading to a certain rebirth of the community through solidarity. "We had forgotten many of our old customs, spending time with our neighbors. . . . It was a

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good experience," says a resident. "The community is more united now," observes another local. Narrating the construction of new social ties is key to asserting identity and self-confidence in a colonial relation. In fact, it is essential to show "Puerto Ricans speaking for themselves after months of receiving news about their condition from the outside," writes Marianne Ramirez Aponte, director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Puerto, in her introduction to the exhibition *Entredichos* (2017). Whether through a film or an exhibition, the artists express the need in the wake of the disaster to "respond with (their) own voice to the greater level of international interest" in the socioeconomic situation of the island, and to the many visions of its complex political relationship with the United States (Acker 2018). By presenting the film in various festivals in the US, including in collaboration with French diplomatic services, del Pilar Lewis takes part in this sociopolitical construction as an audiovisual diplomat standing for the island, despite the recurring Sisyphean violence of disasters: "There is always a rebirth, and a start" (2018).

Flooding and Sea Level Rise

Going through Cycles: Gender Powers Strengthened by Waters

Context: Floods reaching a half meter above high-tide levels may become common throughout the Caribbean within the next several decades. More than six hundred thousand people occupy land less than a half meter above the tides. Guyana accounts for more than one-third of these totals; Haiti, Suriname, the Bahamas and the Dominican Republic are the other countries most likely to be affected. The Bahamas faces the greatest proportional threat: 32 percent of its land and 25 percent of its population are below a half meter above high tide.

Several regional conferences were organized to raise awareness about sea level rise in the Caribbean while giving art and culture progressively more attention. In 1992, CARICOM (Caribbean Community) adopted a regional development project with the United Nations Development Program and UNESCO for cultural conservation in the region. In 2015, the climate change conference "Voices and Imagination United for Climate Justice" established an informal group of Caribbean artists and journalists to raise awareness on climate change, with the participation of popular Caribbean musicians such as David Michael Rudder, Alison Hinds, and Gamal Doyle. In 2017, the Jamaican ministry responsible for culture and UNESCO organized a symposium on "Caribbean World Heritage and Climate Change," gathering participants from Caribbean countries owning world heritage properties, such as Antigua and Barbuda, Cuba, Curaçao,

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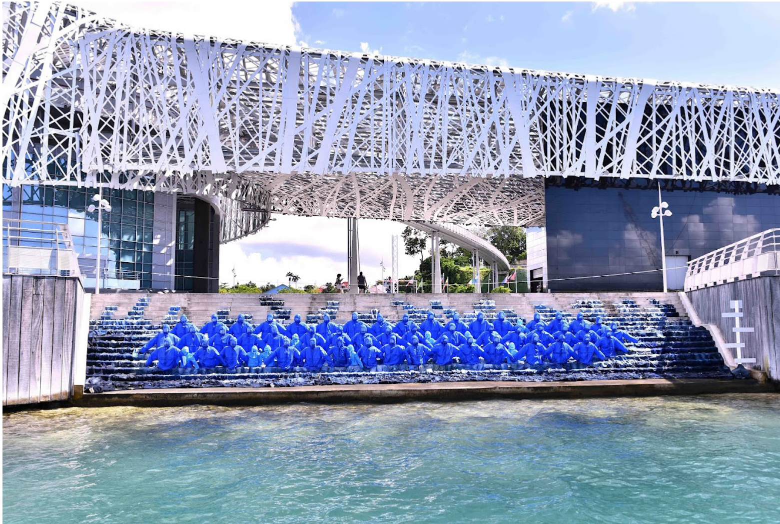

Figure 7.6. Guy Gabon, *#AllClimateRefugees*, installation, mixed media, part of *Echos imprévus* at the Memorial ACTe, Guadeloupe, 2017. © Bernard Boucard.

Dominica, Haiti, Jamaica, and others. The operational outcomes and impacts of such conferences on the effective preservation of cultural heritage are, however, extremely hard to evaluate when they do not include immediate target numbers and actions.

Guy Gabon (1967, Guadeloupe/Guadeloupe), Visual Artist, Ecodesigner, and Director

Guy Gabon defines herself as an "artivist" whose social and artistic practice is strongly driven by environmental concerns. Her installation *#AllClimateRefugees*, using mostly textiles such as jeans, initially created as part of the exhibition *Echos imprévus* at the Memorial ACTe in Guadeloupe,[6] reflects a wait-and-see attitude toward a water level that keeps rising before condemning communities to emigrate. In response to the annual climate conference, the artivist calls on cultural and educational actors to adopt a new approach towards ecological disasters. "Far from discourse and numbers," Guy Gabon's militant posture is intended to "reveal the importance of the threat that climate change represents for our island territories." The installation also includes a participatory creative process that involves the public, from the collection of (usually) used jeans, to sewing workshops to create the mannequins. A performance on the installation was added in 2018 through a collaboration with choreographers Myriam Soulanges and Anne Myer in a project titled *Yué#Sorority*. The project

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wove the links of solidarity through sisterhood, both between the three female artists and with local female communities who participated in the creation of the artwork and the final performance. The social link between all women appears as a resilient weapon, empowering them through their collectivity and presenting new paths to face the imminent threat of sea level rise. Traveling through the French Caribbean, the project gained an international and diplomatic dimension when it was presented at the waterfront of the Pérez Art Museum in Miami, Florida, with the support of the French Embassy. The message from this refugee installation is parlous: we are coming, we are already here. Similar to Deborah Jack, Gabon's installation exposes the shared ecological vulnerabilities between Guadeloupe and Miami.

Dominique Hunter (1987, Guyana), Visual Artist

During a residency at the Vermont Studio Center in January 2017, Dominique Hunter unexpectedly revived the memory of the 1927 flood of Vermont's Gihon River. Before embarking on her trip to the US, Dominique Hunter decided to pack only one material: sanitary napkin wrappers, which she had been collecting obsessively for years without knowing how and when to use them. After her arrival, upon learning about the 1927 Vermont flood, the idea for *And Then It Came* began to germinate. She started imagining the potential overwhelming force of the swelling Gihon River pouring through her window and flooding furniture and artwork in her studio. The installation *And Then It Came* suggests not only the duality of water but also speaks to the ideas of feminine strength and resilience as the artist incorporates specific resistant materials to hold the piece together (e.g., painter's tape, aluminum foil tape). As an extension to this piece, Dominique Hunter produced another installation with a suggestive title, *Downpour*, developed in collaboration with Trinidadian artist Shanice Smith. The use of recycled material in each version, augmenting the integrity of the wrappers by the use of tape, hints towards a gradual process of disintegration, both of the artwork and of the human body affected by time, disasters, and erosion. Finally, the threatening context of sea level rise in her own country, Guyana, where two hundred thousand people live on land less than a half meter above the tides (Strauss and Kulp 2018), may have played a conscious or unconscious role in the conceptualization of the work by the artist. The concept of "black Anthropocene," referred to by geographer Kathryn Youssef as the "absorbent qualities of black and brown bodies to take up the body burdens of exposures to toxicities and to buffer the violence of the earth" (Youssef cited in Loichot 2020: 4), may offer an interpretation of the embodiment by the artist of the Vermont

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Figure 7.7. Dominique Hunter, *And Then It Came*, 2017, installation, mixed media. © Mark Reamy.

flood through her own menstrual cycle. Finally, the vision of water flooding the artist's studio raises the international question of urgent political action to adopt conservation measures to protect Caribbean artwork facing sea level rise in the region.

Oceanic Pollution

Awakening Apnea: Dive or Die

Context: About 80 percent of marine pollution comes from land-based activities. Nitrogen loads to oceans tripled from preindustrial times due to fertilizer and wastewater. More than 8 million tons of plastic enter the oceans each year, killing up to one million sea birds and a hundred thousand sea mammals, marine turtles and fish each year, causing a threat to the $57 billion of coastal tourism revenue (Sayed and Kemper 2019).

The United Nations proclaimed a Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development, to be held from 2021 to 2030. The goal is to provide a framework in which ocean science can support and guide countries' actions to sustainably manage oceans. In its report on marine pollution in the Caribbean (Michele Diez et al. 2019), the World Bank makes twelve recommendations to take action on a national, regional, and international

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level. Beyond improved data collection and adopting new legislation, the strongest calls for action consist in reinforcing the control policies to reduce litter on coasts, the discharge of untreated sewage, and the use of industrial nutrients. It will take decades, however, for states to first adopt any necessary legislation and then enforce it through control mechanisms or sanctions. On a "glocal" level, the US Department of State launched the Greening Diplomacy Initiative in 2015, including an International Coastal Cleanup Day on 9 September, organized in partnership with Ocean Conservancy and with foreign diplomatic services (consulates and embassies) to help protect oceans and beaches and stem the tide of pollution. It is unusual and quite significant to see how various diplomats from all levels gather on American beaches on that day to actively collect litter.

Morel Doucet (1990, Haiti/USA), Multimedia Artist and Educator

Morel Doucet has been working over the last few years on the process of climate gentrification in South Florida. Highlighting how communities who don't have the means to escape natural disasters caused by climate change will be most affected by displacement, he notably stresses the precariousness of Black and immigrant lives. Studying the endangered ecosystems of coral reef colonies, green seas, and marine life, Doucet draws a parallel with the toxic exposure of Black bodies facing unstable environmental safety in Florida. Doucet makes a localized analysis about the ecologic volatility around Lake Okeechobee in Florida, where the unregulated use of sewage and other nutrients on farm fields leads to an increase of phosphorus in the lake's once fresh water, contaminating surrounding residents. Urban planning and dikes have further forced the lake to overflow into the Everglades and then into coastal saltwater, mixing with nitrogen and resulting in the proliferation of a new fluorescent blue-green alga (Staletovich 2016). Like intoxicated plant life and bleached coral reefs dying from an increase in water temperature, the survival of Black immigrant and low-income neighborhoods is compromised by the daily aggressions of the American way of life, reminding them of "the impossibility of attaining whiteness." Cast into delicate white porcelain by Doucet, the bodies, corals, and plants become one, calcified into decorative art objects, acting as a metaphor for the communities who have no seats at social banquets and whose future remains "a constant battle." He writes:

> WHEN A CORAL REEF DIES,
> Its body becomes a hollow memory
> Of its distanced past, the outer shell
> Is calcified, frozen in time. (Doucet 2018)

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Figure 7.8. *White Noise*, 2019, Ceramic sculpture. © Morel Doucet.

White Noise: When Moonlight Whisper & Raindrop Scream in Silence is the title of Doucet's ceramic series, which loudly proclaims the racial inequalities experienced by those communities and their cacophonous suffering. Each artwork serves as a megaphone speaking to Florida's politicians, lawmakers, and governmental agencies, who have failed to implement protective environmental measures.

Louisa Marajo (1987, Martinique/France), Visual Artist

It was during a yearly visit to Martinique in 2018 that Louisa Marajo started observing the proliferation of the sargassum algae on coasts. Due to polluting agricultural activities in the Americas and the rise of water temperature, these algae, naturally thriving between the coasts of West Africa and the Sargasso Sea not far from Florida, have drifted further toward the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico, where they started accumulating. The stagnation and decomposition in masses of the sargassum produces a toxic gas that causes severe health impacts, such as memory loss and respiratory diseases, and also kills marine life, leading to a social and economic disaster through the closing of schools and beaches. Marajo writes:

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Figure 7.9. *Dismantling Sargasse Sea 3*, photography. © Louisa Marajo.

> Sargassum waves,
> Which carry away and restore
> The deepening of our pollution,
> Nauseating landscapes, Re-Mixed
> To Nature. (Doucet 2018)

However, in spite of the shared challenge posed to political authorities and scientists, Louisa Marajo does not blame the authorities or focus on the victims. Instead, she decides to confront the sargassum, embracing its proliferation and integrating its images into her work. In fact, the "nauseating landscapes" form a new state of coastal chaos, in which she sees an opportunity resulting from the unknown.

> From the ruins of the Sargassum shines beauty,
> From the unexpected,
> From the resilience.

Unlike the Sisyphean gesture of absurd repetition and endless despair, she reads meaning in each reconstruction effort. She cites German modernist artist Kurt Schwitters as her inspiration. "With a purpose," Schwitters believed, "we can destroy a world and, through the knowledge of possibilities, build a world with debris." This debris is part of her chaotic visual partition, in which paintings and photography are falling apart in

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conversation, forming a new orderly chaos, her sculptures. Her posture was more poetically personal until she decided to share her vision about the sargassum chaos with others, such as the Tout-Monde Art Foundation in 2019. Her initial idea was soon expanded beyond the Francophone territories, including West Africa, Latin America, and the USA, and beyond the art scene, by including scientists, researchers, anthropologists, and even business leaders who had been working on scientific solutions regarding the sargassum. The project tipped over into another dimension, becoming more international and political because it aims at raising awareness worldwide. The COVID-19 pandemic came to further shake the project, adding new surprises. The virus arrived as "a disaster after the disaster," increasing the vulnerabilities of the populations whose lungs had already been harmed by the hydrogen sulfide released by the sargassum. The sanitary emergency becomes even more obvious. The project quickly grew into a new hybrid form, ranging from art videos and film to an artist residency and exhibition, and announcing the advent of a new hybrid creature, *Homo sargassum*.

Conclusion

If these short case studies often seem to highlight how a disaster can be exacerbated in a colonial or postcolonial context, the relation to a continental power can also appear to be efficient as it can mobilize material, human effort, and financial means from an area that has not been affected by the disaster. Solidarity is easier and faster to execute when one of the parties is not in need.

But whether or not these power relations have a destructive or constructive impact on disasters, the fact that Caribbean artists raise their voices through different sociopolitical practices and artistic forms—film, poems, theater plays, installations, paintings, sculptures—to call for international attention to various disaster situations seems to announce a new generation of "cultural agents." They serve as inspiring examples to build a new cultural diplomacy, or rather a "cultural agency" (Summer 2006), in the region and beyond. Three lessons can be drawn from these cases for institutional cultural diplomatic players.

First, it is time to decolonize cultural diplomacy by accepting internal criticism of existing forms of domination and of the coercive force or hard power of certain cultural attributes. Such deconstruction goes through a stronger recruitment of underrepresented communities and a reorientation of existing programs toward more diversity. Second, the rarity of Caribbean art, considering sea level rise and recurring disasters, needs

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to be incorporated into art conservation programs, beyond existing cultural heritage preservation efforts. Expertise in water- or salt-damaged art and in evaluating the value of Caribbean art in a context of rarity and risk needs to be developed. Climate refugee artists who have lost their studio or material must be further supported through dedicated disaster residencies and long-term disaster-relief programs for artists, whereas galleries, museums, and collectors should be encouraged to acquire Caribbean art before it is too late. Last, cultural specificities of local communities or indigenous populations need to be more incorporated in diplomatic decision-making, taking into account specific languages, traditions, and memories.

Finally, after examining how cultural diplomacy can be implemented as a political priority in natural disaster situations in the Caribbean, one should now ask what the situation would look like in a disaster resulting from a human-made hazard, such as a military or biological attack. Is the Caribbean prepared to face such disaster? The question challenges the basis of the ruling security dogma in the countries possessing territories in the Caribbean—the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, all founding members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. In fact, article 5 of the treaty ensures, in case of an armed attack against one of the members, that all parties will assist the attacked member, including through the use of force. However, article 6 explicitly excludes from this protection all the territories belonging to the countries situated south of the Tropic of Cancer, which means the Caribbean (NATO 1949). One can therefore wonder if Caribbean populations do represent a concern for NATO countries in terms of security for any potential human-provoked disasters affecting the region. Maybe it is time to rethink the Caribbean as a priority, at last.

Vanessa Selk is an independent political arts advisor, cultural programmer, entrepreneur, and former diplomat. She is the executive and artistic director of Snowblack, a company offering creative consulting, projects, and storytelling in the arts and media industry. In this role, she has been working as an art consultant for digital companies now expanding into the arts, such as chaching.nyc. She is also the founder and artistic director of the Tout-Monde Art Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting emerging Caribbean artists committed to sociopolitical work related to ecology, education, and equality. Prior to this role, she served as the cultural attaché/head of the Florida Office of the Cultural Services of the French Embassy in the US, where she was responsible for the French cultural programming in visual and performing arts and education in Florida and the Caribbean. In this role, she launched and directed the Tout-

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Monde Festival dedicated to Caribbean contemporary arts, which has now become a regular year-round program. She would like to especially thank Dr. Tatiana Flores.

Notes

1. The reading of the play at the Martin Segal Theater, directed by Kaneza Schaal of the Caribbean Theater Project ACT (Cultural Services of the French Embassy in the US), took place in December 2019.
2. These efforts were organized in 2018 by the Caribbean branch of the International Council on Archives (CARBICA), with the support of the UNESCO's Heritage Emergency Fund.
3. CARBICA XI Conference Archives at Risk: Preserving Caribbean Heritage (2019)
4. The conference was organized by the World Bank and the Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR), in partnership with the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) and financed by the European Union
5. Conceived by World Bank representative Janot Mendler de Suarez and by artist in residence Pablo Suarez.
6. *Echos imprévus/Turning tide* at the Memorial ACTe in Guadeloupe, held from November 2016 to April 2017, was curated by Johanna Auguiac and Tumelo Mosaka.

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