

Disrupting Permanent Catastrophe through Commemoration, Grief, and Action

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When the earthquake struck Haiti on 12 January 2010, amid the chaos of fallen buildings, dead bodies, and general panic, citizens of Port-au-Prince were heard to cry that it was the “fin du monde,” the end of the world. To many, it was an apocalyptic moment, a cataclysmic end, but without the promise contained in biblical versions of the apocalypse of a new and better beginning. In short, there was a sense, expressed by authors such as Dany Laferrière, that the earthquake marked an ending, and that whatever came next would have to be different. And yet, the disaster appears endless, as Haiti experiences an ongoing social and economic catastrophe that shows no signs of ending. As far back as 2012, this experience was termed one of “permanent catastrophe” by the Haitian sociologist Laënnec Hurbon. Recognizing the apparent contradiction in the term, Hurbon writes that if every disaster supposes a rupture in time and experience, one should also be aware of the “before and after of the catastrophe” (2012: 8).¹ Disasters strike so often in Haiti—from the floods in Gonaïves in 2004 to the 2010 earthquake to the cholera epidemic to Hurricanes Sandy and Isaac in 2012 and beyond—that the population “risks taking as natural every calamity” (9). One effect of living in permanent catastrophe is that the memory of the deadliest of these events, the 2010 earthquake, fades quickly and the event loses its distinctiveness. One has the impression, Hurbon wrote in 2012, that nothing happened on 12 January 2010, and that a “leap has been skillfully made beyond that date” (8). The constant denial and annulment of the disaster leads to the general “permanent installation in catastrophe” (9).

This condition of permanent disaster has important political dimensions, for as Hurbon argues, at the heart of the situation “the leaders

of the State seem to worry only about how to stay in power” (9). Disasters are moreover “godsend” for those in power in that they give the politicians a source of legitimacy, which otherwise they would not have (9).² There is even a “desire for disasters” in government, as these events allow the leaders to present themselves as victims to the international community, and to discharge their responsibilities in the economic, social, cultural, and political life of Haiti (9). At a global level, disasters create opportunities for creating new financial markets that thrive when a catastrophe occurs. They are also opportunities for international NGOs that pile up donations whenever a major disaster strikes. As many contributors to this volume show, NGOs often replace governmental agencies, but they do so temporarily, leaving a void once they depart. Decades of disaster studies have shown that disasters are the result of identifiable political and/or neoliberal practices of violence, dispossession, and exploitation. As Hurbon (2012) points out, though, various types of disasters feed off one other and, in a sense, “natural” disasters accelerate the decline of democracy in places weakened by decades of austerity politics, such as Haiti, but also in Puerto Rico or Florida.

Declaring a state of emergency is one of the key processes that leads to the demise of democratic practices. Disasters further social and ecological vulnerabilities by suspending all kinds of governmental regulations and by reinforcing top-down forms of power. At once, the state dwindles and, paradoxically, takes on a greater importance. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the US federal government showed its inability to help its own citizens and contributed to the permanent displacement of thousands of people. At the same time, the George W. Bush administration forcefully implemented educational reforms that led to the closure of public schools, hence to the withering of the Black middle classes in the Crescent City. Disasters are not one-off events. They compound and lead to a state of permanent and global catastrophe—to a state of opportunities for neoliberal and self-serving nationalist leaders. Hence, thinking outside of the crisis mode enables us to capture new temporalities, to shed light on new relations between humans, nature, and the spiritual realm. It allows us to take a pause and ponder past disasters, to describe their specificity, to learn from them. The fine-tuned analyses of historical and structural processes contributors put forth in this volume show where economic and political changes must occur. They show that neoliberalism, nationalism, and racism only fuel disasters and lead us, to take Mark Schuller’s words, to “humanity’s last stand.” Additionally, paying attention to cultural productions and practices that emerge in the wake of disasters, and paying attention to individual narratives and indigenous solidarity systems, enable us to see disasters not as disparate and ineluctable crises but as

symptoms of global disenfranchisement. In other words, listening to and reflecting on the voices that describe, explain, and dissect disasters from below opens new political and epistemological alternatives. They open a path to commemoration, grief, and action.

To live in a state of permanent disaster means that individual events are not memorialized in a way that would consign them to the past and allow a sense of time other than that characterized by catastrophe. People live, Hurbon says, “without a perceptible future” and “in the condition of being superfluous (floating between life and death)” (2012: 10). Hurbon points out that the government has no interest in a memorial for the 2010 Port-au-Prince earthquake, and thus the disaster is not considered past but part of the catastrophic present (9). This in turn has serious consequences for notions of reconstruction, as to be in a permanent state of catastrophe is to forget any time in which disaster was not a daily reality, and to lose awareness of what was there before to be reconstructed. As Hurbon puts it, the causes of permanent disaster are as much political as environmental (10). Indeed, the various signs of environmental degradation—deforestation, pollution, and so forth—can be read as “the expression of the failure of the Haitian State” (10).³

In turn, the failure of the Haitian state can be read as a legacy of colonialism, imperialism, and foreign interventions leading to the fraudulent election and support of authoritarian leaders. After the 2010 earthquake, the US again undermined Haitian sovereignty by supporting the campaign of Michel Martelly, an incompetent probusiness candidate who won the presidential elections thanks to the support of US institutions. The Martelly government implemented reconstruction projects that were either unfinished or directly harmful to the Haitian population. In other words, undermining democratic processes disempowers entire societies and opens forms of “reconstruction” that foster disaster vulnerability. A majority of Haitians lived in autarkic and self-sufficient communities that sustained their natural environments in the nineteenth century. However, the values and ecological practices of small-scale peasantries were at best mocked, at worst severely repressed during antisuperstition campaigns.

We observe the same processes in so-called developed regions of the circum-Caribbean, where politicians and their corporate allies sabotage state institutions meant to prevent disasters or to help local populations, and where disaster relief is increasingly being privatized. For instance, rural communities of Florida have to rebuild their towns themselves as local officials steal reconstruction funds (“Former City Official” 2020), or as state and federal agencies are too slow to bring help. In the case of Puerto Rico, the Trump administration even withheld relief funds to retaliate against political adversaries (Acevedo 2021). Decades of austerity

measures in Puerto Rico and Florida led to the closing of fire stations and to the withering of state education, health, and emergency management agencies. At the federal level, the government-induced decay of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is yet another example of the dwindling role of the state when it comes to the welfare of its citizens when disasters strike. Not surprisingly, areas of Florida affected by Hurricane Michael and areas of Puerto Rico hurt by Hurricane Maria do not recover. Simply put, the demise of the welfare state is not only a social question. The withering of democratic institutions fuels natural disasters, and in turn, these catastrophes only accelerate the nefarious privatization of public goods and services.

We conclude this volume by reinvoking Hurbon, as his ideas seem not to have lost any of their relevance, and as Haiti and the broader Caribbean are increasingly prone to disasters, social, economic, and environmental. As scholars of the Caribbean working across disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, the question of how our work contributes to efforts to counter the long-term effects of disaster in the region is pressing and difficult. One possible answer this volume provides is the production of scholarship that mobilizes commemoration, grief, and action to disrupt ways of living, thinking, and governing that normalize a state of permanent catastrophe. The work included in this collection commemorates disasters long after they have left the nightly news and the front page. It grieves the long-term losses that these disasters produce in their particularities and structural similarities. And it calls for action so that past disasters do not become the norm in a state of permanent catastrophe. The recent challenges of creating policies and practices to manage the catastrophic effects of a global pandemic and climate change demonstrate that disaster in the circum-Caribbean—often considered an eccentricity of the region linked to its unique geography, weather, and history—is in fact a vital topic for understanding the future of humanity broadly. Lessons learned about disaster in the Caribbean become increasingly applicable elsewhere in the world in regions where people have imagined themselves immune to its effects. We finally encourage more work on these pressing themes and offer the volume as a token of our solidarity and respect for the people of the region.

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Notes

1. See also David Scott's interpretation of the collapse of the Grenada Revolution as "merely one significant episode in a larger story of generations of conflict in what is now imagined and represented as the cyclical pattern of a general history whose generative logic is catastrophic" (2014: 74–75).
2. Jonathan Katz suggests that disasters are also godsend for donors, who by late March 2012 had delivered less than half of the long-term funding pledged for 2010 and 2011. Donor countries, he argues, let President René Préval carry the blame for the lack of reconstruction (2013: 207). He also says that with the huge logistical costs of the relief operation, "much of the money was a stimulus program for the donor countries themselves" (206). He further critiques the overall achievements of the foreign relief programs: "Having sought above all to prevent riots, ensure stability, and prevent disease, the responders helped spark the first, undermine the second, and by all evidence caused the third" (278). See also Myriam J. A. Chancy's argument that "the Duvalier regime was in large part supported and financed (with arms and funds) by the U.S. for a thirty-year period" (2012: 34). Raoul Peck's 2013 film *Assistance mortelle* presents a cutting critique of humanitarian and development aid in Haiti. For a critique of "military humanitarianism" in postearthquake Haiti, see Jennifer Greenburg, "The 'Strong Arm' and the 'Friendly Hand'" (2013).
3. See also Hurbon's critique of the "privatization of the state" in "De la privatisation de l'État ou les embûches de la reconstruction," *L'Observatoire de la reconstruction* 5 (November 2012): 2–4.

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