



Colonial Abandonment and Hurricane María: Puerto Rican Material Poetics as Survivance

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Abstract

In the wake of Hurricane María, Puerto Ricans in the tropical archipelago and the diaspora engaged in various forms of community organizing to confront governmental and social abandonment. Building on long-term ethnographic research and poetic analysis focused on the work of Puerto Rican poet Ana Portnoy Brimmer, I analyze poets' critical and creative material practices that confronted histories of colonialism and engaged in forms of survivance post María (Vizenor, 2008). I argue that survivance is *poiesis* – a creative engagement in and with the world. Through writing and performing poems, Puerto Ricans contested state narratives about the effects of the hurricane, documented their material and diasporic suffering, and made their lives more livable through accessing necessities, such as food and water, building and reconnecting with community, and bearing witness to each other's lived experiences. Puerto Rican life and experiences are always entangled with their environment and material world. Thus, for Puerto Ricans, survivance as *poiesis* is a continuous affirmation of life in the face of ongoing disasters and death through material poetic practices.

Keywords: Hurricane María, poetry, survivance, material poetics, tropical materialism, *poiesis*, colonialism, Puerto Rico,

Opening: Creative Recoveries

The hurricane blew out our lights
in a single exhale – the archipelago
mere wisps of smoke. Our sole
certainty, abandonment. When all you hear
is darkness, it's easy to disappear.

— Ana Portnoy Brimmer

Climate catastrophe looms near on the entire planet; however, its impacts are most gravely felt in the Tropics, the region between the Tropics of Cancer and the Tropics of Capricorn (Hsiang & Sobel, 2016; Lundberg et al., 2021; United Nations Children's Fund, 2019). In the Caribbean, increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather has led to mass death, illness, suffering, and displacement. In 2017, the consequences of climate catastrophe were felt throughout the Caribbean. In that year, the Atlantic hurricane season boasted a total of 17 named storms (NOAA, 2017). Ten storms became hurricanes, six of which went above Category 2. Three caused grave devastation – Harvey, Irma, and María. Described as *Imageddon* (a play on Armageddon) for its vast impact, Category 5 Hurricane Irma caused at least 134 deaths across the Caribbean and the U.S., destroyed over 90% of housing in Barbuda leaving its 1,500 residents displaced, and destroyed another 30,000+ homes throughout the region. Hurricane Irma left roughly one million Puerto Ricans without electricity and caused over \$77.16 billion in damages throughout the Caribbean (Hahn & Boudin, 2017; Hendry, 2017; Neuman, 2017; Smith Amos, 2017; USDA, 2018). Not yet having recovered from the impacts of Hurricane Irma, the Caribbean found itself in peril once again when Category 5 Hurricane María barreled across islands demolishing houses, snapping trees in half, and clearing vegetation with its 175 mph winds and torrential downpour. In Puerto Rico, life and time became marked by Hurricane María's impact: roughly 4,645 people died (Harris, 2018), over 200,000 people were displaced (Schachter & Bruce, 2020), and an estimated \$43 billion in damages occurred (Horowitz, 2017). The 2017 hurricane season, not only proved that climate catastrophe is worsening (Nature, 2019), it also revealed the cruelty of colonial enterprise and how it leads to death and suffering, especially in Puerto Rico (Pérez Ramos et al., 2022).

In the ever-present face of colonial neglect by local and federal governments, many Puerto Ricans across the archipelago and the diaspora engaged in various forms of cultural production with “decolonial imaginaries” (Arbino, 2021). In this article, I focus on poetry. Historically, Puerto Rican artists, particularly poets, have used the written word since at least the 1930s to address the impacts of colonialism, austerity, and

displacement in their communities. Between 2017 and 2019, I conducted ethnographic research across poetry spaces in Puerto Rico, New York, and digital space. I followed poets from the stage to the page, to protests on the streets. I performed with them, listened to their stories, and conducted semi-structured and life history narrative interviews.

In this article, I analyze Puerto Rican critical and creative material practices in poetry spaces that confront histories of colonialism and engage in forms of survivance (Vizenor, 2008). Vizenor (2008) defines survivance as “an active sense of presence over absence” and “renunciations of dominance, detractions, obtrusions...and the legacy of victimry” (p. 1). Survivance is not merely about survival, but also about resistance through the affirmation of life even in the continuous presence of genocidal practices from conquering states (Vizenor, 2008). Moreover, I argue that survivance is *poiesis* – “an active engagement with the world, which is always creative” (Lundberg, 2008, p. 2). Through writing and performing poems, Puerto Ricans contested state narratives about the impacts of hurricane María, documented their material and diasporic suffering, and made their lives more livable through accessing necessities, such as food and water, building and reconnecting with community, and bearing witness to each other’s lived experiences. For Puerto Ricans, survivance as *poiesis* is a continuous affirmation of life in the face of ongoing disasters and death through material poetic practices.

Colonial Storms in the Caribbean Tropics

Declared an unlivable place by Aristotle (Spicer, 2016), the Tropics has been imagined as a zone of danger due to its extreme weather, such as high temperatures, hurricanes, cyclones, earthquakes, and tsunamis, most of which have impacted Puerto Rico between 2017 and 2022. However, the Tropics is home to nearly half of the world’s population, full of people speaking hundreds of languages, practicing dozens of faiths, and immersed in a wide variety of cultural practices. The Tropics hold much of the planet’s biodiversity, including varieties of crops and sweet things like cacao, quinoa, coffee, and sugar. While once imagined as a wild and untameable region by Western philosophers, the Tropics made possible European and U.S. American empire and wealth through the exploitation of its lands and peoples (Clayton, 2021, p.55, quoted in Lundberg et al., 2021, p. 4). Extraction of oil and resources from the Topics to build wealth for the West has come with grave consequences. In fact, over 500 years of exploitive extraction and continued colonialism, of polluting air, water, and destroying land, of murdering and enslaving people to build Western empire, have left the entire planet and its inhabitants in danger. Global temperatures have risen causing polar ice caps to melt and sea levels to rise. The frequency and intensity of storms and weather events has increased (Lundberg et al., 2021;

Samenow et al., 2021), and according to UNICEF, over 18 million people worldwide were displaced due to weather-related events in 2017 alone (United Nations Children's Fund, 2019).

In Puerto Rico, one cannot separate the impacts of hurricanes from the colonial relationship the archipelago shares with the United States of America. Puerto Rico has been a colony of the U.S. for over 120 years. The political, economic, and biopolitical subalternity of Puerto Rico was established through numerous and intersecting processes. Shortly after the U.S. occupation began in Puerto Rico, U.S. Congress passed the 1917 Jones Act, which made Puerto Ricans U.S. citizens without full incorporation into U.S. political life while residing on the archipelago (Bonilla, 2018; Bonilla & LeBrón 2019; Duany, 2000; Uperesa & Garriga-Lopez, 2017). Puerto Ricans were othered and racialized as non-white and thus their status limited by ideas that certain groups of people were undeserving of full citizenship (Uperesa & Garriga-Lopez, 2017). The racialization of archipelago residents and the physical distance of island territories allowed for a disembodied sovereignty to develop, one where unincorporation became law (Uperesa & Garriga-Lopez, 2017, 48-49). Possessing U.S. citizenship allowed Puerto Ricans to migrate to and from the U.S. without immigration processes, but simultaneously prevented their political participation within the archipelago until the establishment of a local government in 1947 (Uperesa & Garriga-Lopez, 2017). Puerto Ricans residing on the archipelago, still cannot vote for the U.S. president, nor does the Puerto Rican congressional representative have any voting powers in Congress. The Jones Act further mandated that the archipelago would be unable to engage in its own international commerce. All trade must pass through U.S. trade routes. In effect, the Puerto Rican economy became completely dependent on the U.S. This had devastating effects after Hurricane María, when Puerto Ricans could not receive direct international aid and U.S.-based aid was held up in Puerto Rican ports due to the Jones Act (González, 2020).

In 2016, the U.S. Congress passed the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act, known simply as PROMESA – Spanish for “promise.” The goal of PROMESA was to restructure the Puerto Rican economy to pay off a highly contested debt of \$74 billion owed by the Puerto Rican government to U.S.-based hedge funds, mutual funds, and private lenders. PROMESA's legislation positioned The Fiscal Control Board (often referred to as La Junta), a group of seven people with various ties and investments to Puerto Rico, as the legal body responsible for the economic future of the archipelago. La Junta enacted multiple austerity measures to reduce Puerto Rico's debt (Duany, 2000; Uperesa & Garriga-Lopez, 2017). Upon its implementation: over 30% of Puerto Rico's gross domestic product was directed at paying off the debt; over 300 public schools were closed, limiting children's access to education; requests for infrastructural projects were dismissed; and a vast majority of

Puerto Rican people faced worse poverty than ever before. Hundreds of thousands out-migrated, resulting in more Puerto Ricans living outside of Puerto Rico than on the archipelago for the first time in history. Puerto Ricans feared what life would be like with closed hospitals, limited schools, the threat of a decreased minimum wage, limited employment opportunities, food insecurity, and mass poverty. PROMESA was met with protests across Puerto Rico and its diaspora communities. When Hurricane María arrived, a third of the Puerto Rican economy was focused on paying off the debt.

Already living in a state of economic destitution due to various austerity measures and inflated government spending (Sullivan, 2018), Puerto Rico's government was ill-prepared when the archipelago found itself in the path of both Hurricanes Irma and María. On September 6, 2017, Category 4 Hurricane Irma brushed the island of Vieques, destroying the boardwalk and leaving over 900,000 Puerto Ricans without electricity (Almasy et al., 2017). Just two weeks later, on September 20, 2017, Category 5 Hurricane María entered the southeastern tip of the big island of Puerto Rico and exited through the northwest. The hurricane's width was physically larger than the main island, and spelled catastrophe for Puerto Rico (Meyer, 2017). María blew out the entire electrical grid, leaving all of Puerto Rico, including hospitals, supermarkets, and banks, without electricity. The winds cleared off almost all vegetation on the archipelago.

On September 29, 2017, days after Hurricane María struck Puerto Rico, then-President Donald J. Trump explained that his administration was doing the best they could to provide relief to the devastated archipelago, but was encumbered by the fact that "this is an island surrounded by water, big water, ocean water" (Shugerman 2017). Trump's assertion of the imagined distance of Puerto Rico reified the sense of desertion and isolation that Puerto Ricans had long felt due to their colonial relationship with the U.S. Trump's signaling of Puerto Rico's distance – both real and imagined – contributed to devastating consequences for those living on the archipelago in the aftermath of the largest climate catastrophe that Puerto Ricans had experienced in modern history.

Little to no help was expected from the local or U.S. governments, especially given Trump's assertions of Puerto Ricans as "want[ing] everything to be done for them" (Segarra, 2017). From the Rhoades' birth control trials to Operation Bootstrap and the dumping of toxic carbon ash in Peñuelas, U.S. policy towards Puerto Rico since its early colonial history has often been characterized by experimentation and neglect (Arbino, 2021; Bonilla & LeBrón, 2019). Thus, as Hurricane María made landfall in Puerto Rico, there was a general sense that it would be up to Puerto Ricans on the ground and in the diaspora to ameliorate any potential devastation the archipelago and its inhabitants would face (González, 2020).

Material Poetics as Survivance

Poetry spaces were among the first to deploy themselves as sites of disaster recovery both in Puerto Rico and in the diaspora. Since Hurricane María, numerous poetry anthologies, as well as other creative written productions, such as comic books (Arbino, 2021), have been released by survivors and diaspora organizers. Here, I focus on the work of the poet Ana Portnoy Brimmer, who survived María and has written prolifically about the hurricane. Her poetry is exemplary of how poets and poems moved in the aftermath of Hurricane María. She performed throughout the course of my fieldwork in in-person and digital poetry spaces, had her pieces published in several poetry anthologies, and published collections of her own. Borrowing methodologically from Mitchell (2009) I followed Portnoy Brimmer and her poems across digital and geographical locations to examine how poetic and art spaces contributed to disaster recovery efforts and engaged with forms of survivance.

Puerto Rican poets and their poems are inextricably connected to the material poetics of their lives. I borrow from Lundberg (2008), who describes how material poetics “explores the relation between the material world..., the environment and bodies; and the poetics of metaphor, creativity, [and] imagination” (p. 2). That is, the poet and their poems exist in relation to the animate world around them. For Puerto Rican poets their work embodies and responds to the constant threat of environmental catastrophe, their experiences of life as islanders, and the everyday impacts of colonialism. In the intricacies of this relation, while these material affects have agency and act upon them, Puerto Rican poets also reshape their material worlds through writing and performances to imagine possible futures. Similar to other forms of written artistic commentary, such as comics, poets engage with decolonial aesthetics (Arbino, 2021, p. 160). For poets, however, these decolonial aesthetics were not always a call for independence (Rivera-Santana, 2020, quoted in Arbino, 2021, p. 160). Rather, the poets I worked with desired a decoloniality of thought and everyday life before national independence could be realized. They weren’t always hopeful of a Puerto Rico that would become free. Thus, when they first mobilized at the threat of Hurricane María, their objective was to save as many lives as possible and to limit the suffering of their people with full understanding that colonialism created barriers at every turn. Using community-based recovery efforts, Puerto Rican poets renounced presidential narratives about their unwillingness to participate in their own recovery. They, in fact, revealed how community-based recovery is precisely what kept them alive. They moved beyond discourses of “victimry” (Vizenor, 2008, p. 1), to reveal how U.S. empire was genocidal in its design. Through their poems, Puerto Ricans reimagined the purpose of the hurricane, reconnected to their homeland, and used creative expression as an action-oriented affirmation of their right to existence.

Survivance took the form of storytelling by those who had lived through the aftermaths of Hurricane María through writing, performing, and publishing their poems. Puerto Ricans throughout the diaspora moved their poems and bodies across spaces to raise awareness of the challenges posed by the hurricane and austerity measures, and to engage in disaster recovery. Poetry spaces became sites of important disaster recovery events among artists. Over the duration of my research, I calculated that poets across the diaspora used travelling poetry spaces to raise over \$500,000 in donations to be sent in a combination of goods and cash to grassroots organizations across the archipelago. Also in the aftermath of María poets spoke back to and against racialized tropes while engaging in community uplift. Through poetry, hurricane survivors were able to respond to negative media representations as well as empower their communities and engage in healing through “highly poetic politics” (Camp, 2009, p. 710). Poetry spaces were locations where diasporic connections were solidified and reaffirmed, and the poems written were forms of bearing witness to the tragedies that ensued while simultaneously calling for action from the diaspora and allies.

Ethnographic and Literary Encounters with Poetry

Born to Mexican-Jewish immigrants and raised in Puerto Rico, Ana Portnoy Brimmer is a poet and organizer. Beginning in mid-2017, I conducted ethnographic research alongside Portnoy Brimmer after we connected via social media to discuss what resources were needed across the archipelago, particularly in Western Puerto Rico, a region neglected after the hurricane as recovery efforts focused on the San Juan Metro area. Portnoy Brimmer was residing in Puerto Rico when Hurricanes Irma and María occurred; later she left the archipelago to pursue an MFA in New Jersey and returned at the conclusion of her studies. Her movements across the diaspora and her experiences of circular migration and community access are exemplary of many Puerto Rican poets and artists. She organized and performed at numerous events connected to disaster recovery, participated in demonstrations in Puerto Rico and New York, and her poetry was included in at least three anthologies connected to the aftermaths of Hurricane María (Bonilla & LeBrón, 2019; Morales, 2019; del Valle Schorske et al., 2019). In 2021, her debut poetry collection, *To Love an Island* was published. *To Love an Island* documents the anticipation and fall of Hurricane María, the trauma of the collective experience of government abandonment, the impacts of displacement and settler colonialism, and the movement for a better Puerto Rico. To discuss Portnoy Brimmer’s engagement in poetic spaces, I will first highlight her sustained poetic organizing in the diaspora, then, analyze her poetic contributions to anthologies, and finally, will focus on two poems in her debut poetry collection. Her material poetics is exemplary of action and bearing witness.

Diasporic Organizing

Portnoy Brimmer was one of many organizers and poets that I observed working on sustained disaster recovery events using poetry well after the first anniversary of Hurricane María, and who continued to engage in activism both in New Jersey and New York as well as Puerto Rico. As a survivor of Hurricane María, poetry was a primary tool that she used to bear witness to the events that followed, process her own displacement, and continue to provide resources where they were most needed. While I attended many events that she organized, hosted and/or performed at, here I highlight just four of them in the diaspora.

In September 2018, nearing the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Maria, Portnoy Brimmer and Dimitri Reyes, a poet from Newark, New Jersey, co-hosted an installment of #PoetsforPuertoRico at the Newark Public Library. #PoetsforPuertoRico was started by famed Nuyorican poet Willie Perdomo, who used his wide audience reach and influence to gather poets across the U.S. and Puerto Rico to help gather funds for survivors of Hurricane María. In our interview, Perdomo explained that he had lived through Hurricane Sandy's impact in New York and was worried about the devastating impact of María. #PoetsforPuertoRico took place in digital spaces and in-person events across New York, Newark, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Baton Rouge, Louisiana. As a diaspora-based event, #PoetsforPuertoRico was unique in its inclusion of poets still living in Puerto Rico through the use of pre-recorded videos, a model that was later adopted by organizers throughout the diaspora. On social media, the #PoetsforPuertoRico hashtag indexed digital locations where people could donate money, goods, and supplies to assist in disaster recovery. It also advertised various events one could attend in person. Proceeds from #PoetsforPuertoRico went to several causes. The November 2017 installment at Poets House in New York fundraised for Comedores Sociales de Puerto Rico, a collective that served food to families that experienced food insecurity. The April 2018 event in Chicago supported ISER Caribe, a non-profit in Puerto Rico that supports local sustainability efforts. The June 2018 event in the Bay Area supported a fundraising campaign for the Poet's Passage, a living museum of poetry and art in Old San Juan founded by Puerto Rican poet Lady Lee Andrews. Proceeds from a September 2018 event in Washington, D.C. went to CREATTE, Inc, a non-profit organization in Río Piedras, Puerto Rico, dedicated to serving the emotional and social development of young children through the arts. Proceeds from the Newark-based event co-hosted by Portnoy Brimmer went to *La Impresora*, a Puerto Rico-based printing press to support the publication of works created by artists and poets in Puerto Rico.

In March 2019, I joined Portnoy Brimmer at O'lala Empanadas in Newark, New Jersey, where she organized, hosted, and performed at an event titled *Our Bruises Keep Singing—Libertá* (Freedom). Featuring two diaspora-based poets, Ysabel Y. Gonzalez and Malcolm Friend, from Newark and Seattle, respectively, the event's Facebook page stated that this event explored "the place of the diaspora [...] and questions around who gets to claim Puerto Rican identity and Puerto Rico itself." Portnoy Brimmer is of Mexican and Jewish descent, and we engaged in several conversations about her identity as a Puerto Rican who moved to the archipelago as a toddler. She was raised in Puerto Rico by two parents who worked as educators, speaks Puerto Rican Spanish, and is heavily engaged in local activism and politics; she affirms her Puerto Ricanness through her lived experiences, poetry, and activism.

At times, our conversations addressed the prevailing mythology of *mestizaje* and the racial trilogy ideology, which states that all Puerto Ricans are 1/3 Taino, 1/3 African, and 1/3 Spanish. While many Puerto Ricans claim this as their ancestral reality, in fact, many Puerto Ricans do not fit this idealized mythology as Puerto Rico has been colonized three times and has had numerous waves of migration from Central America, its neighbouring Caribbean islands, Europe and Asia (Davila, 1997; Duany, 2002). While the racial trilogy belief is held onto quite tightly by people in the diaspora, my research in Puerto Rico showed that organizers there viewed this myth as anti-immigrant in nature and rooted in anti-Blackness and racism. At the O'lala Empanadas event, and others, Portnoy Brimmer affirmed that all Puerto Rican experiences matter, whether in the diaspora or in Puerto Rico, as shared experiences of austerity, poverty, and disaster had led many to migrate both within and outside of Puerto Rico. This event also featured art from other Hurricane María survivors and provided an opportunity for artists to sell their work and share personal experiences and the trauma of surviving across both Puerto Rico and the diaspora.

In June 2019, I volunteered as a poet and performed alongside Portnoy Brimmer, Lenis Maríana, Joey De Jesus, Nancy Mercado, and Noel Quiñones at the 5C Cafe & Cultural Center in the Lower East Side of Manhattan at an event entitled *Retoñan Las Flores y La Resistencia* (Flowers and Resistance are Blooming). While most of the events that followed Hurricane María focused on getting supplies and food to Puerto Ricans in the archipelago, this event addressed the ongoing effects of austerity measures on Puerto Rico and the widespread criminalization of activists in the archipelago. This included the events of May 2017, when twenty activists, including Nina Droz, were arrested for participating in a national demonstration against the signing of the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA) and austerity measures that limited access to enrollment at the University of Puerto Rico. Droz served 37 months in prison and was only released in late 2019.

Similar to Droz, seven students were served with criminal charges after demonstrating against proposed budget cuts at the University of Puerto Rico in April 2017. Portnoy Brimmer hoped to fundraise for a legal defense fund for the seven students and to raise awareness of police repression and the criminalization of student activists in Puerto Rico.

Closely following *Retoñan Las Flores y La Resistencia*, massive protests began in Puerto Rico after a telegram chat was released revealing widespread corruption in the Puerto Rican government after Hurricane María. Portnoy Brimmer, a number of other poets and artists, and I, gathered together to support the #RickyRenuncia solidarity protests that occurred throughout New York City in July 2019. At the height of the protests in Puerto Rico, we shared poems at Union Square about the effects of the hurricane on survivability, displacement, and continuing austerity. In the midst of the protests, Portnoy Brimmer decided to return to Puerto Rico to support the protests there, and I followed her shortly afterwards to Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, where we attended the *Asamblea Popular*, a community gathering at the town square, aimed at imagining a new political future for Puerto Rico. We both returned to New York in the Fall, just in the time for the two-year anniversary of Hurricane María.

I concluded my fieldwork in late September 2019 at the book release event for *Puerto Rico En Mi Corazon*, held at The Poetry Project in Manhattan. The intention of the event was to “curate poetry as a response to the disaster” and featured performances from several poets, including Philadelphia Poet Laureate and co-editor of the anthology, Raquel Salas Rivera. Proceeds from this event also supported the work of the Puerto Rican publication press, *La Impresora*. The performed pieces included poems written before and after María in order to illustrate the continuous state of disaster that has forced Puerto Ricans to migrate and that were lived through after María. As poets performed, some of them cried recalling the traumatic events of living through the hurricane, while others lamented having to make the difficult decision to leave. Each poem served as a testament to their embodied experiences of colonialism, austerity, and trauma.

Anthologies

Portnoy Brimmer’s poetry was included in multiple anthologies. Here, I focus on three – *Voices from Puerto Rico Post-Hurricane María* (Morales, 2019), *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm* (Bonilla & LeBrón, 2019), and the aforementioned *Puerto Rico En Mi Corazon* (del Valle Schorske et al., 2019). An English-Spanish bilingual anthology of poetry and essays, *Voices from Puerto Rico*

Post-Hurricane María was edited by New York-based activist and former Young Lord¹ Iris Morales. In the introduction, Morales (2019) explained that she was inspired to create the anthology out of a feeling of desperation and a need to highlight “first-person chronicles” (p. xvi) about the hurricane. The text is divided into three parts, beginning with the impacts of the hurricane, then “bottom-up solutions to meet the destruction caused by the climate catastrophe and the ongoing economic and political crisis” (p. xvii), and concludes with the hope of how Puerto Rico might be rebuilt anew. Portnoy Brimmer contributed one poem in this anthology, entitled “To Julia Keleher, Puerto Rico’s Secretary of Education, who was on the same American Airlines flight as I was four months after Hurricane María” (English version p. 39; Spanish version p. 159). Edited by two Puerto Rican anthropologists, *Aftershocks of Disaster* (Bonilla & LeBrón, 2019), a collection of essays, poems, and photos, brought to the forefront “the *coloniality of disaster*” (p. 11, italics in original) by revealing how “structures and enduring legacies of colonialism set the stage for María’s impact and its aftermath” (p. 11). Portnoy Brimmer contributed two poems to *Aftershocks of Disaster* – “If a Tree Falls in an Island: The Metaphysics of Colonialism” (p. 94) and “Rhizomatic” (p. 257). Finally, in *Puerto Rico En Mi Corazón* (del Valle Schorske et al., 2019), another English-Spanish bilingual anthology, the editors explain that the creation of the printed book is precisely to give a material object, “something we could hold” (p. XIII), to cope with the grief of the hurricane and surviving it. The book itself is a form of material poetics, reshaping the feelings and experiences of the hurricane and colonialism into a physical object to be shared and touched. The anthology features poetry from across the Puerto Rican diaspora and affirms diasporic connection by pronouncing a “vast ecosystem of care that calls our community into being” (p. XIII). Portnoy Brimmer contributed one poem to this collection entitled, “It Starts With” (p. 97-100).

Written in June 2018, “To Julia Keleher, Puerto Rico’s Secretary of Education, who was on the same American Airlines flight as I was four months after Hurricane María” (Morales, 2019, p. 39-40), discusses policies and conditions that led to outward migration and displacement for Puerto Ricans after Hurricane María. Portnoy Brimmer wrote, “You probably think 188 is not a big number/you paid 5 times that for your Priority Seat/and receive 1,330 times that as your annual salary.” In these first few lines, Portnoy Brimmer is addressing Puerto Rico’s local government and the closing of public schools that were caused by austerity measures intended to pay the Puerto Rican government’s debt. She names the hypocrisy of the government shutting down much needed schools to save money, while simultaneously providing priority seating and high salaries to government officials. Portnoy Brimmer continues, “You probably haven’t realized how full this plane is/that a percentage of the more than 25,000

¹ The Young Lords Party was a militant Puerto Rican organization in the 1960s and 70s that used poems, protests, and direct action to address challenges faced by Puerto Ricans in New York City and advocated for Puerto Rican independence.

students that/have left the 188 schools that you closed are/passengers on this flight.” In these lines, Portnoy Brimmer documents the mass displacement that occurred after Hurricane María, in which over 200,000 people were forcibly displaced, not only by the hurricane, but by austerity measures, which shut down hundreds of schools, and left students in high need areas without access to education, forcing parents to leave the archipelago. Towards the end of the poem, Portnoy Brimmer describes how the plane “heaves under the human weight on its titanium,” meanwhile Keleher can “breathe easy” as she looks past “FEMA tarps” and “military trucks.” In this way, the airplane, feels more of the impact of Puerto Rican displacement than Keleher, showing the aliveness of the plane’s materiality and the emotional deadness of the government official. At the conclusion, Portnoy Brimmer juxtaposes Keleher’s ease and promise of return with the reality that many Puerto Ricans will be permanently displaced from their homes. She confronts uncertainty about her own displacement from Puerto Rico. The plane becomes a more than human entity that bears the consequences of colonial displacement, almost breaking at the weight of all that it carries – people, objects, and the sorrow of those displaced.

Written almost a year after Hurricane María, “If a Tree Falls in an Island: The Metaphysics of Colonialism” (Bonilla & LeBrón, 2019, p. 94), begins: “but even the trees spoke.” They spoke through their “snapping,” and experienced “fright” as their “roots ripped/from the earth’s scalp.” Through this description of trees dying “self-suffocated” and “twisting arthritic fingers,” Portnoy Brimmer eulogizes the material devastation of Hurricane María’s winds and rains on the archipelago. The more than human impact to vegetation and animal life after Hurricane María often came up in the interviews that I conducted throughout my field work. People would describe the archipelago as appearing to have experienced an atomic bomb, a reference to Hiroshima. The trees bore witness as well through their own destruction and attempts at living. They also become a material metaphor for human life. As people forgot to listen to the voice of the trees, they also ignored the suffering that Puerto Ricans themselves were experiencing. Portnoy Brimmer’s piece ends alluding to the ever-rising ocean waters, an impact of melting polar ice caps and atmospheric expansions, writing: “we make a sound-but only the ocean responds/with a swallow.” The eeriness of the ocean’s swallow and the lack of response from anything other than the ocean mirror the material experiences of climate catastrophe, government neglect, and the promise of death in the aftermaths of María. Moreover, the swallowing ocean signals the multiple layers of abandonment that Puerto Ricans have faced since the hurricane.

Discussing the threat of displacement through gentrification, “Rhizomatic” (Bonilla & LeBrón, 2019, p. 257-259), reveals a different image of the ocean. Instead of responding “with a swallow,” the ocean is a “home” that is threatened by the “acid whispers/of *private* and *profit*” and people from “the continent” building homes (p. 259,

italics in original). In this piece, Portnoy Brimmer shares a decolonial perspective stating that “This land is no one’s./This land is of itself” (p. 258). She describes her relationship with the land as a place that “has taken us in. Made a home/of us in return” (p. 258). Through these lines we see the material poetics of Portnoy Brimmer’s connection with the archipelago where land and humans are in relation and mutually dependent on each other. Further, the looming threat of disaster capitalism is foreshadowed. The land is threatened by outsiders that promise to provide better lives in exchange for Puerto Ricans moving away from the ocean shores. She concludes with a warning to potential gentrifiers writing “Let another hurricane come./We stand rhizomatic upon this saline earth.” Again, the relational experience with the earth is reified through these lines as she reaffirms her connection to the land as intertwined, embedded, and rooted in the earth.

“It Starts With” (del Valle Schorske et al., 2019, p. 97-100) was written on September 19, 2017, as Hurricane María began to move towards Puerto Rico. The poem chronicles the slow emergence of the hurricane, and its material impacts on one’s home. In the short piece, Portnoy Brimmer writes, “it starts with/a rumble/a shuffle of dirt/an epilepsy of earth/an avalanche of sticks and soil/breaking through your window...and ends/with your home/wooden splinters/a door knob/in the palm of your hand” (p. 97). Of the poems shared in anthologies, “It Starts With” differs in sharing the physical impacts of the hurricane without delving too deeply into the political reality surrounding it. In the piece, she documents the material consequences and the uncertainty that was lived in the immediate aftermaths. The focus on the exact moment of the hurricane’s arrival brings the reader into presence with her and the phenomenon.

Debut Poetry Collection

To Love an Island (2021) is divided into seven parts, respectively entitled: Strawberries (a stand-alone poem), Breathing Up Storms, Scarred As Islands, Only the Ocean Answers, Forced Flowering, Guillotine—A Flag, and Smallness (another stand-alone poem). The collection chronicles Portnoy Brimmer’s life after Hurricane María – from the landfall of the hurricane and organizing in Puerto Rico, to being displaced while completing her MFA and migrating circularly to her relationship with nature and observations of climate catastrophe, and her hopes for a Puerto Rico that belongs to Puerto Ricans. Edited versions of previously discussed poems also appear in this collection. The piece addressed to Julia Keleher is retitled “American Airlines Flight #188” (p. 49). While edited and polished with new line breaks, the piece retains the same themes and central message. The poem “If a Tree Falls in an Island” is edited and entitled “When a tree falls” (p. 52). Much of the poem remains the same in the beginning with minor edits to polish the language and alter line breaks; however, in

the middle, the poem shifts to discuss injustice. These edits offer a more precise accounting of debris on the streets of Puerto Rico and how government neglect left trees rotting across the archipelago, signaling a lack of care for people. Staying true to the original, only the ocean responds “with a swallow” – a clear metaphor of abandonment. “Rhizomatic” retains its title, but the language of “we” is altered to “they” (p. 54-57). When I questioned her about the change in language, Portnoy Brimmer explained, “It was a question of the politics of voice in that particular poem. I had been writing about the hurricane largely from the first personal plural, to collectivize the poetic voice, and make politicized use of the first person. But, for the purposes of this poem – which is about a very situated history and community – it felt important and necessary to step back from the first person, and write from witness instead. Using the plural third person” (personal communication, September 26, 2022). As in much of her work, Portnoy Brimmer is vigilante about her subject position and understands the need to bear witness to what the unfolding before her.

Two poems from her debut collection – “Reservoir” and “Let it tremble” – highlight this unfolding survivance as *poiesis* through their documentation of recovery and resistance.

I've tried connecting a hose to
 my tear ducts but my grief, the
 men in uniform tell me, is not
 potable. I must wait for bottles
 to rain from the sky. I must wait
 for aisles to be restocked. I must
 wait for truckloads of aseptic
 charity. I must wait. I must wait.
 To die. With dry tongues ...

—Ana Portnoy Brimmer

With the words arranged so as to be shaped like a hose or the tip of a rifle in its publication layout, Portnoy Brimmer’s “Reservoir” (2019, p.45), provides the reader with a visual representation of suffering and resistance after Hurricane María. The poem begins by recounting the dehydration she felt, which was compounded by the suffering she bore witness to. Many died after Hurricane María due to lack of access to clean drinking water. In the opening lines, “I’ve tried connecting a hose/to my tear ducts but my grief,/the men in uniform tell me,/is not potable,” Portnoy Brimmer created a metaphor of her grief as drinkable yet interrupted by the presence of U.S. military personnel in Puerto Rico. She continues, “I must wait for bottles to rain from the sky” alluding to helicopter drop offs of goods in unreachable areas. Years after María, it was discovered that thousands of unused water bottles were left on an airport strip

while people died of thirst. The words “I must wait” appear six times following the opening where Portnoy Brimmer illustrates the precarity experienced in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane. She must wait for “bottles,” a reference to Puerto Rico’s colonial status and local government filtered donations. She must “wait for aisles to be restocked,” a reference to the Jones Act, which bottlenecked goods at Puerto Rican ports. The waiting for Portnoy Brimmer, however, is not hopeful. For, at the end of the waiting, the only promise is “to die.” Death, however, is not just from the lack of water or food, it is orchestrated through colonial occupation in the form of soldier’s guns. In earlier versions of the poem before publication, the lines read, “I must wait for/truckloads of aseptic charity. I/must wait. I must wait. I must/wait. To die. Is a privilege/I cannot afford.” As an activist and someone intimately impacted by austerity, the words “I cannot afford”, speak to Portnoy Brimmer’s desire to engage in social change while also revealing the material conditions of her economic precarity. The “privilege” (she cannot afford) is a juxtaposition of her will to live. As the poem speeds in rhythm, her “reservoir of sorrow” shifts from a tearful lament at the impossibility of survival, to the “drown[ing]” of “the men in uniform.” Through this shift, and the breaking of sentences through periods, commas, and dashes, Portnoy Brimmer gives multiple meanings to each line and engages in a practice of material poetics. For example, taken alone “fortress, always a rifle’s distance” has double meaning as an awareness of Puerto Rico’s long history of anticolonial resistance through armed forces; yet, when coupled with the line “away—the men in uniform” the possibility of resistance is reversed through the risk of armed oppression.

Puerto Rico’s geographic location on the Puerto Rico Trench, where the Atlantic and Caribbean tectonic plates meet, meant a new wave of suffering and anxiety for the Puerto Rican people when, on January 6, 2020, beginning with a 6.4 magnitude earthquake, thousands of aftershocks hit the archipelago. Like the time following Hurricane María, diaspora spaces and mutual aid groups in Puerto Rico engaged in disaster recovery efforts. In “Let it tremble” (p. 95), Portnoy Brimmer recounts the multiple intersecting climate catastrophes that impacted the country between 2017 and early 2020 – hurricanes, earthquakes, and “colonizers” (p. 96). The poem documents the long-term effects of the hurricane and the parallel lack of resources after the 2020 earthquakes. In the first stanza, Portnoy Brimmer writes, “We want to speak/of earthquakes, but trip/over our rubble throats/and say *hurricane* instead” (p. 95, italics in original). When the earthquakes came in 2020, the infrastructure in Puerto Rico had not yet been rebuilt. The electric grid remained unstable, and many homes collapsed unable to survive both the hurricane and the earthquakes. Over 8,000 homes were destabilized and almost 3,000 were deemed uninhabitable, leaving thousands sleeping in the streets during continuing aftershocks (Robles, 2020). The earthquakes brought back memories of government hoarded supplies after the hurricane, which Portnoy Brimmer details in the second stanza – “We found warehouses glutted/with

light and expired water,/haven't showered in days/and only have memory/of power walking out/the door, taking the bill with it." In 2019, suspicions of government corruption were well-documented when cases of water and other goods, hidden by local officials, were discovered. And in what was dubbed 'telegram-gate', then-governor Ricardo Rosselló and his cabinet members were caught making jokes at the expense of Puerto Ricans as they suffered through the worst of life after Hurricane María. Protests erupted across the archipelago and in the diaspora demanding the governor's resignation. Portnoy Brimmer describes these protests in the fifth stanza – "swap flags for guillotine, parade it/through tear-gassed air./Sound pots/and pans from twenty-first floors./Rebaptize streets. Suffocate highways./...Grind up on each other combatively." Not only did people resist and successfully oust the governor, but the 2019 protests also publicized the colonial repression that the people dealt with when Puerto Rican police were documented throwing tear gas into crowds. The poem shifts in nonchronological order through memories, spaces, and places. While reading it, we remember with Portnoy Brimmer what transpired before the earthquakes, and how people learned that community organizing would be their primary route towards staying alive. In the sixth stanza she recounts community-based actions of disaster recovery explaining that "We don't know each other/but distribute tenderness/with organizational urgency./... Cook for entire/neighborhoods. Hold each other when/night's curtain falls.../Tighten our embrace/when it trembles once again." There's a shift that occurs in tone after the community comes together. The tremble takes on new meaning in the seventh stanza, because it is not just the trembling of the earthquakes. It becomes the tremble of their oppressors, too. The tremble of fear and the potential collapse of government. Portnoy Brimmer celebrates their fear, writing: "Let them tremble./Our murderers. The colonizers .../For we've swallowed it all – hurricanes, earthquakes, meteorites, debt,/invasions, and fear with our morning coffee." The celebration is not one of sadism, but one that desires that government officials and colonizers feel what the people have lived with every day. In its conclusion, the poem does not offer a hopeful future for Puerto Rico, but one that mirrors the current realities the archipelago and its inhabitants face – an uncertain future with worsening climate catastrophe and extractive colonialism. While the colonizers engage in an orchestrated genocidal attempt to empty out the archipelago, displacement is resisted, because "...the ruin,/all ours. Puerto Rico is ours./Even if it trembles again and collapses atop us entirely." Through the reclamation of land Portnoy Brimmer engages in survivance; like in "Rhizomatic", the land exists in relation to and with Puerto Ricans.

For Portnoy Brimmer, writing and performing poetry is *poiesis*. Through poems, Portnoy Brimmer was able to remember parts of the storm she had blocked from her active memory, speak back to colonial violence, and affirm her identity. Poetry allowed survivance through storytelling, world making, and contesting dominant narratives.

The spaces where poems were performed also provided material resources to hurricane survivors which allowed for deeper and more meaningful living.

Inconclusive Conclusion: Survivance and Ongoing Climate Catastrophe

As I edited this article, Category 1 Hurricane Fiona passed through Puerto Rico on September 18, 2022. It has been over a week and much of Puerto Rico remains without electricity or running water (Associated Press, 2022; Zahn, 2022). Today (September 26, 2022), people are in the streets protesting, demanding a solution to their lived experiences. Puerto Ricans want to understand why they are still without electricity or running water, forced to throw away groceries, and uncertain about when they will have access to basic necessities. As I continue my ethnographic research, the only explanation many have to offer is that Puerto Rico's electrical grid is out because of colonialism. Puerto Ricans do not own the grid, as it is provided by LUMA Energy, an energy company created after Hurricane María with parent companies in Canada and the U.S. As people find ways to eat, wash their clothes, and bathe without water, it is still too soon to know how many have died through the long-term consequences of lack of access to electricity, drinking water, medical care, and the consequences of mass flooding. Once again, a viral video of Naomi Klein (Democracy Now!, 2018), shared by the Zinn Education Project on their social media accounts on September 2022, affirms that this "is not a disaster...it is state-sponsored mass killing" – a sentiment shared by many Puerto Ricans.

As members of the Puerto Rican diaspora, we are exhausted by the knowledge that the government has done little to protect life and prevent death since Hurricane María. The official death count after María was 4,645, a highly contested number, given that many were cremated and buried without official knowledge (Hoyos & Schabner, 2017). Studies suggest that anywhere between 3,000 and 12,000 people died as a result of Hurricane María's impact (Feldscher, 2018; Prakash, 2018; Sosa Pascual, 2017). Many people were left without electricity over a year after María and some even two years later. Thousands of people were forcibly evacuated from Puerto Rico, resulting in increased trauma due to displacement and experiences of racism and culture shock. Many waited days and months to receive assistance from FEMA or local government officials, but they were left to survive on their own and rely on community networks to survive. And, now, we find ourselves again in similar circumstances.

Today, Portnoy Brimmer along with other poets on the archipelago search for a way to survive all that has transpired. After Hurricane María, Portnoy Brimmer used her poetry as a form of survivance to affirm her Puerto Rican identity, engaging in poetry-based activism and organizing, and protesting. Her poems tell stories of survivance and call people to action. In her own words, Portnoy Brimmer's poetry is "an

exploration of collective trauma, an outpour of amassed grief, a desire for unleashed mourning, a fuck-you to resilience, a brandishing of resistance...all the complexities of loving a place under imperial duress" (2021).

For Puerto Ricans, the weather cannot be separated from their lives, for the impacts of that weather are always enmeshed in larger historical processes and material experiences. As island people, our lives are always entangled with our environment – the mountains, the oceans, the wind, and climate. These entanglements allow for generative and creative practices that permit spaces for survivance even in the midst of overwhelming death and destruction. The hurricane wasn't just a thing that happened to Puerto Ricans. Hurricane María was shaped by and continues shaping the environment for Puerto Ricans. Hurricane María also reshaped the way that Puerto Ricans experience and understand time, mark historical moments, and engage with politics and the world around them. Through a re-coming of La Santa María, the hurricane brought international attention to the deep and lasting impacts of colonialism and austerity on Puerto Rican life and the possibilities and impossibilities of survivance in the continued face of imperialism and economic destitution.

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