

## Editor's Note

Puerto Rico continues to be on my mind. In the last "Editor's Note" (AHR 36.2), I addressed Hurricane María's destructive force over the island of Puerto Rico. Though Puerto Rico and other Caribbean islands are not new to the natural forces originating off the coast of Africa, María's impact was different.

Hurricane destruction in Puerto Rico has been a constant reminder since San Ciriaco of 1899, which wreaked havoc with twenty-eight days of rain and constant winds surpassing 149 miles per hour. It produced more than 3,400 deaths and created damages in excess of \$250 million. Though María was not as strong as San Ciriaco, it had more devastating consequences. There were the usual catastrophic winds and accompanying rain, but the high number of deaths was caused not directly by the hurricane but by political negligence and incompetence.

A few days after the much-anticipated arrival of María, there was an equally publicized visit to the island by President Donald Trump, who made televised appearances for the purpose of convincing Puerto Ricans and the national audience that he cared. At an October 3rd news briefing held shortly after his arrival in San Juan, President Trump compared María to Katrina, claiming that the hurricane that ravaged New Orleans had been much more serious, undermining the devastation many of us were seeing on the news cable channels. I still ask, aren't all hurricanes powerful, destructive, natural forces, and isn't the death of a single person more than enough for concern? President Trump's promotional event was marked by distributing a few supplies and tossing paper towels at a handful of Puerto Rican survivors. As was to be expected, Trump made the visit not about the victims but about himself. When criticized about his delayed reaction, Trump added that his response was comparable to Hurricanes Harvey and Irma. According to the president, his administration responded in a timely fashion and saved the day.

In another televised interview with Puerto Rico's Governor Ricardo Roselló Nevares, President Trump looked over to the chief officer of the Commonwealth, who had abandoned his responsibilities to become the president's leading cheerleader. Much to Trump's delight, the governor confirmed sixty-four untimely deaths. In contrast, the mayor of San Juan, Carmen Yulín Cruz, with boots on the ground, clearly saw a more alarming picture. She witnessed devastation of the capital city and rural communities. Calling attention to this other more realistic picture, one she expressed over and over again, Cruz was challenged by Trump himself. In a September 29 interview, she proclaimed for the world to hear: "We are dying and you are killing us with the inefficiency and the bureaucracy." What Trump broadcasted as an incredibly positive response by his administration, the mayor equated to genocide. In a September 30 tweet, Trump accused Cruz of "poor leadership" and claimed that she and "others in Puerto Rico . . . want everything to be done for them."

In the above mentioned “Editor’s Note,” I referred to the Harvard University study, which placed María destruction well over 4,600 deaths and \$90 billion in damages. After the journal went to press, another study, this one from George Washington University’s Milken Institute of Public Health, agreed with a much higher number of deaths than the amount reported by Puerto Rico’s government, and it estimated the total figure to be closer to 3,000 casualties. Certainly, the devastation affected in greater numbers the island’s poorest and most vulnerable US citizens. Though Puerto Rico has a wealthy class, many of its citizens live in precarious conditions, and the hurricane uncovered their degree of despair.

The editorial staff of the *Afro-Hispanic Review* finally arrived in Puerto Rico on October 11, 2018, to attend the Third Academic Program of the Festival de la Palabra and support this unprecedented cultural activity. We also presented a provisional monographic issue on Afro-Puerto Rican writers, coedited by Mayra Santos Febres and Zaira Rivera Casellas. Our journey had begun in the fall of 2017, when Hurricane María arrived before we did, and forced us to delay our trip for an entire year. The Festival, held at the Archivo General y Biblioteca Nacional, was well attended by countless school children and adults. We were humbled by the number of people who attended our session and the quality of their overwhelming questions.

Indeed, María changed Puerto Rico. We stayed in the well-known Condado area, but I was surprised to see that this once busy tourist zone seemed desolate. Many of the popular hotels continued to be closed, including the Condado Plaza Hilton, the principle location of the Latin American Studies Association Congress in May of 2015. Normally known for its abundance and exuberance, there seemed to be less of everything: people, restaurants, convenience stores, noise, music, vendors, and supportive facilities.

I first traveled to Puerto Rico at the end of my first year in college to work as a volunteer in a program sponsored by the Episcopal Church of Puerto Rico and VESPRA—Puerto Rican Peace Corps—in the Caño de Martín Peña. A handful of undergraduate students and I were asked to create education and social programs for the residents of the Caño, who would soon be asked to exchange their precarious homes, whether they wanted this option or not, for more modern accommodations known as *caseríos* (public housing). Working with students and adults of the Caño was, without a doubt, a rich and rewarding experience. We interacted with community members, organized games and activities, shared meals and experiences, learned about their wants and dreams, and listened to their concerns. As I look back, the journey was an important step in my own personal development. As someone born and raised in the Lower East Side of Manhattan (Loisaida), foreign and national college students came to our neighborhood and church to support our summer programs. The people in the Caño were like me, and yet I, who was raised by a single parent with little means, was there to help

them. Moreover, Puerto Rico is where the journey started for many of my close friends from my neighborhood, whose parents made their way from a warm climate and familiar culture to a cold and inhospitable mainland environment to start a new life. The journey has been documented by many island and mainland Puerto Rican writers, like René Marqués in his groundbreaking *La carreta* (1953). This play is about a Puerto Rican family who leaves the countryside for the capital city, and later for New York. After being assaulted by a culture very different from their own, those who survived returned to the island. Marqués' play was answered by the late Nuyorican poet Tato Laviera whose *La Carreta Made a U-Turn* (1979) proposed that, indeed, New York was their new home, which Puerto Ricans on the mainland welcomed and accepted. The journey to the North was eloquently captured by others, including Felipe Luciano with the following version of his popular poem:

"Jibaro My Pretty Nigger"

Jíbaro, mi negro lindo  
De los bosques de caña  
Caciques de luz  
Tiempo es una cosa cósmica.

Jíbaro, my pretty nigga.  
Father of my yearning for the soil,  
The land,  
The earth of my people.

Father of the sweet smells of fruit in my mother's womb,  
the earth brown of my skin,  
the thoughts of freedom that butterfly through my insides.

Jíbaro, my pretty nigga.  
Sweating bullets of blood and bedbugs,  
Swaying slowly to the softly strummed stains of a five string guitar  
Remembering ancient empires  
Of sun gods and black spirits and things that were once  
So simple.

How times have changed Man.  
how Man has changed time.  
"Unnatural," screams the wind.  
"Unnatural."

Jíbaro, my pretty nigga man.  
Fish smells and cane smells and  
Fish smells and cane smells and  
Tobacco  
And oppression makes even God smell foul.

As foul as the bowels of the ship  
That vomited you up on the harbors of a cold metal city to die.  
No sun, no sand, no palm trees

*William Luis*

And you clung,  
Yes, you clung to the slimy ribs of an animal  
Called the Marine Tiger,  
In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost Amen.

Jíbaro, did you know you my nigga?  
I love the curve of your brow,  
The slant of your baby's eyes  
The calves of your woman dancing;  
I dig you!

You can't hide.  
I ride with you on subways.  
I touch shoulders with you in dances.  
I make crazy love to your daughter.  
yea, you my cold nigga man.  
And I love you 'cause you're mine.

And I'll never let you go.  
And I'll never let you go.  
(You mine, nigga!)  
And I'll never let you go.  
Forget about self.  
We're together now.  
And I'll never let you go!  
Uh'uh  
Never, Nigga.

I now wonder if our work in the Caño, to provide decent housing for its inhabitants, was part of a larger strategy designed by the ruling class to displace people from this area for US tourism to flourish. Many years later, during another trip to the island, I met a group of Puerto Ricans who were involved in the Caño project. I was invited to attend a community meeting and there I found out that our efforts had failed.

That experience was the first of many visits to the island, including regular ones when my mother decided to move to Puerto Rico and retire in the city of Caguas, to be near to her cherished and close friends. While some members of the AHR staff were familiar with the island, it was the first trip for our assistant editor. To expose her to the beauty of la Isla del Encanto, we rented a car and traveled to the usual well-known and popular locations: El Yunque, Luquillo, el Viejo San Juan, among others, and savored many delectable dishes I had come to claim as my own. As we traveled from one place to the other, we saw with our own eyes the devastation María left behind. It was apparent everywhere we looked, and the damage was widespread. Most all of the homes and businesses we saw had some damage. We could still see some without roofs or with partial roofs, many in much need of repairs, and then there was the somber citizenry. You could almost sense in the air a certain sadness and anguish, as if a thick dark cloud hovered over the island. And simultaneously, we also detected a desire to move forward and start anew, as we observed from some who attended the Festival.

I cannot forget, while driving past Luquillo in direction of El Yunque, an electronic billboard with commercial advertisements and, then, the words that read “Harto de estar sin luz.” The message clearly spoke for the entire nation and in particular for Puerto Rico’s poor population. One final observation: we encountered less traffic and people in our travels. Many Puerto Ricans had voted themselves off the island.

I want to thank Mayra Santos Febres and Zaira Rivera Casellas for offering to coedit the present issue on Afro-Puerto Rican writers. Though the current conversation addresses topics relevant to Hispanics and Latinx communities, people of African descent, both at home and abroad, continue to be invisible. The invisibility is even more noticeable with women of African descent. I am grateful to our guest editors for bringing this important subject to the attention of our readers.

William Luis  
Editor