

Teaching Hurricane María: From Chaos and Crisis to Healing and Resistance in Contemporary Puerto Rican Fiction

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On September 19, 2024, Benito Martínez Ocasio, the artist better known as Bad Bunny, used his international platform as an award-winning musician to release the single, “Una velita” (‘A Little Candle’). The song was released the day before the seventh anniversary of Hurricane María, a category five storm that devastated the Puerto Rican archipelago on September 20, 2017. “Una velita” underscores that once again Puerto Rico finds itself amid hurricane season, but that the storms that are raging are not simply atmospheric, but also political, social, and economic. As the song provocatively asks in the chorus, “‘Tá empezando a llover/ Otra ve' va a pasar/ Por ahí viene tormenta/ ¿Quién nos va a salvar?’” ‘It’s starting to rain/ It’s gonna happen again/ Here comes the storm/ Who will save us?’.¹ The song emphasizes the inefficiency and negligence on the part of the Puerto Rican government as well as the federal government in the face of the most devastating natural disaster in the archipelago’s history, and how it became up to the Puerto Rican community with the help of the diaspora to organize and ensure their own survival. By asking “¿quién nos va a salvar?” ‘who will save us?’, the song references how the Puerto Rican people with the help of grassroots community organizations filled the void left by governmental institutions, providing basic necessities such as food and water as well as medical and (re)construction services. It calls for the Puerto Rican people, since the song was released prior to the November 5th elections, to not forget the 4,645 people who died due to this governmental negligence and abandonment.

With this song, I started my *After Hurricane María: From Chaos to Rebellion in Contemporary Puerto Rican Fiction* course in the fall quarter of 2024 at the University of California, Davis. I taught thirty-eight students, who knew very little about the history or the current colonial situation of the archipelago, about contemporary Puerto Rican fiction. Using Hurricane María as a springboard, students examined how Puerto Rican fiction since 2017 has been born out of crisis but also out of attempts to heal, resist, and decolonize. As we continue to consume global natural disasters via social media and other outlets, a question that has come up for higher education instructors is how to effectively translate these conversations to the classroom environment. How can instructors use popular literature, art, music, film, and the media in the classroom to open and create a new space to dialogue with students about the political, social, and cultural impacts of

¹ All translations, unless noted otherwise, are my own.

natural disasters? What sort of pedagogical tools can—or should—one employ, and what teaching practices are effective when discussing trauma and traumatic events? And lastly, what should or could student output look like when we teach about these crises?

As a literature professor whose own research is at the intersection of contemporary literary, gender, and decolonial studies, I broach subject matters that are pertinent to my undergraduate students' lives, such as immigration, race, discrimination, gentrification and forced displacements, violence against women and the LGBTQIA2+ community, and housing and job insecurity. A question I often ask myself as an instructor who teaches contemporary iterations of crisis is: how can we encourage students to analyze crises through fiction? And yet, when I decided to teach a contemporary Puerto Rican fiction course that would examine the aftereffects of Hurricane María in literary, visual, and musical culture, I encountered a new set of challenges that I had not experienced before. How could I get undergraduate students in Northern California to take interest in an event that happened seven years ago, in an archipelago they know very little to nothing about? How would I encourage students to study not only the social and cultural consequences of a hurricane that impacted a country that is a non-incorporated territory of the United States, but also to investigate the complicated colonial relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States through contemporary fiction? How would I guide my students in their examination of fiction detailing a catastrophic event and its sociopolitical, economic, and cultural aftereffects while considering potential trauma triggers for students? Moreover, how could I teach about the new fiction produced after Hurricane María when this catastrophic event had affected my own family, as well as myself as a member of the Puerto Rican diaspora?

In this article, I document my pedagogical approach and strategies in teaching a contemporary fiction course that uses a natural disaster as a catalyst to discuss Puerto Rico's colonial crisis. To assess the results of my teaching practices, I consider students' analytic and creative output during the course and detail my use of trauma-informed pedagogy in combination with an engaged participation model that converts the classroom into a critical space for reflection and dialogue. I propose that teaching crisis and trauma fiction can promote students' critical thinking, allowing them to gain a better understanding of contemporary iterations of crisis while being mindful of their wellbeing. For this reason, I ask my students not only how artists are using visual and written material to represent crises and their aftereffects, but also how we use art, literature, and other mediums to examine and respond to the effects of crisis on our lives as well as to heal from trauma.

Using the framework of decolonial studies, I encouraged students to examine events in Puerto Rico, in particular the forced exodus and the continual displacement of Puerto Ricans from the archipelago especially after the hurricane,

as a microcosm of what is occurring in other parts of the world. Avtar Brah argues in *Decolonial Imaginings*:

[d]ecoloniality enables us to prioritise and foreground regimes of knowledge that have been sidelined, ignored, forgotten, repressed, even discredited by the forces of modernity, colonialism, imperialism, and racial capitalism. It is a method to restore and resituate the marginalised to the centre and thereby validate the lived experiences, cultures, and multiplicity of forms of knowledge of subordinate groups such as Indigenous people, racialised groups, and those suffering all manner of exploitation and discrimination. The project of decoloniality is designed to interrogate and decentre the hegemonic moves of hetero/cis normativity. It challenges intersectional hierarchies of 'race', class, gender, and de/disability. (17)

My *After Hurricane María* course, therefore, focused on the voices, be they literary, artistic, cinematographic, and/or musical, that have long been marginalized even prior to Hurricane María and that continue to be silenced in a repressive Puerto Rican colonial system. Thus, all of the fiction that we studied was created by Puerto Ricans, both from the archipelago and the diaspora, and included material in both Spanish and English. Although the course began with fiction that represented the hurricane's impact on Puerto Rico and its diasporic communities, we then analyzed the Puerto Rican exodus that occurred after the storm and investigated the *Verano del 19* 'Summer of 2019' or the *Verano Boricua* 'Boricua Summer' protests which led to the resignation of the Puerto Rican governor at the time, Ricardo Rosselló. We examined how the grassroots community-centered response to Hurricane María paved the way not only for the protests of the *Verano del 19* where citizens took to the streets in response to a Puerto Rican government that had failed them, but also for a new decolonial and emancipatory fiction in Puerto Rico. Feminist decolonial *coraje* 'rage' was central to the success of the *Verano del 19* protests as it has been for contemporary protest fiction denouncing the effects that coloniality, debt, and precarity have on the Puerto Rican population. Marisol LeBrón proposes that "*coraje* has emerged as one of the most potent responses to the ongoing crisis of colonial capitalism in Puerto Rico. Building from feminist, particularly Black feminist, theorizations of rage and anger, I understand *coraje* as an essential political emotion necessary for structural transformation" ("Policing *Coraje*" 802). For this reason, we ended the course with a discussion of the forced displacements of Puerto Ricans from Puerto Rico as well as the current grassroots activism that employs *coraje* as a decolonial strategy to counter these displacements by returning to the land and developing sustainable agricultural practices.

I wanted to be mindful, however, about how reading or watching the devastation following a catastrophic natural disaster could potentially retraumatize

or provoke trauma responses in certain students. With this in mind, I have adopted a trauma-informed educational practice and approach in my teaching. Janice Carello and Phyllis Thompson define a trauma-informed approach as one that “hold[s] space for pain and risk” when discussing trauma, but that also “does not erase the trauma, does not pretend it did not happen, and does not downplay its effects but also does not believe that trauma is our destiny; there is recovery, recuperation, and healing” (“Developing a New Default” 5). For Mays Imad, a trauma-informed mode of instruction means instructors are aware of the continuous impact of trauma on students’ well-being as well as their ability to learn (39). Like Carello and Thompson, Imad underscores that instructors must also recognize the effects of trauma on themselves. Thus, being mindful of my own trauma responses and potential trauma triggers for students, I searched for material that did not commodify suffering by using clichéd or simplified images of trauma. Instead, I wanted to draw attention to how businesses and wealthy individuals as well as the local and federal government have capitalized on Puerto Ricans’ trauma after Hurricane María. For this reason, I made sure that the stories we read were not simply equating Puerto Rican identity with trauma to capitalize on the wounds from Hurricane María.

Using a multimodal, multigenre approach, I included material that first addressed the effects of Hurricane María within Puerto Rico along with representations of the aftershocks of the storm in daily life. Next, we examined the storm’s impact on the Puerto Rican diaspora. Yarimar Bonilla and Marisol LeBrón explain that “[a]ftershocks remind us that disasters are not singular events but ongoing processes. [...] Indeed, we ask whether Hurricane María should be considered the ‘mainshock’ at all, or whether the storm and its effects are best understood as the compounded results of a longer colonial history” (“Introduction” 9). This idea of Hurricane María as an aftershock and as an unmasking of Puerto Rico’s colonial situation was precisely what I wanted my students to grasp. For this reason, we began the course asking how language, be it literary, artistic, musical or cinematographic, is used to put the pain and trauma caused by a catastrophic event into words. As the Puerto Rican author Eduardo Lalo has stated,

Literature is a special world. It tries to express tragedy, but the real object of the literary word is the unnameable. You could put into words all the government’s irresponsibility and its corruption. And people do that every day. But you cannot use words to capture pain, especially collective pain. Our pain is not only a personal but also a historical pain. It’s a pain that is not seen, or that is seen as that of a marginal society whose humanity is undervalued. (52)

Employing various genres such as poetry, short stories, chronicles, comics, documentaries, and music, my students analyzed the techniques used to put this pain into words, images, and music. For example, we started discussing poetry as a medium to personify the Hurricane's violence, its voraciousness, and the devastation it left in its wake. Through poems by contemporary authors such as Mara Pastor, Ana Portnoy Brimmer, and Xavier Valcárcel, among others, students investigated not only the physical devastation caused by the storm, but also different manifestations of trauma. As Cathy Caruth elucidates in *Unclaimed Experience*, "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4; italics in original). Poems like Portnoy Brimmer's "GERD" in her poetry anthology *To Love an Island* (2021) personify colonial and generational trauma as a sick body, one who has ingested and now chronically houses trauma in the form of GERD (gastroesophageal reflux disease). Students were interested in the poem's use of the doctor-patient interaction, where the doctor asks her patient whether Puerto Rico is open for U.S. tourism following the storm, as a commentary on Puerto Rico's colonial situation and on the continued invasion and violation of Puerto Rico by new age colonizers.

However, this examination of Hurricane María's unmasking of Puerto Rico's collective, colonial pain also considered the agency and resilience of the Puerto Rican community and the Puerto Rican diaspora. This led to watching documentaries, such as Verónica Ortiz Calderón's *Candlelight: A Life After the Storm* (2018), which showcased the struggles of acquiring basic necessities such as food and water and yet also highlighted how people came together as a community to provide for one another. And yet, students understood that resilience should also be understood as a form of generational trauma because as Yarimar Bonilla suggests, "years of abandonment by local and federal governments have forced communities to take care of themselves. I think this is why people were able to move so quickly and to immediately begin thinking about alternatives at the community level. This is wonderful but also troubling, given the superhuman capacity for resilience that is now expected of residents" ("The Trauma Doctrine" 19). Resilience as trauma was also the theme of other works we discussed, such as Ana María Fuster Lavín's chronicle "De las pisadas del insomnio" ("From the Footsteps of Insomnia") or the short stories "Madriguera" ("The Burrow") by Tere Dávila or "Empty" by Laura García Urrutía, among others. In their portrayal of life after the storm, these works employ the grotesque, the supernatural, and the terrifying to accentuate the daily horrors endured by the Puerto Rican population.

After examining the fiction that has been produced in Puerto Rico post-Hurricane María, we turned our focus to the Puerto Rican exodus and the diaspora's trauma following the storm in Portnoy Brimmer's *To Love an Island* as well as

chronicles such as Xavier Valcárcel's *Aterrizar no es regreso* ('Landing Is Not a Return') (2019) and Patricia Coral's *Women Surrounded by Water* (2024). In her chapter "Storms," Coral includes personal musings in the form of diary entries as well as poems to depict the diaspora's trauma—the feelings of impotence, loss, and heartache at witnessing the destruction of your country combined with the impossibility of returning home. As UC Davis has recently been designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution, I teach and mentor many Latinx and Chicax students in my undergraduate courses, many of whom are the first in their families to be attending college.² Many of my students' families have been forced to emigrate to the United States from Mexico, so they felt very connected to the feelings and experiences represented in works discussing migration, displacement, and the loss of home. For this reason, I wanted to make sure that I valued their diverse experiences in the classroom by creating a safe space for discussion while also acknowledging that this material examines difficult topics that can be emotionally provocative.

Some of the students tended to draw more explicit parallels to their own experiences, especially if they had also been present for a natural disaster or had families who were forced to emigrate. Many shared this in class or in their weekly reflection papers, where I asked them to comment on the themes explored during that week and what impacted them the most and why. In these weekly reflections, there were also students who more directly expressed that "this was difficult to read" or "this was hard to watch" because of the suffering depicted but also commented on the fact that they empathized with the author's or character's feelings. Although some material elicited memories or triggered emotional responses for certain students, many remarked that they felt represented even though they were not Puerto Rican and that many of these works had a healing effect. In her study of trauma-informed pedagogy, Katarina Bath remarks that "reading about someone else's trauma can have a healing, consolatory effect on persons suffering from similar traumas," especially when instructors create a sense of "ethical awareness among the students about how to read trauma narratives" (141). What this means, as Phyllis Thompson and Heidi Marsh explain, is that:

recognizing the fear of danger as a trauma response and employing practices to avoid retraumatizing others (and becoming retraumatized ourselves) does not mean that a safe space is one that shies away from challenges. We are

² In their study of Hispanic-Serving Institutions, Joy Patton and Lauren Cortez explain the importance of adopting a trauma-informed pedagogical approach in an HSI because "prior research has demonstrated that Hispanics tend to have high rates of PTSD, anxiety, and panic disorders, suicide, and suicidal ideations, substance use, and other mental health disorders, with increasing rates among second and third-generation Hispanics due to experiences of marginalization and acculturation" (108).

charged with cultivating a certain sense of discomfort for our students—to challenge their own status-quo thinking, to ask them to push themselves toward deeper, more critical thought—and as agents of change in our institutions to challenge practices, policies, and procedures that are barriers to justice, so let us not dismiss either. Let us instead recognize that discomfort and the fear of danger are not the same, that the trauma response of fear shuts us down physiologically and psychologically in a way that intellectual discomfort does not. (22)

For Thompson and Marsh, providing a safe space for class discussion does not mean avoiding material or conversations that could produce discomfort in certain students. Trauma-informed pedagogy means transforming “our classrooms, offices, and institutions into sites where we can recognize the impact of trauma, avoid re-traumatization, and build resilience while moving the needle toward justice” (20). Bath encourages instructors to employ the classroom space to discuss both “the ethical challenges the traumatic material poses and how we can be responsible as readers” (143). In discussing the instructor-student relationship, Zaretta Hammond proposes that the classroom should be thought of as “a critical container for empowering marginalized students. It serves as a space that reflects the values of trust, partnership, and academic mindset that are at its core” (143).

Thinking of my own classroom as “a critical container” for student empowerment, trust, and transformation, I conducted regular verbal check-ins with students before we started our discussion of the class materials, asking for their reactions but also determining how students were doing emotionally and whether adjustments were needed. The willingness to make adjustments to one’s course is essential because as Bath signals, “an educator teaching potentially traumatic material must be sensitive and assess what the group in question can handle and how to discuss the material in a way that will make the students grow as human beings” (143). In addition to the weekly reflection papers which I hoped would provide a space for students to open up about their affective responses to the material, I occasionally asked for brief written check-ins at the beginning of class, so that students who did not want to verbalize how they were feeling could do so in a written format. In this way, I invited students to share their emotional responses to the material if they wanted to, and I allowed for a moment of decompression before engaging them in a discussion of potentially difficult material.

Another one of my pedagogical strategies has been to use small group discussions as preparation for our larger in-class discussions. After contextualizing the material for the day and including pertinent theoretical frameworks to help guide our analysis and discussion, I divide my class into six or seven groups of students, depending on the class size. For each of my classes, I ask my discussion leaders, about six to seven students per class, to write three analytical discussion

questions on the day's material prior to our class session. In their analytical questions, students are encouraged to question the effectiveness of the representation that they have been asked to read or see and to problematize certain concepts or ideas. As a learner-focused strategy, students are responsible for generating discussion first in their small groups, coming up with group answers and reflections, and guiding the direction that our class discussion will take.

During a particular class session on the *Verano del 19* protests, which were a direct response to the local and federal government's inefficiency and negligence following Hurricane María, I asked students to analyze the song "Afilando los cuchillos" ('Sharpening the Knives') by Residente, Bad Bunny, and iLe. Released during the protests on July 17, 2019, the song became a revolutionary anthem because it verbalized the colonial abuse and abandonment that Puerto Ricans have long suffered due to a political class that, as Marisol LeBrón states, "is responsible for the harm and fear that Puerto Ricans had been suffering in the months leading up to the protests" and is, furthermore, "a murderous class" (*Against Muerto Rico* 37). Students engaged with the song's title, lyrics, and rhythm as well as the change from one singer to the next. As one student asked, "'Afilando los Cuchillos' de Residente, iLe y Bad Bunny es un 'diss track' bellamente escrito y una declaración política. ¿Qué crees que significa el título de la canción? ¿Qué simboliza? ¿Qué significa en relación con la protesta?" "'Sharpening the Knives' by Residente, iLe y Bad Bunny is a beautifully written 'diss track' and a political statement. What do you think the song title means? What does it symbolize? What does it mean in relation to the protest?" With their assigned group leaders, students would then answer the questions that the leaders posed on the discussion forum site. The discussion leader would write out the conclusions that the group had reached to share them with the rest of the class as we examined the different parts of the song.

Often, I would use these discussion questions to facilitate or transition to other in-class group activities. Sometimes their questions would serve as a springboard to analyze a passage from a short story or a scene from a documentary. For example, in analyzing the final scene from Cecilia Aldarondo's *Landfall* (2020), which depicts the urban cleanup following the *Verano del 19* protests, one student asked:

El final del documental muestra a los puertorriqueños resistiendo contra la policía y el gobierno mediante protestas y también empleando el grafiti (por ejemplo, pintando "Auditen la deuda" y "Esto no es un final", entre otras frases), aunque estas palabras se cubren con pintura blanca al final. ¿Cómo simboliza esto la relación entre los ciudadanos y el gobierno? ¿Cuál es el propósito de la resistencia y la protesta y crees que es eficaz? ¿Por qué pondrían esta escena al final del documental?

The end of the documentary shows Puerto Ricans resisting the police and the government through protests and using graffiti (for example, painting “Audit the debt” and “This is not the end,” among other phrases), although these words are covered with white paint at the end. How does this symbolize the relationship between citizens and the government? What is the purpose of resistance and protest, and do you think it is effective? Why would they put this scene at the end of the documentary?

Employing the students’ questions, I would then ask the groups to complete a scene analysis, engaging with the cinematographic strategies employed by Aldarondo in her documentary. In another instance, we discussed Aldarondo’s use of nature scenes in the film—scenes that underscore Puerto Rico as a paradise ripe for neocolonial consumption versus scenes that accentuate the devastation following Hurricane María. Students problematized the idea of Puerto Rico as a paradise and the selling of Puerto Rico as tax haven paradise to United States investors, understanding that Aldarondo is uncovering colonial mechanisms that are still at work in the archipelago. In their weekly reflections, students would often return to these scene analyses, commenting on their peers’ observations and developing their interpretations further, which served as preparation for their final group interview project.

Additionally, students were able to speak to some of the authors studied in the course, such as Patricia Coral via Zoom and Xavier Valcárcel in person, about their writing process and some of the crucial topics they include in their work, such as Puerto Rico’s colonial situation, the need to emigrate to the United States, and the resulting trauma from Hurricane María. In preparation for these sessions, I require all of my students to contribute two questions, out of which I choose twenty for the session. During our class discussion with Valcárcel, students were able to engage directly with the author through a question-and-answer session. For example, students asked about Valcárcel’s narrative strategies and how his concept of home has changed how he writes about Puerto Rico:

Estudiante 1: En su proceso de escribir una crónica, ¿cómo decide qué anécdotas cuenta y cuáles no? Imagino que hay un montón de experiencias que ha tenido durante este tiempo que subrayan las ideas de la culpa y la búsqueda. ¿Cómo consolida todos estos eventos complejos en su proceso de escritura?

Estudiante 2: En tu poesía, el concepto de “hogar” parece ser algo más que un lugar físico; refleja un espacio cultural y emocional. Dado el cambio en la situación social y política de Puerto Rico, ¿cómo ha cambiado tu idea de

“hogar” a lo largo del tiempo y cómo se refleja este cambio en la manera en que escribes sobre Puerto Rico y su gente?

Student 1: In the process of writing a chronicle, how do you decide which anecdotes to tell and which ones you don't? I imagine there are a lot of experiences you've had during this time that underline the ideas of guilt and searching. How do you consolidate all these complex events into your writing process?

Student 2: In your poetry, the concept of 'home' seems to be more than just a physical place; it reflects a cultural and emotional space. Given the change in Puerto Rico's social and political situation, how has your idea of 'home' changed over time and how is this change reflected in the way you write about Puerto Rico and its people?

Their discussion question assignments and the in-class group activities as well as the question-and-answer sessions with the authors allowed for the sort of critical self-reflection that could then translate into a final group interview project, which is a critically-engaged approach that allows students to more fully examine the work of a creator beyond the scope of the course.

For the final project, I asked students to work in groups of four to five people to choose, contact, and interview a contemporary Puerto Rican creator (author, artist, photographer, musician, actor, director, journalist, etc.). I found that a final group interview project would best demonstrate whether students had been able to engage critically with the material in a way that helped them reflect upon Puerto Rico's contemporary crises, protests, and activism through a literary or artistic framework. In my view, the final interview projects revealed that students could make connections with the materials studied in class and apply them in their more holistic examination of a person's work and career, fully engaging with how a particular artist or author wanted to portray Puerto Rico and why. While some groups chose to interview someone whose work we analyzed during the course, they were also free to contact and interview someone whose work we had not studied.³ The student groups would then formulate questions about the person's work and career that pertained to the core themes of the course, but that also reflected a topic that they wished to explore further. For example, some groups focused on issues concerning the Puerto Rican diaspora and the possibility of returning to the archipelago while others wanted to emphasize how artists imagine a decolonized Puerto Rico.

³ Depending on their topic and if the students requested help, I provided some ideas. Other groups contacted people I had referenced or mentioned in class, but whose work we did not analyze as part of the course.

In addition to conducting the interview, students were asked to analyze the interview, explaining the purpose of the interview and why this artist was chosen. I asked students to include sample questions and explain how and why these particular questions were developed and asked. Besides describing the person's career and work, students provided samples of the person's work while analyzing the vision that this creator is promoting of Puerto Rico and why. Finally, I also asked the groups to formulate some conclusions by discussing what was learned and what new ideas or topics arose during the interviews.

During the final week of the course, students gave in-class group presentations on their interviews. The reason for this was that I wanted students to develop their oral communication skills in Spanish as they described the interview process, provided sample questions, and analyzed the interview itself. I also wanted other students in the course to learn about other Puerto Rican creators we had not studied in the course or if we had examined their work, perhaps delve into other material we had not read or seen. Moreover, students had to write short reflection pieces on all of the group presentations, describing each group's focus and process. In this way, I made sure students were engaged throughout the week of presentations. Students commented that this final project was truly rewarding as they were able to interact with authors and illustrators such as Ana Portnoy Brimmer, Rosa Colón, or Karl Michael Iglesias, directors such as Cecilia Aldarondo, or visual artists such as Sofía Córdova, an experience which most had not had prior to this class.

With their interviews and final group presentations, students developed and achieved unique approaches that demonstrated not only their engagement with their chosen topic, but also fiction's potential in providing and cultivating strategies of resistance. In *Read Dangerously*, Azar Nafisi explains that writers, especially those that have lived through trauma,

have found literature and imagination not only important, but, in fact, vital to their well-being. For them, writing was a way of surviving—in a sense, their only way of surviving. [...] I am not talking about literature of resistance but *literature as resistance*. I am interested in ways through which literature and art resist seats of power—not only that of kings and tyrants, but the tyrant within us as well. (9)

In my *After Hurricane María* course, I asked my students to “read dangerously” in the way that Nafisi describes because I wanted them to understand that fiction can be used as a way of surviving, *as resistance*. I also asked them to think about fiction's decolonial possibilities. Ariadna Godreau-Aubert proposes that decolonization is achieved through a “return to our *cuerpas*, to their diversities of race, gender, and class, to propose new forms of dialogue in order to move from

there to action” (132).⁴ The reason for this, suggests Godreau-Aubert, is that “[t]he colony operates through ‘repeated acts of capture.’ [...] The colony is a trap of sorts: impossible to confront and, at the same time, easy to see” (137-38). Hence, Godreau-Aubert encourages understanding our bodies, our *cuerpas* as “spaces of conflict,” but also as “spaces to decolonize” (138). Throughout the course, I encouraged students to reflect upon the ideas of spaces and bodies in need of decolonization, including the classroom.

Following bell hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress*, I envisioned my classroom as one of possibility, and thus, I offered my classroom as space where students could “face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom” (207). For this reason, I made space for my students’ diverse voices and perspectives, all the while considering the impact that I wanted this course to have on them while being mindful that some material could evoke emotional responses. As Carello and Thompson suggest, “to be effective educators we must understand why we teach *what* we teach,” so that we can assess both how to teach what we teach and the resulting impact it will have on our students as well as ourselves (“What Are We Centering?” 204; *italics in original*). In thinking about this impact, I ended the course the same way I began it, having students listen to Bad Bunny’s “Una velita” and answer the question the chorus poses to us, “¿Quién nos va a salvar?” ‘Who will save us?’ As one student put it, we need to reframe this question from passively asking who will save us to actively answering how we are going to save ourselves and what that will entail.

Although contemporary Puerto Rican fiction, especially post-Hurricane María, does not necessarily translate into direct activism, it can challenge us to question the colonial *status quo*, to not be content with the answers we are given, but most significantly, it is disruptive and disorienting as well as healing. In *Kafka’s Monkey and Other Phantoms of Africa*, Seloua Luste Boulbina argues that one aspect of the decolonization of knowledge is disorientation because “we must learn to become disoriented and thereby to become decentered—within oneself and from oneself—to properly or correctly reach regions of humanity long considered ‘backward’” (293). For Boulbina, decolonial thinking translates into “a rejuvenation [*devenir enfant*] of the mind, a way of losing the known world and of finding one’s own world,” for it requires “a massive labor of separation because one’s bearings (one’s north) are what must be lost” (299). My students learned that post-Hurricane María fiction has been disruptive in unmasking the abandonment,

⁴ Godreau-Aubert proposes that the colony is “never a safe space: for women, it’s a hostile territory tinged with the rise of gender violence, precarity, the criminalization of protest, impunity for civil servants who rape women, and the Church who prays for the rapist and his family” (137-38). For this reason, Godreau-Aubert calls for the use not of the masculine *cuerpo* in Spanish, but of *cuerpa*, feminizing the term, to transform Puerto Rico.

negligence, and intergenerational pain and trauma caused by the colonial mechanisms still in place in Puerto Rico, but also disorienting in imagining new futures, in envisioning the dawn of a new national project. As art that practices healing from trauma, Bad Bunny's "Una velita" ends waiting for this new dawn and beginning, which, as the lyrics assure us, is coming: "Toy esperando a que salga el sol/ A que salga el sol/ Va a salir el sol" 'I'm waiting for the sun to rise/ For the sun to rise/The sun is going to rise.'

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