Bolt on Padilla and Rosado, 'Tossed to the Wind: Stories of Hurricane Maria Survivors'

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In *Tossed to the Wind: Stories of Hurricane Maria Survivors*, authors María T. Padilla and Nancy Rosado provide a harrowing and compelling picture of Hurricane Maria and its aftermath as described by those who experienced the storm most acutely. By tracing the mental and geographical paths Maria survivors traversed—what Padilla and Rosado refer to as a “continuing narrative,” the authors highlight the key drivers of one of the largest Puerto Rican outmigrations in modern history (p. xi). Padilla and Rosado argue that the Puerto Rican outmigration following Hurricane Maria was not routine but rather “a concentrated, once-in-a-lifetime event of historical proportions—an event that changed not only Puerto Rico but also the communities in which the Hurricane survivors settled” (p. 34). As illustrated by the featured narratives, survivors fled Puerto Rico for Florida for a number of reasons, including but not limited to: limited access to basic necessities, such as water, food, and electricity, for months following the disaster; a lack of critical health care for the most vulnerable family members; the loss of stable employment and fewer opportunities to pursue education. As one narrator put it, “The path [to fulfill professional goals] is more viable here. I find the path shorter in the States compared with Puerto Rico, where too many doors were closed for me” (p. 121). However, lest the reader conclude that the devastation precipitating the migration was caused by an “act of God,” Padilla and Rosado are clear in their indictment of the federal and municipal governments, federal aid organizations like the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and the long legacy of American colonization and imperialism.

To gain a sense of the shared experiences of Hurricane Maria survivors, the authors interviewed a host of Puerto Ricans who had either relocated to Florida in the months following the storm or had participated in the reception of and aid for immigrants as they arrived stateside. Padilla and Rosado frequented the hotels in which survivors found temporary housing through FEMA vouchers, going door to door and explaining their project. The individuals who consented were asked a list of open-ended questions about their experience, with topics ranging from biography, preparing for and living through Hurricanes Irma and Maria, survival post-Maria, their migration stateside, and, finally, their long-term plans. The authors organized the narratives into broad themes based loosely on where survivors were living at the time of the interview—in hotels paid for by FEMA vouchers, with family members, or in recently secured permanent housing—and alternately, those who already lived in Florida and were providing aid to refugees. These interviews form the three core chapters of the
book: “Living in Hotels,” “Settling In,” and “The View from Orlando.” Because housing security was a pressing concern to those interviewed and largely drove their decision-making and movements in the aftermath of the storm, this organization works. However, some of the more poignant connections between the narratives are obscured as a result, such as the overwhelming lack of aid to survivors in the days following the event, the difficulty in finding stable work and securing long-term housing stateside, long-term mental and physical health consequences, and the decisive role of community care and unity in survival. These through lines underscore both the insufficiency of disaster aid and the resiliency of disaster survivors and warrant focused attention.

One of the most compelling pieces of context that Padilla and Rosado provide for understanding US federal and municipal responses to the disaster in Puerto Rico is their discussion of the Insular Cases—approximately twenty-one Supreme Court cases beginning in 1901 that determined the parameters for US perceptions of and interactions with the island territory. According to the authors, the precedents set by cases like *Balzac v. Porto Rico* (sic) (1922), which established that the provisions of the Constitution did not apply to US territories, in addition to the decision to bestow Congress with political power over the island in the Foraker Act of 1900, set the “lopsided tone for United States-Puerto Rico relations for decades to come” (p. 18). Such evidence draws clear connections between the legal decision-making of a racist Supreme Court (the very same court to establish “separate but equal” in *Plessy v. Ferguson* [1896] and the viral image of former president Donald Trump tossing paper towels into a crowd of Hurricane Maria survivors over a century later.

Balancing personal narratives with historical episodes like the Insular Cases is no small feat, and the authors manage to effectively place the post-Maria outmigration within the broader Puerto Rican diaspora. However, readers could benefit from a more robust discussion of the history of US federal disaster response and an expanded analysis of the history of displacement as an environmental justice and human rights issue associated with “natural” disaster events. This context would further emphasize how events like Hurricane Maria develop and illuminate the governments’ culpability in causing and exacerbating them. To be clear, I am not suggesting the authors sacrifice the oral histories for a more thorough discussion of these topics; rather, the discussion could take the form of an additional chapter that connects the disaster in Puerto Rico to routine and extreme disasters stateside—from Hurricane Katrina and Superstorm Sandy to the Mississippi inundating communities along its banks and the annual fires ravaging the West. This sort of comparison would achieve two things: situating Hurricane Maria in the long history of US disaster response and emphasizing the unique lived experience of disaster in places still suffering the legacies of colonization and racism most acutely.

Ultimately, Padilla and Rosado’s *Tossed to the Wind* is a timely, significant, and methodologically compelling addition to the fields of environmental history and disaster studies. They build on critical early works, like Ted Steinberg’s *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (2000), by highlighting the role of human action (and indeed, inaction) in exacerbating disaster events for the most vulnerable and holding space for these individuals to make sense of the compounding failures of government and aid at multiple scales. Additionally, the authors join an ever-expanding discourse on oral history and disaster, adding to such works as Svetlana Alexievich’s *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* (2006) and Lola Vollen and Chris Ying’s edited collection, *Voices from the Storm: The People of Hurricane Katrina and Its Aftermath* (2006), and recent interdisciplinary scholarship like Mark Cave and Stephen M. Sloan’s edited
volume, *Listening on the Edge: Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis* (2014), and Debbie Lee and Kathryn Newfont’s edited collection, *The Land Speaks: New Voices at the Intersection of Oral and Environmental History* (2017). These works, collectively, seek to empower the communities devastated by disasters of all forms, returning control of the narrative to those facing uncertainty and insecurity and, as in the case of *Tossed to the Wind*, waiting for aid that may never come.

Thus, Padilla and Rosado’s text is of interest not only to historians of the environment, disasters, and oral storytelling but also to a wide public audience seeking to make sense of and prepare for disaster events that seem to strike with increasing frequency and ferocity. *Tossed to the Wind* also serves as a call to action for federal and municipal governments—and everyone with the privilege of influencing national elections—to acknowledge and address the lasting effects of institutionalized colonization and the heavy toll paid by disenfranchised American citizens (to say nothing of the toll paid by those for whom citizenship is denied). The waters will continue to rise; it is up to us all to listen and act.


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