

Revisiting Tidalactics: Irma/José/Maria 2017

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For the stone of this island to be bombed  
by this wind & all this, all this water

.....

wood  
has become so useless, stripped wet,  
fragile, broken, totally uninhabitable  
with what we must still build

—Kamau Brathwaite, *Star: Hurricane Poem*<sup>1</sup>

I revisit Kamau Brathwaite's concept of tidalactics just weeks after the largest triple hurricane system on record has pummeled the Caribbean. It is an awful reminder of the permeability between land and sea, particularly on small islands. In this unholy trinity of Irma, José, and Maria, these mergers are violent and deadly. António Guterres, the secretary-general of the United Nations, declared that Barbuda, thought to have been 90 percent destroyed (like Anguilla) by Hurricane Irma, had become a "paradise transformed to hell."<sup>2</sup> The category 5 Hurricane Maria, which destroyed the freshwater supply and infrastructure on Dominica and Puerto Rico, was thought to be the strongest Atlantic storm on record. Hurricane Irma flooded seawater as far as a third of a mile inland in Cuba. Beach sand covered the region's major arteries, which are still impassable in many places weeks after the storm. Twenty-five-foot waves pounded the shores, while coastal surges were measured at over six feet in the Dominican Republic and elsewhere. Because of the record-breaking rainfall, an 11-billion-gallon dam in Puerto Rico began to fail. Irma's winds were so strong that they literally pulled water out of the ocean, drying out beaches in the Bahamas and creating watery bulges elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> In report after report, eyewitnesses fail to find the words to describe these unprecedented violent weather events. Instead the language of apocalypse prevails: "catastrophic," "precarious," "total devastation," and "hell."

It is a poignant and also maddening time to revisit tidalactics, a neologism that the Barbadian poet has employed throughout his

career to describe “the movement of the water backwards and forwards as a kind of cyclic . . . motion, rather than linear.”<sup>14</sup> Challenging the binarism of Western thought, the ocean and land are seen in continuous relation—as shifting points of contact, arrival, departure, and transformation. Tidalactics engage what Brathwaite calls an “alter/native” historiography to linear models of colonial progress. This “tidal dialectic” resists the synthesizing telos of Hegel’s dialectic by drawing from a cyclical model, invoking the continual movement and rhythm of the ocean. Tidalactics foreground “alter/native” epistemologies to colonialism and capitalism, with their linear and materialist biases. In contradistinction to Western models of passive and empty space, such as *terra* (and *aqua*) *nullius*, which were used to justify territorial expansion, tidalactics reckons a space and time that requires an active and participatory engagement with the island seascape. In keeping with Caribbean thought and aesthetics, tidalactics also challenge the Western bifurcation between nature and culture and position both as always already modern. The long history of ecological imperialism in the region, where the violent transplantation of peoples and commodity crops permanently altered the landscape, evidence the ways in which the Caribbean has been a staging ground for Atlantic modernity. Thus the Western separation of nonhuman nature from culture through the creation of pure wilderness spaces that fuels so much North American ecocriticism was not possible on islands whose economies were based on monocrop culture and plantation slavery.<sup>5</sup>

In this Anthropocene era of extreme weather events and dramatic sea-level rise, Caribbean writers provide a prescient perspective on the relationship between human history and the ocean. Brathwaite and many of his fellow Caribbean authors have envisioned what I have elsewhere called a “transoceanic imaginary” as a trope for Caribbean history, migration, and regionalism.<sup>6</sup> This can be characterized as a cultural oceanography that maps a broader regional identity, establishing that, in Brathwaite’s words, the “unity is submarine.”<sup>7</sup> Or it can be characterized as “sea ontologies,” figuring the ocean as constitutive to being. In Derek Walcott’s words, the “sea is History,” and the Caribbean subject is a “foetus of plankton.”<sup>8</sup> To Grace Nichols, Caribbean culture emerges from a “middle passage womb,” while to Fred D’Aguiar, “the sea was the beginning and end of everything.”<sup>9</sup> The dynamism of island space has long provided a geologic for engaging land and sea. Édouard Glissant has declared that “the dialectic between inside and outside

is reflected in the relationship of land and sea.”<sup>10</sup> This “openness” suggests a tidalactic between the routes of the sea and the transplanted roots of Caribbean diasporas, providing a critical method for reading island literatures.

While saltwater is one of the densest liquids on earth, its narrative history makes it heavier. Gaston Bachelard writes, “This water, enriched by so many reflections and so many shadows, is *heavy water*.”<sup>11</sup> Read tidalactically, the “heavy water” of the transoceanic imagination is constituted by the practices of the land. The element of water appeals because of its lack of fixity and rootedness. As Bachelard explains, “Water is truly the transitory element. It is the essential ontological metamorphosis between heaven and earth. A being dedicated to water is a being in flux.”<sup>12</sup> Since migration and creolization are so characteristic of Caribbean cultural formations, watery trajectories provide an apt metaphor for ethnicities “in flux.” Tidalactics are concerned with the fluidity of water as a shifting site of history, invoke the rupture of modernity created by transoceanic migration and transplantation, and imagine a regional relationship beyond the bifurcations of colonial, linguistic, and national boundaries.

The 2017 Caribbean hurricanes noticeably brought the region into an intimate relationship constituted by force and energy, unvetting a new current for our understanding of tidalactics. Caribbean hurricane systems are ultimately oceanic. Named after the Carib god Huracan,<sup>13</sup> the hurricane is a complex force created and fueled primarily by the ocean as warm seawater evaporates into clouds and is then circulated into counterclockwise rotation by a complex dynamic between wind and the earth’s rotation. As ocean events, they derive their energy from water and are most powerful over open seas and coasts. This is why islands, particularly in an era of oceanic acidification and warming, are so vulnerable to their force.

In the epigraph to this essay—drawn from a series of poems that Brathwaite wrote in the wake of the devastating 1988 Hurricane Gilbert, which destroyed his Jamaican home and extensive Caribbean archive—we can see the grounded, elemental “stone” of the island withstanding an anthropomorphized bombing by wind and water. The poem is written in what Brathwaite has elsewhere called “seametrics, because the sea influences the landscape. The sea influences the nature of poetry—the pauses between the words, the tidalactic nature of the sea.”<sup>14</sup> The poet then turns to wood—a figure

of the tree and roots—and the creative transformation of nonhuman nature into tools and figures. This also speaks to the human subject in the aftermath of the hurricane—as “stripped,” “fragile,” and feeling “broken.” The despondency is transformed into will—“what we must still build”—but the poem emphasizes the breakdown of boundaries between human, land, and sea:

And what. what. what. what more. what more can I tell you  
 .....  
 but that the winds. winds. winds. winds came straight on  
 & that there was no step. no stop. there was no stopp.  
 ing them & they began to reel. in circles. scream. ing like  
 Ezekiel’s wheel (9)

“The hurricane does not roar in pentameters,”<sup>15</sup> Brathwaite famously declared. In his well-known theory of “nation language,” he emphasizes the use of dactyls, intonation, and Afro-Caribbean rhythms that offer an “alter/native” to the pentameter, a poetic form that is tied to the weather, landscape, and cultural rhythms of northern Europe. In Brathwaite’s first work on nation language he characterized it as “organic, person-centred, fluid/tidal rather than ideal/structured.”<sup>16</sup> The breakdown of speech—“there was no step, no stop, there was no stopp”—foregrounds the repetitious, almost ritualistic return to an experience of violence even as language itself—through the use of punctuation—tries to create the cessation of movement, of wind, of terror. The poem, titled “Shar” (a likely play on “shard”), continues: “wasted wasted wasted all all all wasted wasted wasted / the five hundred years of Columbus dragging us here” (7). Just as the opening poem likened the hurricane to the (anthropocentric) bombing of the island, Brathwaite’s “Shar” makes a direct connection between environmental catastrophe and the *longue durée* of colonialism. The repetition of the word *wasted* suggests the omnipresence of the present and the speaker’s inability to move outside the current of destruction, whereas the subsequent line, with its continuous present of ongoing “dragging,” invokes Columbus’s ushering in of a new world of violence and waste.

Brathwaite directly inculpates Columbus for this “dragging” of us “here,” which is both a place (the Caribbean) and time (the devastated present). This temporary fluidity and distortion are invocative of a dialectic or seametric approach, as well as of what

Édouard Glissant has characterized as the “tortured sense of time”<sup>17</sup> that characterizes Caribbean inscriptions of place. These lines are not, as it may initially appear, a simple blaming of Columbus for the author’s presence in the Americas and his troubles. Instead the juxtaposition of the “wasted” remnants of the author’s home and being—“all all all”—are tied here not specifically to a natural event (Hurricane Gilbert) but rather to a figure of androgenic conquest (Columbus). Thus we read not a division between nature and culture but rather their dialectic imbrication.

After the 2010 Haitian earthquake, much symbolism was attributed to the still-standing colossal metal statue of Baron Samedi, his trademark erection intact, at the headquarters of Atis Rezistans, a contemporary art workshop and gallery of recycled metal and bone sculptures in Port-au-Prince. We might juxtapose this to a recent post by the editors of the Caribbean blog *Repeating Islands*, who reposted a report that one of the few standing figures left on Puerto Rico after the devastating Hurricane Maria is a 350-foot metal statue of Christopher Columbus. It has been dubbed the tallest statue in the Western Hemisphere, outstripping the Statue of Liberty. Although it has been since removed, the original article added: “The accolade came at a steep price: While the total cost has not been released, it has been estimated to be in the tens of millions of dollars, much of which came from the public treasury. This, of course, came at a time when Puerto Rico was in the midst of dealing with its crippling national debt.”<sup>18</sup>

The “dragging” of Columbus—an allegory for colonialism, neoliberalism, and the “disaster capitalism”<sup>19</sup> that will surely follow in these hurricanes’ wake—places the frailties of human structures at the center of so-called natural disasters. There is no “nature” here outside of the history of ecological imperialism on the one hand, and the history of empire on the other. To not recognize the repercussions of the imbrication of the human within natural disasters can have deadly consequences. For instance, US President Donald Trump seems to have determined that both Hurricane Maria and the Caribbean Sea represent pure nature, which thus justifies his unethical refusal of desperately needed assistance for Puerto Rico. In Trump’s limited imagination the American citizens of Puerto Rico are too far outside continental (and therefore cultured) space to receive assistance from their own government. When questioned as to why he had not sent the hospital ship USNS *Comfort* to proffer aid and had not lifted the Jones Act to allow more American ships

into Puerto Rican harbors, he defensively blamed the ocean. In a series of staccato, incomplete sentences (that I am tempted to render into verse), Trump lamented this challenge of geography: “This is an island. Surrounded by water. Big water. Ocean water. We’re closely coordinated with the territorial and local governments, which are totally and unfortunately unable to handle this catastrophic crisis on their own. Just totally unable to.”<sup>20</sup>

Trump creatively imagines a new geographic space, a Caribbean Ocean, in his recent press conference describing Puerto Rico as “out in the ocean—you can’t just drive your trucks there from other states.” He seems to have forgotten that the US Navy had a base in Ceiba, Puerto Rico, the Roosevelt Roads Naval Station (now a public airport), until 2003. The navy also occupied (and bombed) the Puerto Rican island of Vieques from 1941 until protestors drove them out in 2003. That testing range is now a superfund site, contaminated with napalm, depleted uranium, mercury, and other poisonous materials. Refusing to engage tidalectics, which would foreground the relationship between land and sea, Trump laments, “It’s the most difficult job because it’s on the island, it’s on an island in the middle of the ocean.”<sup>21</sup> It seems times have changed significantly since the 1960s, when C. L. R. James declared, “the Caribbean is now an American sea. Puerto Rico is its show piece.”<sup>22</sup> Trump’s perpetuation of this trope of island isolation in the wake of transoceanic militarism can best be described as an imperial myth that seeks to erase the colonial intentionality of the past.<sup>23</sup> Colonial powers have constructed the trope of the isolated island by mystifying the importance of the sea and the migrations across its expanse, thus rendering tropical island spaces as ahistorical and isolated. Tidalectics provides a methodological tool to foreground islands in history and in modernity, rendering a dynamic model of geography for exploring the complex and shifting entanglement between sea and land, between routes and roots.

Elsewhere I’ve argued that a focus on the vessel renders tidalectics visible—it is the principal way in which roots are connected to routes and islands connected to the sea.<sup>24</sup> And the vessels that have dominated the world oceans since the nineteenth century are of course the ships of the US Navy. While Trump declares that the US Navy and Coast Guard are too challenged by the pure nature of “this . . . thing called the Atlantic Ocean,” which is “tough stuff” Caribbean people have long understood the ways in which US military ships have dominated the region. The “big ocean” otherwise

known as the Caribbean Sea did not deter the US Marines from invading Haiti (1915) or Grenada (1983). More recently the United States has controlled the regional seas under the aegis of the “war on drugs” through various Shiprider agreements focused on maritime security and policing. The United States has long been omnipresent in Caribbean waters to stem the crossing of “boopippi!” from nations like Haiti into the United States and to forcibly intern tens of thousands of refugees in Guantánamo. Because few Caribbean states have the resource capacity to patrol their own twelve-mile exclusive economic zones, “the role of the marine police is largely restricted to being placed as a ‘Law Enforcement Detachment’—commonly known as a Shiprider—on a US or UK vessel.”<sup>25</sup> Thus big northern ships have long patrolled this “big water,” a place that the Puerto Rican author Ana Lydia Vega has called the “muscle arm of the sea.”<sup>26</sup> What Trump conveniently seems to forget here is that Puerto Rico is not “out there in the ocean” but is in fact in US territorial waters.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Gilbert, Brathwaite lamented:

“As far as I can see our Caribb culture is too much a reaction—if not a reactionary plantation culture. We are not prepared to foresee to forestall to help in that real way. Instead we prefer / we proffer help . . . *after* the accident *after* the death *after* the hurricane.”<sup>27</sup> In the wake of the devastation of Irma/José/Maria, we could not make the same claims about the preference or proffering of help. Instead we see American citizens in the Caribbean begging for help. The mayor of San Juan, Carmen Yulín Cruz, called Trump’s initial refusal of aid “something close to a genocide.” In the wake of Maria she lamented, “I cannot fathom the thought that the greatest nation in the world cannot figure out the logistics for a small island of 100 miles by 35 miles. So, mayday, we are in trouble.”<sup>28</sup> In tidalectics we see the merging of water and land, north and south, human and nature. And we look for those tools—poetic and otherwise—to proffer the opportunity and resources to take what is “fragile” and envision what “we must still build.”<sup>29</sup>

1) Kanan Brathwaite, *Shave: Hurricane Poem* (Kingston, Jamaica: Savacou, 1990), unpaginated.

2) Antonio Gutierrez, quoted in “Barbuda Now Turned to ‘Hell’—UN Head,” *Trinidad and Tobago Guardian*, October 9, 2017.

3) Angela Fritz, “Hurricane Irma Is Literally Pulling the Ocean Away from Shorelines,” *Washington Post*, September 10, 2017.

- 4) Kamau Brathwaite, in Nathaniel Mackey, "An Interview with Edward Kamau Brathwaite," *Hambo*, no. 9 (Winter 1991): 44. I first published on this concept in "Tidalities: Charting the Space/Time of Caribbean Waters," *SPAN: Journal of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies* 47 (October 1998): 18–38.
- 5) For the impact on Caribbean aesthetics of this history, see Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989). Glissant's book serves as the conceptual structure for Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Renée K. Gosson, and George B. Handley, eds., *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005).
- 6) See Elizabeth DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007).
- 7) See Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems, 1948–1984* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986), and Kamau Brathwaite, "Caribbean Man in Space and Time," *Sarawau*, no. 11–12 (September 1975): 1–11.
- 8) Walcott, *Collected Poems*, 364, 11.
- 9) Grace Nichols, *I Is a Long-Memoried Woman* (London: Karnak House 1983), 5; Fred D'Aguiar, *Feeding the Ghosts* (New York: Ecco Press, 1999), 112.
- 10) Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 139. See also Walcott's sense that "there is a strength that is drawn from island peoples in that reality of scale in which they inhabit. There is a sense both of infinity and acceptance of the possibility of infinity." Walcott, in William Baer, ed., *Conversations with Derek Walcott* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 159.
- 11) Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, trans. Edith R. Farrell (Dallas: Pegasus Foundation, 1983), 56. I pursue a reading of saltwater and metallic modernity in my article "Heavy Waters: Waste and Atlantic Modernity," *PMLA* 125 (May 2010): 703–12.
- 12) Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, 6.
- 13) As Peter Hulme has brilliantly argued, the word hurricane was adopted into English after contact with the Caribbean. During the seventeenth century the Mediterranean "tempest" was transformed into the more violent "hurricane," which was supposedly derived from the Caribs' lack of Christian devotion. Hulme, "Hurricanes in the Caribbees: The Constitution of the Discourse of English Colonialism," in *1642: Literature and Power in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Francis Barker et al. (Colchester, UK: University of Essex, 1981), 55–83. In his poem "Hurricane," Derek Walcott reminds us, "we remember you as the possible / deity of the whistling marsh-canes / we doubt that you were ever slain." Walcott, *Collected Poems*, 423.
- 14) Kamau Brathwaite, *Words Need Love Too* (Cambridge, UK: Salt, 2004), xiii.
- 15) Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London: New Beacon, 1984), 10. On Caribbean hurricane poetry, see Sharon Deckard, "The Political Ecology of Storms in Caribbean Literature," in *The Caribbean: Aesthetics, World-Ecology, Politics*, ed. Chris Campbell and Michael Niblett (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), 25–45.
- 16) Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, 49.
- 17) Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 144.
- 18) Nick Marf, "Puerto Rico Has a Christopher Columbus Statue That Is Taller Than the Statue of Liberty," *Architectural Digest*, October 9, 2017, <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/puerto-rico-has-christopher-columbus-statue-taller-than-statue-of-liberty>; reposted on *Repeating Islands* (blog), October 9, 2017, <https://repeatingislands.com/2017/10/09/puerto-rico-has-a-christopher-columbus-statue-thats-taller-than-the-statue-of-liberty/>.
- 19) I refer to Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2007). I have in mind the disastrous "aid" offered to Haiti after the 2010 earthquake, documented in Raoul Peck's film *Fatal Assistance* (2013).
- 20) Associated Press, "Puerto Rico Response Hampered by Ocean, Trump Says," *Boston Globe*, September 29, 2017.
- 21) Allan Smith, "Trump Addresses Criticism over Puerto Rico Disaster Response: 'It's Out in the Ocean—You Can't Just Drive Your Trucks There,'" *Business Insider*, September 26, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/trump-puerto-rico-atlantic-ocean-2017-9>.
- 22) C. L. R. James, "Appendix: From Toussaint L'Ouverture to Fidel Castro," in *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd ed. rev. (New York: Vintage, 1989), 409.
- 23) This concept is taken up extensively in my *Routes and Roots*. In "The Myth of Isolates: Ecosystem Ecologies in the Nuclear Pacific," *Cultural Geographies* 20, no. 2 (2013): 167–84, I argue that American environmentalism and militarism are paradoxically and mutually imbricated, particularly in their construction of the isolate. The ecosystem paradigm relies on the idea of a closed system, a concept that was constituted by the island laboratory and the irradiated atoll.
- 24) DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots*.
- 25) Ben Bowling, *Policing the Caribbean: Transnational Security Cooperation in Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 241.
- 26) Ana Lydia Vega, "Cloud Cover Caribbean," in *Her True-True Name*, ed. Pamela Mordecai and Betsy Wilson (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1989), 107.
- 27) Brathwaite, *Shar*, unpaginated.
- 28) Amanda Holpuch and Lauren Gambino, "'Close to Genocide': San Juan Mayor's Dire Appeal to US for Puerto Rico Relief," *The Guardian*, September 29, 2017.