Author’s Note

While much of *The Hurricane Book* is autobiographical, I can’t and don’t claim to fully know what is true or false about real people’s private histories, thoughts, or intentions—much less those of people I’ve only ever heard about or imagined. (I also imagine and misremember people I know!)

For this reason, I have changed people’s names and sometimes other identifying characteristics throughout the book. There are also degrees of speculation and fictionalization where certain events I had no part in are concerned. Throughout the book, I point out where something may not have actually happened, or may not have happened in the way described, or could be considered fiction, depending on whom you ask.

The above does not apply to the “Historical Notes,” or to the hurricane essays directly following those, which deal with hurricane-related statistics. Nor does it apply to anything occurring solely to me. Yet even then, there is always room for error. I have a difficult time trusting myself, which is part of the reason why I write.

This lack of trust led me to experiment with hybrid forms in recent years. I need to consider all potential outcomes and employ every approach and perspective at my disposal before I feel confident enough to make a statement. Before I was able to let go of my adherence to “form” and “genre,” poetry was my preferred outlet. I could make the storytelling process (and myself) as messy or neat, as concrete or abstract, as I wanted. Prose in the regular sense—clean transitions, continuity, plot—didn’t come easily to me. I dealt in stilted lines, fragmented images, and incomplete thoughts. I abandoned the first draft of this book 14 years ago, during my third year in the United States, because I didn’t think I could lean into that way of writing a story.

At that time, I wanted this book to be a chronological account of my maternal family’s move from Galicia, Spain to Puerto Rico in the 1600s.
stopped writing it after 40 pages. I stopped writing regularly for years. When I did write, I opted for flash fiction and poems that told stories I felt I had the right to tell: mainly from my own romantic life, or the stories of people and inanimate objects who couldn’t talk back.

In 2017, I recommitted to writing seriously. I quit my job in publishing and enrolled in an MFA program. There, I attended workshops in all genres, but joined as a poet. My goal was to leave Stony Brook University with 20 to 30 poems I could turn into a publishable collection.

Then, during my first month of grad school, Hurricane María hit Puerto Rico. Even though I’d left the island more than a decade prior, I hadn’t felt the weight of my choice to leave quite as soberly as when the island was going through that particular catastrophe, one of many happening concurrently. I decided to go back to the original draft of this book, to the story of the ancestors who, like me, had left their place of birth.

Estrangement and distance warp memory. They influence one’s treatment of a place. There was no way I could’ve gone back to the draft without acknowledging that I was a white member of the Puerto Rican diaspora who had been assimilating and in the land of the colonizer for 17 years, and that I was trying to piece together a multi-pronged story with many missing pieces. I realized that I couldn’t write the story in a strictly narrative way and started to conceptualize a hybrid way to tell it.

I began by writing down what I knew for sure, what was at the forefront. Like any Puerto Rican, I am intimately familiar with hurricanes. We know when and how to put up a storm window, what we need to keep in our pantry, how to pass the time when there’s no power. While reconstructing and deconstructing Puerto Rican historico-politics and my family’s history—a process that is flawed and objectively ever-changing—I structured my work around something that I could directly speak to and that has, without question, influenced how we live and what we endure and recover from. As the book took shape, I built it around six major hurricanes, beginning each section with historical facts about that era in Puerto Rico and factual details
about the hurricane. I then tied my family and personal history to the same eras and hurricanes.

I grounded what I knew about hurricanes in research. Archival photography, weather maps, old newspaper clippings, databases, and U.S. census documents were essential to the process. Those same census documents led me to ancestry websites, which, while occasionally inaccurate or incomplete, produced birth and marriage certificates, draft cards, and surprising information about people I had only heard about in drunken spill sessions. I went on statistical tangents, talked to meteorologists, transcribed poems by family members, and translated half-remembered conversations. I started to be able to make connections between historical and private events, facts and hearsay, things that were kept quiet and painful lived experience. I would love to say that this project gave me absolute clarity, or some sort of justification for my and my family’s decisions to leave Puerto Rico or stay, but this wasn’t the case. I can say that my confusion about what we’ve done and what has been done to us, while not gone, has become more layered, textured, and open to other sources of confusion.

The only way I can feel like I’ve told a “true” story responsibly is by making it as much about the process as it is about what is being told. My process is imperfect, scattered, and not the most efficient. But I hope it’s fair. Writing a memoir is not necessarily cathartic. It’s more like dredging sediment. Coming to terms with both my personal history and the realities of Puerto Rico’s past and present stirred up a lot for me.

But ultimately, I didn’t only write this book for me. It felt essential to tell my story in a way that also illuminated Puerto Rico’s long and deep-seated relationship with the uncertainty and trauma brought on by colonialism, in addition to its beauty. I wanted to show how the impact of that history, intensified by weather, is felt by the island’s ecosystems, residents, and diaspora, and seeps into our families and lives. I hope the book will resonate and reveal, appealing to the scattered and murky parts of us that want to feel less messed up and alone.
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