

YADIRA HERNÁNDEZ PICÓ

HURRICANE MARIA, PUERTO RICO





Three years after Hurricane Maria made landfall in Puerto Rico, thousands still lack a place to live safely and with dignity.

This destroyed landscape series chronicles the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, Puerto Rico's most catastrophic storm in recent history, particularly in my hometown of Maricao, in western Puerto Rico, where many still live beneath blue tarps as a substitute roof for their homes.

When Hurricane Maria ravaged Puerto Rico's island on September 20, 2017, it left a massive humanitarian emergency in its wake. The storm leveled towns, deprived thousands of their homes and jobs, left the island's 3.3 million residents without power, clean water, and access to medical care—a cruel turn of events for a United States territory already in an economic crisis. Many were forced to leave in the face of the local and federal government's negligence.

According to data released by the U.S. Census Bureau, An estimated 130,000 people—nearly 4% of the population—fled to the mainland in the aftermath of the storm. According to the government, just 64 people died due to Hurricane María, but a Harvard study reveals that the actual death toll was closer to 5,000.

Hurricane Maria decimated natural landscapes and agriculture, bringing the climate crisis to the forefront of attention. Puerto Rico's agriculture sector was devastated: "*There will be no food in Puerto Rico,*" many agriculturists and farmers predicted. "*There is no more agriculture, and there won't be any for the next year or maybe longer.*" It is estimated by the Puerto Rico Department of Agriculture that 80 percent of total agricultural production was wiped out.



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VOLVER A CASA

[Returning Home]

This loss amounts to \$780 million, with plantains, bananas, and coffee the hardest hit. The force and fury of Hurricane María left "a rich agricultural region looking like the result of a post-apocalyptic drought. Plants and trees simply blew away".

"That [the hurricane] was like an herbicide because it burned everything", said another farmer as the coffee trees seemed to have caught fire, in Maricao, an almost entirely agricultural town with the highest poverty and unemployment rate in the country, according to the latest statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau's Puerto Rico Community Survey.

These intimate visual narratives about nature are documented with sincere respect and personal commitment toward the subject since I also experienced the shock of finding my mother's



home for the last 40 years—the house where I grew up—completely destroyed.

A trip usually completed in three hours by car took me about four days, queueing for hours or days to get some gasoline to drive through the most precarious conditions just to have the certainty that my loved ones were still alive.



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Puerto Rican photojournalist and educator Yadira Hernández-Picó is also the founder of the socially engaged photography-based nonprofit organization "El duende que habita en tu alma" [The goblin that lives in your soul], which is committed to exploring the possibilities for creative visual storytelling to advance social justice within underrepresented communities in Puerto Rico.

Yadira holds a Master's in Arts and Cultural Management from the University of Puerto Rico. The artist is engaged in extended, ongoing fieldwork that employs

photographs and text to create a powerful and resonant representation of her subjects. Her photographic work has received numerous awards and has been exhibited worldwide.

Her personal long-term documentary project chronicling the devastation caused by Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, *Volver a casa* [Returning home], has been recognized with the National Association of Latino Arts and Cultures (NALAC) Fund for the Arts Grant (2020) and a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, in partnership with the Fundación Puertorriqueña de las Humanidades (2018).



YOUR TOWN, EVERY TOWN

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(EXCERPT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ESSAY BY ANA TERESA TORO)

Return. Although you can never really go back anywhere. Return. Although we are no longer the same. Return. Although no one is waiting for us. Return. Although that place bears no trace of our memories. Return.

The artist and photographer Yadira Hernández-Picó invites us to enter the intimate space of a painful return. Her detailed documentation of the lives and stories of the residents of the Indieras neighborhoods in the municipality of Maricao

confronts us with the traumatic experience of returning home after Hurricane Maria's passage in Puerto Rico. The literalness of this narrative—the characters returning to what was once their home only to discover an entire landscape that is utterly transformed—drains any metaphorical value we may ascribe to the return when faced with this dimension of catastrophic reality: They have returned home, but the house is gone. They have returned home, but nothing is as it was.

The images that comprise this series present us with the humanistic view of an environment and its inhabitants. The result also reveals the creative and documentary processes of the artist. She has been to each place numerous times and has patiently waited for the most judicious moment to take her photographs. In the gestures and expressions of the subjects, it is possible to detect the trace of the human encounter that preceded the image.



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These are not passive subjects who fix their gaze toward the camera or let themselves be lost in the surroundings; these are people who know that they are being narrated, and in that process, they will build upon their own narrative of return. The same thing happens when we look at windows opening outward to

a landscape. We not only see them, but we see what they see. Their stories and their gaze intersect.

Sometimes, even amid the cruelest adversity, it is not until we piece together the story of the tragedy that we can move on and transform it.

Through Hernández-Picó images, we begin down the path of returning to the home lost after the hurricane, which is also our own home. By immersing ourselves in these landscape images, we relive the feeling of that morning after the disaster when we went out to open paths that were impossible to recognize. In the intimacy of this landscape, we also find our own landscape.

The series, in turn, constructs a macro story, since the artist also returns home and, in an unexpected moment, we discover that one of the images is a depiction of her childhood home, her mother's home, the repository of her memories among these same neighborhoods of Maricao. It is then that we understand that by accompanying each of the subjects on their return home, it is possible for our narrator to also reach her starting point.



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By documenting her encounters with her hometown residents, we also accompany her on a reenounter with her own past. *"I didn't know why or what for, but I knew I had to do it,"* Hernández-Picó would say about the force that impelled her to go, day after day, house after house, accompanying and documenting the stories of this handful of Puerto Ricans who reveal a drop of truth amid the ocean of stories that make up the cataclysm of Hurricane Maria. Why does it, then? Why more photos and more accounts of the disaster? Because we also have the right to our own tragedy, we also have

the right to appropriate it. The work also adds to the long line of stories that reaffirm the saying (attributed to Leo Tolstoy): *"If you want to be universal, start by painting your own village."* In this town, there is abandonment, loneliness, innocence, love, faith, pain, and truth—all themes of unquestionable universality. In turn, in this body of work, what has not been revealed is also striking. We do not see the photographer's face, but we make use of her narrative approach and her visual framework to enter this world.

And even so, we do wind up discovering—as we have indicated—that we are also accompanying the artist on her return home when we embark on this visual journey. If we stop at any image, we will have the certainty that in those faces, in those destroyed houses, and in this painful return, we will also inevitably find our own home that the hurricane took from us.




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