

# The Halo-Halo Review

Critical reviews, Introductions, and other engagements with the English-language works of Filipino authors in all genres

Sunday, February 5, 2017

## A SERIES OF UN/NATURAL/DISASTERS by CHEENA MARIE LO

KIMBERLY ALIDIO Reviews

***A Series of Un/Natural/Disasters* by Cheena Marie Lo**  
(Commune Editions, Oakland, CA, 2016)

### BOOK LINK

This morning, the Center for Art and Thought's Facebook page shared a *Time Magazine* photo of supine shirtless men lying on a floor, as they say, packed like sardines. Or trafficked people on a slave ship. "[This Photograph Makes Life Inside a Philippines Jail Look Like Dante's 'Inferno'](#)" is the title. Where to look, the article opens? Are these corpses? The article then provides the metadata for the photograph: 3800 people are imprisoned in the Quezon City Jail, an institution designed to hold 800. The photojournalist, Noel Celis, intends to get his audience to push for prison reform. Two last important points of context: the sight of prisoners sleeping on stairs shocked Celis the most, and the photographs have gone viral. The narrative of policy reform and collective sensationalism organizes our experience of the photograph. After we get the message, we no longer have to look.

Cheena Marie Lo offers another way to look at the photojournalism of crisis. Three poems in their collection, *A Series of Un/Natural/Disasters* (Commune Editions 2015), reconstruct photographs of houses in New Orleans left behind by evacuees during Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Lo does not engage with the ambiguity of these images. They start with an almost painterly image of an object and methodically catalog descriptive information relating to it: color, number, what is adjacent.

lines of parallel panels painted gray and peeling.

eight lines of parallel panels in the frame painted gray and peeling.

orange X spraypainted on eight lines of parallel panels in the frame, so bright against paint gray and peeling.

With each line a variant of the last, "Direct Sunlight Looking Over 4725 Dauphine Street" uses anaphora to return us to images of light, shadow and architecture. In "Successive Water Lines on Door in Lakeview," repetition builds the poem with the starting seed words "successive" and "second" — a kind of in-joke about anaphora. The slowing down and building up of a list poem is put to good use here. We can see the physical, built environment of post-Katrina New Orleans with a degree of contemplation. The house bears traces left by its inhabitants, the tropical storm, by subsequent evacuation, and then by the state.

Perhaps the poem keeps us looking for Lo's interpretation of the photograph. This photographed house could be made into evidence for any number of policy or intellectual debates on climate change, climate refugees, disaster capitalism, race and poverty, and cultural memory. Lo refuses any framing narrative. The poems' lack of interpretative framing — what's the central lesson of the photograph, for example — frees us from the almost automatic responses we have to crisis, suffering and disaster. Here is a series of events: a house was hit by Hurricane Katrina and then visited by a FEMA's search and rescue mission and subsequently marked with an X as "dangerous." So which part do we accept as the "natural" disaster? The storm surge brought on by greenhouse gases and global warming? Or the devaluing of Black lives by state agencies? When did either of these disasters really begin? How are they understood as inevitable and accidental all at once?

Governance and structures amount to another fraught language to learn and then overturn. *A Series of Un/Natural/Disasters* is related to Lo's other project exploring their use of the pronoun "they" and their engagement with gender. In an interview with *Weird Sister*, Lo states, "since English is her second language, [my mom]'s kind of bad with pronouns, but in a subversive way that I am obsessed with." Lo enacts a queer immigrant rematerialization of the failure of the government to rescue and protect mostly Black and poor people in New Orleans. "Connect Policy to Built Environment" is a kind of *ars poetica* advising how the control of people and place are looped to

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- ▶ [2022](#) (31)
- ▶ [2021](#) (42)
- ▶ [2020](#) (47)
- ▶ [2019](#) (26)
- ▶ [2018](#) (35)
- ▼ [2017](#) (46)
  - ▶ [December](#) (19)
  - ▼ [February](#) (27)

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data, reports and law. "It Keeps Getting Better" is a prose block of phrases enclosed in quotation marks, creating a hypnotic rhythm reminiscent of Alice Notley's epic *The Descent of Alette*. The quotation marks here, however, emphasize the otherness of policy confidence. The mosaic of proposed solutions is a play of tension between "immense part played by mutual aid" and "individual jails." In addition to stripping context clues, Lo arranges found language around a keyword: "poor planning and communication," "poor judgment in not evacuating" and "poor or too frail to leave." The rationalizations about vulnerability in the wake of the storm are both infinitely variable and mind-numbingly the same.

The most mysterious and powerful poems are arrangements of numbers without any explanation of what is measured. The poem "0" is a center-justified list of six zeros followed by sixty-five numbers ordered from smallest (in thousands) to the largest (in millions). The visual effect is striking and sparse. Each number represents a value related to the built environment or to people but more importantly it is somehow key to the government management and control. Although most reviewers confess frustration with the absence of explanation and interpretation, tables of numbers are familiar to anyone who's done some kind of administrative work. This is necessary poetry: Lo releases the data from serving policy, whether aid administration or mass surveillance. They perform subversive incantation to redeploy statistics' magical force.

Lo's methods of research, erasure, and formal arrangement (the collection is organized as an abecedarian) make visible how the disaster is governance interrupting our relationships and our dreams of a truly transformative collectivity. In "How There Was so Much Water," they write: "how struggle is replaced by cooperation. how to be human./ how there is a difference between refugee and evacuee. how one is marked as an other. how to be human."

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Kimberly Alidio wrote *After projects the resound* (Black Radish, 2016) and *solitude being alien* (dancing girl press, 2013). She held residencies at the Center for Art and Thought, Kundiman and VONA, and received fellowships from the University of Illinois's Asian American Studies Program and Naropa University's Summer Writing Program. She is a high-school history teacher and tenure-track dropout born in West Baltimore, raised in Baltimore County and living in East Austin.

Posted by EILEEN at [10:00 PM](#)

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