

# “No había humanidad”: Critiquing English Monolingualism and Other Entwined Systems of White Supremacy in Local Emergency Management Responses

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**M**EMBERS OF THE SALEM, OREGON, COMMUNITY EXPERIENCED two public health advisories during the spring and summer of 2018, when the city’s water supply, Detroit Reservoir, tested positive for cyanotoxins. Released in blue-green algae blooms, the presence of these toxins is linked to climate disruption, as these bacteria are more likely to appear with high water temperatures and pH levels and excess nutrients (e.g., chemical and animal waste and fertilizer runoff).<sup>1</sup> Blooms are more frequent than assumed, and many go undetected until visible, when contamination is already underway. In May 2018, after detecting elevated levels of cyanotoxins, City of Salem officials declared the water unsafe to drink for “vulnerable populations” (i.e., children under the age of six, pregnant people, the elderly, those with liver problems or already compromised immune systems, and pets), following Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) standards. Many local residents responded with frustration, given the passage of several days between the first detection of cyanotoxins (May 23) and the city’s public emergency alert notification on the evening of May 29 (see figure 1), which ambiguously and alarmingly warned: “Civil Emergency ... Prepare for Action” (Bach 2018b).<sup>2</sup>

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Figure 1. The first emergency alert on May 29, 2018, communicated this message, after City of Salem officials overlooked unchecking the default message option, which overrode the specific water advisory description.

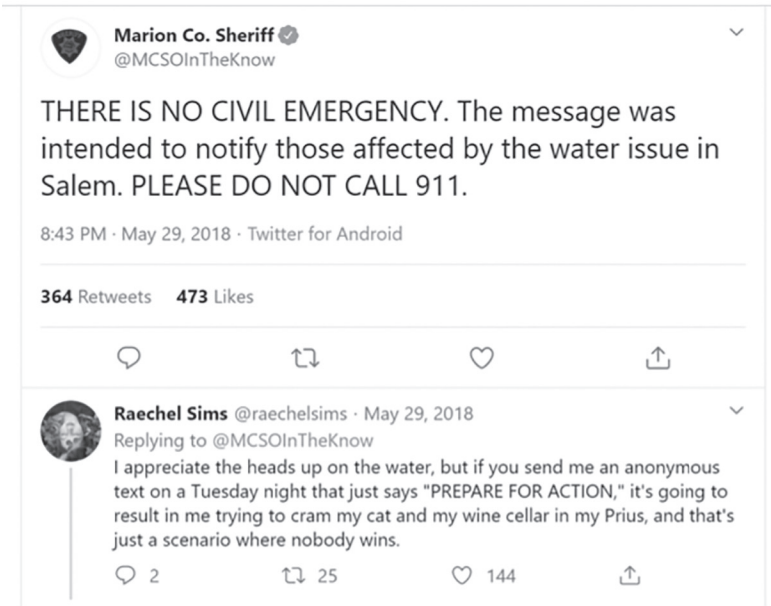


Figure 2. The Marion County Sheriff’s Office published this Twitter post shortly after the first public message was released. Social media followers responded to the tweet in various ways, ranging from using humor and expressing relief to employing descriptors such as “incompetent,” “unacceptable,” “inexcusable,” and a “clear messaging fail.”



Figure 3. An updated message reached recipients half an hour after the initial alert.

This English-only message reached at least three different counties and aired on local TV stations. Thirty-one minutes elapsed before a corrected text was sent, as seen in figure 3 (Novak Consulting Group 2018). Shortly after city officials issued the “Do Not Drink” water advisory, Oregon Governor Kate Brown declared a “state of emergency” and coordinated with the Oregon Military Department’s National Guard to organize and oversee water distribution sites (Bach 2018a). Although this first advisory lasted a few days, officials issued a second advisory that spanned early June to early July, based on water samples and concerns with potential health harms for “vulnerable” people and pets. These advisories caused stress and confusion for many individuals in Salem, primarily because this public health problem, at its core, exemplified a “communication crisis,” as reported by the city-commissioned Novak Consulting Group’s (2018, 1) *After-Action Assessment*.

At this point, this narrative provides a generalized description of events; however, the differential, inequitable, and underreported impacts of these advisories merit attention. Although the City of Salem disseminated information about cyanotoxins and other resources, including regularly posting test results and updates to its website in English and sometimes Spanish, municipal and other affiliated actors failed to provide adequate multilingual resources using culturally appropriate forms of communication to best support

non-English-speaking community members. Many people faced barriers to accessing both relevant information and potable drinking water, as they did not encounter easily understandable information in their preferred language or mode of communication. More than 20 percent of Salem's nearly 175,000 residents speak a language other than English, one of many demographic realities that we delve into later in this essay.<sup>3</sup>

Many individuals and families did not have the means necessary to access water at the distribution sites because of limited public transportation and time, among other constraints. For example, when several emergency management officials visited the authors' university classes, they recalled a rule restricting how much water each vehicle could take from distribution sites (based on the faulty assumption that one vehicle equals one family) that had to be adapted because multiple Latinx<sup>4</sup> family representatives carpooled using one vehicle. When issues of accessibility are seen from an intersectional framework (i.e., considering both language barriers and socioeconomic status), it becomes clear that availability of both informational and material resources was lacking. Additionally, community members experienced the forced militarization of their city, as emergency managers, some of whom have military backgrounds, directed messaging, water distribution, and other operations, alongside National Guard members.

This essay seeks to build a case, in conversation with existing community-based and scholarly critiques, for challenging dominant emergency management approaches. The Salem situation is, in many ways, not unique. For example, studying Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico and the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, among many other injustices, can shed light on "the emergency manager effect," constituted by colonial logics, racial capitalism, and neoliberal austerity measures that create and aggravate these unnatural disasters (Onís 2018, 2; see also Lloréns et al. 2018, Pulido 2016).<sup>5</sup> In studying these impacts, every place and situation must be understood on its own terms to avoid replicating a colonial one-size-fits-all orientation. Arturo Escobar (2006, 132) argues that "glocality means that everything is local and global, to be sure, but not global and local in the same way ... place-based resistance and practices [are needed] to reconfigure the world according to different parameters and concerns." Though there are notable differences between the Puerto Rico and Flint cases, there are also similarities, which we outline in a subsequent section, revealing top-down, undemocratic practices and policies that further disadvantage people with long histories of dispossession, including the Spanish-speaking, Latinx community in Salem (Lloréns 2019, Onís 2018, Pulido 2016, Ranganathan 2016).

In conversation with other water-related situations, which notably carried far greater consequences than this cyanotoxins case, this essay raises several questions: How did Spanish-speaking, Latinx community members experience the water advisories, and how did they navigate uncertainties? How can emergency management officials make science communication about cyanobacteria and other public health risks accessible to local residents from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds? What possibilities exist for university, government, and community collaborations, especially relating to current problems with emergency management communication?

Drawing on a collaboratively composed archive and fieldwork in the form of structured interviews and the authors' lived experiences, this article features testimonios<sup>6</sup> (testimonials) from Salem's Spanish-speaking, Latinx residents and argues that this water situation demonstrates the need to challenge public health and emergency management communication and other practices that enact and exacerbate existing inequities and injustices. We contend that City of Salem officials and their emergency management colleagues violated the non-English-speaking public's right to know, or "the ability to have access to relevant information" (Pezzullo & Cox 2018, 368), as a monolingual bias caused misunderstandings about what was happening, who was at risk, and resource issues. Though the city has taken some positive steps since this 2018 incident, such as paying for various staff trainings and working on multilingual emergency messaging, much work remains—as evidenced in harmful, even deadly, ways during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article seeks to make several interventions to assist in uprooting oppressive emergency management ideologies and communication practices for more equitable, culturally and linguistically centered alternatives, including by demonstrating the potential role of university members in documenting underheard experiences and creating collaborative spaces that bridge campus, government, and community partnerships.

Water injustices linked to climate disruption (e.g., increased cyanotoxins contamination) are just one of many exigencies, as the record-breaking 2020 wildfires made obvious. In Oregon and beyond, many residents confronted the impossible situation of navigating multiple respiratory-related crises at once—often with competing public health advisories, such as being told to stay at home because of the pandemic without proper ventilation for extremely hazardous levels of wildfire smoke.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, earthquake risks exist throughout the globe, including mounting concerns with the impending "Big One" earthquake in the US Pacific Northwest. These issues and the impacts of the novel coronavirus, as well as predicted future pandemics, enjoin

studying and learning from previous and ongoing experiences to address grave injustices, relational differences and commonalities, and sustainable communication practices for emergency preparations and responses that support individual and communal well-being, rather than harm.

To critically approach these problems and possibilities, first, this essay describes the socioeconomic realities and racial politics shaping everyday life in Salem, as well as ideologies and policies that formed Oregon's white ecotopia founding and past and present environmental racism and other entwined injustices. Second, this piece triangulates disaster capitalism, risk communication, and border rhetorics to mark different bordering (i.e., exclusionary and dehumanizing) effects, which disproportionately impact non-English-speaking, racially and ethnically othered individuals and communities. Third, this article discusses methods, including a "Writing Water" research project that required undergraduates to interview residents about their experiences and then to analyze and interpret these conversations, before sharing their findings with emergency management officials. Fourth, this essay features three testimonios from Spanish-speaking, Latinx immigrants who have lived in Salem for many years. Rather than tell a victimhood narrative, we record how these residents navigated the situation from their shared and distinct positionalities. Finally, this essay concludes by discussing possibilities for disrupting oppressive emergency management structures and assumptions in the form of multilingual, collaborative communication efforts and events, which the disproportionate impacts of the 2020 pandemic and wildfires render increasingly urgent.

### **Constituting a "Communication Crisis" in the Capital City**

Salem, Oregon, sits in the fertile Willamette Valley and is known, in popular media representations, for its verdant landscapes, hazelnuts, and vineyards—though the headlines of September 2020 depicted a dystopic reality of wildfires and smoke that some residents described as "apocalyptic." Depending on traffic, the city is about one hour's drive south of Portland and is a relatively similar distance from the ocean, to the west, and the Cascade Mountains, to the east. In 2018, the population estimate was 173,442 people.<sup>8</sup> Northeast Salem, South Salem, West Salem, and the downtown, which is quickly gentrifying and home to many houseless individuals, compose the capital city. As one of many barriers to accessing the area fully, the public bus service only recently started running on Saturdays in September 2019 and has delayed plans to offer Sunday service because of the pandemic.

While 7 percent of West Salem residents live in poverty, 40 percent of the Northeast Salem population faces these financial hardships.<sup>9</sup> A 2018 study found West Salem dwellers, many of whom are white and middle or upper class, tend to live 10 years longer than their Northeast neighbors, many of whom come from Vietnam, Russia, and especially Latin America (Barreda 2018). Much of this reality results from uneven resource allocation, linked to de facto segregation.<sup>10</sup> The “White alone, Not Hispanic or Latino” community consists of 110,589 people (64 percent), and the “White alone” figure tallies 132,534 (76 percent). “Hispanic or Latino (of any race)” applies to 36,656 people (21 percent), and “mixed-race,” “Black or African-American,” “American Indian and Alaska Native,” “Asian,” and “Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander” comprise the rest of the community.<sup>11</sup> Given these racial and ethnic demographics, more than 20 percent of Salem’s residents are non-English speakers, and 17 percent of the population speaks Spanish as a preferred language.<sup>12</sup> Although not all Latinx-identifying individuals speak this language, exemplified by the authors’ own diverse experiences with Spanish, English, and Indigenous languages, as well as codeswitching and Spanglish, the Spanish-speaking community in Salem has a strong presence, especially on the Northeast side, home to taquerías (taco shops), panaderías (bakeries), and envíos de dinero (money transfer services).<sup>13</sup> Other non-Spanish speakers include those who speak Indigenous languages, who are often from Oaxaca, Jalisco, and Michoacán, México (López et al. 2011).<sup>14</sup> The persistent growth of the Latinx community over the years stems from transnational, national, and state immigration, trade, and labor policies and the strengthening of community ties, as people create and cultivate local roots, amid escalating violence and survivability concerns linked to United States-backed dirty wars and increasingly unlivable conditions in Latin America (Sifuentez 2016).

Many individuals labor in the agricultural and forestry industries, as their more privileged neighbors recharge in outdoor recreational settings, shaped by the work of pineros (tree planters), and literally enjoy the fruits of migrant labor at expensive wineries. It is not uncommon to drive through the Willamette Valley and see billboards depicting heteronormative couplings of blonde white people smiling and sipping pinot noir, while nearby signs in English and Spanish advertise low-wage jobs for laborers in the same industry filling the sparkling wine glasses of those with class and race privilege.<sup>15</sup> In response to numerous injustices, the Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN, Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United) labor union has fought successfully for affordable housing and

against wage theft, toxic chemicals, and anti-immigrant policies, among many other efforts, and in doing so has created a decades-long movement that has improved the ánimo (spirit) and material realities of many union and nonunion members (*ibid.*).

In addition to PCUN, which is located about 20 miles northeast of Salem in Woodburn, there are other Latinx-serving groups, such as the Mano a Mano Family Resource Center and Causa, which is Oregon's Latinx immigrant rights organization. Longtime Salem resident Delia Olmos-García, a local college access program director and former Causa development manager, shared that, although Salem does offer public services,

... due to fears around immigration status, they aren't used (aka using food banks). I once was volunteering with the Marion Polk Food Share, and they were doing surveys in Spanish (which were terribly written). What I learned is that some sites ask for information that is not appropriate (demographics or other questions), which make people anxious. I know they were working on that, but I'm not sure what their plan was. I think this [problem] speaks largely to the efforts of serving sites that don't have insight into the Latinx community. Their efforts aren't successful because they don't consult.<sup>16</sup>

Olmos-García also noted that many Latinx community members reach out when they need support identifying a lawyer but are less likely to do so for other services. She added that, at times, false rumors circulate about the risks of using resources, such as food stamps, which some individuals think could negatively impact legalizing one's status, even if a community member's children qualify for the benefit.

Although these barriers to public services exist, Salem's Latinx community is also shaped by vibrancy and perseverance. As Olmos-García described,

The Latinx community is active—especially in North Salem. I've seen more businesses pop up, as well as centers to send packages to México and Central America. There's new hope with the Driver's Licenses coming [regardless of immigration status] and the buses running on Saturdays—and because families are mixed-status I think that plays a role in more visibility of bodies in public spaces.<sup>17</sup>

These observations point to how the Latinx community continues to navigate challenges and build community—a collectivist relational dynamic that shapes emergency situations.



Numerous activist-scholars document how local and state governments devalue, ignore, and erase non-English speakers, people of color, Indigenous and Black individuals, and immigrants to uphold white supremacy (Lloréns et al. 2018, Lloréns 2019, Onís 2018, Park & Pellow 2011, Pulido 2016, Ybarra 2018). This concept “is not simply the material privileges (e.g., clean water, not living near a highway, green space, etc.) ... It also embeds a historiography of how racial hierarchy came to be—how it was instated as an organizing, taken-for-granted logic” (Ranganathan 2016, 21). In Oregon, the state’s founding is tied to the codified exclusion of and terrorism against Black individuals, who faced public lashings and other brutalities for living in the state, with enduring effects that the 2020 Movement for Black Lives uprisings made clear (Imarisha 2013).<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the systemic eradication and erasure of Black individuals, for Latinx residents, labor injustices and xenophobia are commonplace. Anti-Latinx and -immigrant bias has supported and continues to support white privilege in Salem and in Oregon more broadly. For example, anti-immigrant ballot controversies occur frequently, including efforts in the 1990s to deny driver’s licenses, public services, and school access unless legal status was verified (Stephen 2012). More recently, Oregonians for Immigration Reform (OFIR), a hate group that “works to stop illegal immigration” and to “reduce legal immigration to a more environmentally, economically and socially sustainable level,” electrified a ballot controversy that would have overturned Oregon’s longstanding status as a sanctuary state.<sup>19</sup> The measure was defeated in 2018 and evinces how Latinx community members are scapegoated for environmental harms, as they supposedly threaten the (white, United States-born) social fabric (Wilson 2018). Given this history and its contemporary impacts—including the reality that most municipal and emergency management officials are white—fear, exclusion, and inequity shape the everyday experiences of many residents, as Olmos-García’s comments above suggest. These acknowledgments are key for understanding and intervening in troubling emergency management assumptions and practices.

### **On Disaster Capitalism, Risk Communication, and Borders**

Engaging several theoretical frameworks assists in comprehending the intricacies of this study’s observations and its desired interventions. Accordingly, this article turns to scholarship on disaster capitalism, risk communication, and border rhetorics to approach the recorded interviews.

When exceptional events (ever growing in frequency and intensity) collide with everyday stressors, they create the perfect conditions for exploitation via the “shock doctrine”—a foundational aspect of disaster capitalism (Klein 2007). This oppressive top-down maneuvering:

... involves the hasty reconfiguration of societies struggling with devastation and distress, caused by sudden disturbances to daily life. In these situations, politicians and corporate allies mobilize... a neo-liberal strategy, driven by free-market ideology, to exploit the public’s emotional and psychological vulnerabilities. In so doing, this doctrine advances, and often fast-tracks, controversial, corrupt, and undemocratic political agendas and policies. (Onís 2018, 536)

While agreeing with the shock doctrine concept, Hilda Lloréns (2019) questions: “*when was capitalism not a disaster?*” She continues, “the answer(s) to this question might have something to do with *who* is doing the asking and *from what vantage point*” (ibid., 1; italics in original). Drawing on ethnographic research in Puerto Rico, Lloréns (ibid., 4) troubles “the fixation on the ‘top’ and ‘center’ socio-political spheres,” which risks ignoring the multitude of ways different networks at the bottom or at the margins have learned how to exist amid intersecting crises. Lloréns focuses on how community members have struggled in these conditions and, in so doing, have built strong relational ties that reveal strategies and tactics for surviving and thriving.

Following centuries of colonial domination and capitalistic dispossession, Hurricanes Irma and Maria served harsh blows to Puerto Rico in September 2017, only to be followed by a stream of seismic shocks in 2019–2020. Puerto Rico has been and continues to be a sacrifice zone for empire building and a multinational corporate playground at the expense of residents, who often shuttle between the continental United States and the archipelago to find more livable conditions and employment (Berman Santana 1996, Lloréns 2019). When tax incentives and other exploitative agreements evaporated, linked to Puerto Rico’s ongoing illegal, unpayable debt, local residents were left with the bill. More recently, yet still before Irma and Maria, the territorial government’s “energy emergency” declaration in 2011 pushed neoliberal, undemocratic policies and energy projects (Atilés-Osoria 2014, 16). Following the 2017 hurricane season, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the territorial and US governments demonstrated utter disregard for the self-determination of local peoples, who had already been marked by the state and corporations as extractable and expendable—not

worth engaging—all while green and disaster capitalists salivated at the idea of developing the supposed “blank canvas,” which echoes the pristine wilderness myth made possible by genocidal campaigns (Onís 2018, 14). In addition to the systemic shocks (and deaths) associated with the 2017 hurricanes and the recent flurry of earthquakes, the emergency management effect continues to grip the archipelago, as disputes over extractivist zoning laws, ongoing gutting of public services, and corporate polluters shape daily struggles—struggles that link to other emergency contexts.

In the case of Flint, Michigan, former Governor Rick Snyder named a so-called fiscal crisis that paved the way for austerity measures, implemented by city Emergency Manager Darnell Earley; both figures played a strong role in poisoning the largely African American, low-income community (Pulido 2016, 3). Their operational mode involved unilateral decision-making regarding public health and other topics vital to sustaining civil society, whereby achieving fiscal solvency justified any means necessary. Laura Pulido (2016, 3–4) writes that this managerial imposition, “in the words of one [Flint] resident, ‘totally decimates democracy.’”<sup>20</sup> Other studies address how emergency management laws and managers tend to be disproportionately applied to economically depressed communities that are also home to larger numbers of people of color, choking possibilities for community-based agency and more egalitarian alternatives (Lee et al. 2016).

One means for discussing these disastrous impacts is via risk communication. This concept describes “the symbolic mode of interaction that we use in identifying, defining, assessing, and negotiating public health and ecological dangers” (Pezzullo & Cox 2018, 368). The use of “we” should not be read as assuming a universal orientation to understanding risk—a recognition ignored by the technical model of risk communication, which translates “technical data about environmental or human health risks for public understanding, with the goal of educating a target audience” (ibid., 369). This one-size-fits-all communication tends to rely on the information deficit model, which falsely assumes that once the public is given information, officials have done their job; these same individuals “decide-announce-defend,” without considering other viewpoints, experiences, and knowledges (ibid., 159). In contrast, the cultural model of risk communication recognizes community members as experts of their own situations and “involves the affected public in assessing risk and designing risk communication campaigns” (ibid., 162), motivated by awareness of and appreciation for different ways of knowing and being. This approach involves collaboration with scientists, public citizens, and organizations to communicate risk effectively. Without

such cultural assumptions and values, a host of problems can result. In the present case, the City of Salem failed to incorporate this model, including by not centering Spanish-speaking, Latinx perspectives, which are tied to material-metaphoric borders.

The US-México frontera (border) is embodied by immigrants and other racialized and ethnic others far from the actual physical site. Accordingly, the xenophobia, nativism, white supremacy, English monolingualism, and other interrelated oppressive forces that inflict trauma, violence, and death are mapped onto and carried by different bodies seen as suspect. Thus, the impacts of border policy, dehumanization, and more must not be considered limited to a particular geographical area (Ono 2012, Pham 2015, Sowards 2019a). Understanding the border as embodied calls attention to bordering as an active process that controls well beyond the US-México border itself. This reality should be considered alongside activist-scholar calls for using the language of militarization, rather than security, to understand and intervene in naming practices that fail to adequately express the cruelties facing immigrants, refugees, and others who are read as always already illegal, regardless of physical location (Chávez 2012).

Crafting and employing this triangulated framework of disaster capitalism, risk communication, and border rhetorics, this essay aims to contribute to extant scholarship by revealing how the exigencies underlying more publicized, nationally and internationally reported crises share many of the same underlying structural concerns as this lesser-known 2018 event. These connections urge continued engagement with systemic analyses and critical disruptions to advance equitable and livable conditions for all people. Furthermore, this project works to deepen understandings of border complexities beyond the US-México frontera, to critically engage this material metaphor, as it relates to bodies, segregated communities, and differential, inequitable experiences, especially involving English monolingualism's bordering effects and environmental concerns—an emphasis that diverges from many extant risk communication studies.

### **Methods: Disrupting and Dismantling Master Narratives with Ethnographic Approaches**

One effect of and approach to challenging bordering is community building rooted in shared trauma, violence, and resistance. Alai Reyes-Santos (2015, 106) describes this effort as “transcolonial solidarity” among currently and formerly colonized places and peoples. One means for constructing and

cultivating these kinships is via testimonios, which are part theory, method, and narrative form. These lived experiences center individuals and people with Latin American origins to navigate and translate realities with (un)belonging in various expressive modes, including poetry, music, and oral histories. Testimonios serve as vital discursive spaces for individual and communal self-determination, resistance, and transgression, prompting Latinx critical race theory scholarship to study this communicative form rooted in Cherrie Moraga's "theory in the flesh" (Moraga & Anzaldúa 1981, 23). The contributors to *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* present this concept as holding collective potential and as a means for pointing out similarities and differences (The Latina Feminist Group 2001). Thus, testimonio crafting and circulating is more than fragmentary recordings, as the process involves drawing connections between experiences. As embodied truth, this genre of survival, sustenance, and shaping and sustaining community is rooted in struggle that can challenge oppressive systems and discourses and can offer powerful counternarratives to dominant stories and assumptions, exemplified in recounting brutalities during United States-backed wars and genocidal complicity in Latin America. Rigoberta Menchú's memoir is one notable example of why testimonios matter for communicating counternarratives that expose and deeply trouble interventionist military violence, in this case against the K'iche' Maya during the civil war in Guatemala (Ybarra 2018). To engage this theory, method, and narrative form ethically, researchers must ensure the stories recorded and translated are authentic to the communities themselves and, following critical ethnographic methods, must place the needs of research collaborators before academics (Madison 2012).

Fieldwork is integral to recording everyday, ephemeral experiences, for disrupting state and other forms of violence, including climate and environmental injustices, and for emphasizing the importance of interconnection, as it relates to various places and people (Lloréns 2014, Pezzullo & Onís 2018). Thus, this approach offers key tools for critiquing dominant assumptions about authority and expertise and seeks to highlight the existence of multiple knowledges that often involve conflict. As Chávez (2013) explains in her work on coalitional politics, rather than strive for harmonious collaborations that assume unrealistic, idealized communication contexts, dissonance and disruption can be potentially generative, as experiences, information, and insights may arise from these frictions. In the spirit of struggling with tensions, rather than avoiding them (Lloréns 2014, Martinez 2007), this essay locates and critiques several problems that arose during the 2018 water advisories. Such an engagement, enabled by the sharing and analyzing of

testimonios, creates space for differential experiences to emerge. This effort matters for rejecting dominant discourses that constitute all community experiences as the same via erasure and also can function to highlight how systemic oppression and power dynamics influence different understandings and realities, in an effort to learn from past failings to do better in the future.

Although the previously mentioned *After-Action* report provided some useful material about the Salem water situation, including a timeline of events and the conclusion that “the City should conduct targeted outreach to non-English-speaking populations to ensure that they receive training on emergency preparedness and know how to get information from the City in the event of an emergency” (Novak Consulting Group 2018, 20), strategies and tactics for how this relational process should unfold are absent. Furthermore, the report carries a strong technocratic bias, as the document relies on press releases and interviews with city officials and other so-called experts. The diverse experiences and voices of civil society are not incorporated and thus continue to go un(der)heard.

Recognizing this erasure and exclusion as a major problem, in fall 2018, the first author assigned her undergraduate students a multipart project called “Writing Water,” with the goal of helping emergency management officials to improve their communication. Class members, including the second and third authors of this paper, began their research by studying an archive, compiled by the professor and research assistants during the summer, which included news articles, press releases, Facebook posts, City Council meeting videos, water distribution site maps, and radio reports, including from the first author’s radio program. With this information as a foundation, students crafted topic proposals with research questions inspired by the archive and their own interests. After receiving feedback, class members constructed and conducted structured interviews with Salem community members about their water advisory experiences in October 2018, about three months after government actors lifted the final advisory. A variety of individuals participated as interviewees, including medical professionals and patients, children, people experiencing homelessness, nursing mothers, small business owners and employees, and grocery store managers.<sup>21</sup> Several class members also focused on the experiences of Latinx community members, which pointed to problematic areas that confirmed the experiences and observations of two of the authors, who lived in Salem during the advisories. Upon completing the interviews, class members analyzed these texts, attending to how different language use and moves constituted these testimonials. From this process, class members wrote papers detailing their

findings, which were then shared orally with local emergency management officials during class visits toward the end of the term. One month later, the professor presented a final written executive summary to city and county representatives.

Interview testimonials pointed to several recurring and interrelated problems: miscommunication between government agencies, city officials, and residents; lack of public understanding of the situation and trust in government; and separation between the impacts experienced by low-income and non-English speaking populations and more privileged individuals. This final area and its complexities became the focus of our research, given our identification as Spanish speakers. After the course concluded, the second and third authors shifted from class members to research assistants, as we worked collaboratively to combine our existing writing about monolingual assumptions and multilingual realities shaping experiences during the Salem water advisories.

### Interpreting and Translating Experiences

Although the responses that follow do not represent all experiences, these perspectives do offer insights into values held by the Spanish-speaking community, as well as some of the communication problems encountered. The opening testimonial occurred on the first author's local radio program, *Worldviews Wednesday: Communicating a Just, Equitable, and Sustainable Salem-Keizer Community*.<sup>22</sup> The second and third interviews were transcribed by the third author, after conducting interviews for the "Writing Water" assignment. The authors strategically interviewed individuals who were in their community networks, given the importance of *confianza* (trust) for recounting personal experiences candidly. Though some might argue this approach is not objective, ethnographic studies critique research that claims to be free of subjectivity (Conquergood 1992). Of course, supposedly unbiased research defenses tend to be issued by those who are part of dominant culture and who look down upon scholars who do engaged work, which we often carry out in our own communities. Related to these concerns, some might say the three testimonials below may not be representative of all Spanish speakers' experiences. We agree. Our purpose for recording and circulating these narratives is not to claim generalizability but rather to amplify the perspectives that officials ignored. We argue that because these experiences occurred, they should be listened to, taken seriously, learned from, and responded to, and so we turn to interviews with Karen, Ofelia, and Alonso.<sup>23</sup>

Karen is a Mexican American immigrant in her early 20s, who recently received an undergraduate degree in biology. As a student, she regularly worked in university science labs and also visited her family in Salem frequently. During a radio interview in July 2018, a few weeks after the second advisory was lifted, Karen described her experiences as a lab assistant working with her microbiology professor and another student colleague to support the city's cyanobacteria testing. On the air, she shared her memories of having been briefed by her professor about the complexities of the water situation, including about why a "do not boil" warning was in place (boiling cyanotoxins can actually make the bacteria more potent) and why some perceived that the city had delayed communicating publicly about detecting cyanobacteria in the Detroit Reservoir. Karen recounted:

I actually remember a few days after the first advisory was given ... That day I got home, and my mom was in the living room ... I come from an immigrant family, so we usually speak Spanish at home, and the first thing she tells me is... "Están diciendo las noticias que no tomemos agua porque nos puede hacer daño." And, so what she said is that "in the news they're telling us to not drink the water because it might be harmful to us" ... she sounded very confused and overwhelmed, and I realized that she was left with more questions than anything ... "Why is it actually worse in this situation to boil the water? I'm not understanding this, it doesn't make any sense." And she also asked me ... "How is it that we're able to use this water with these cyanotoxins for certain activities, like washing dishes or doing the laundry, but yet it's considered unsafe to use it for cooking?" And even as the days passed by I started to have similar conversations with my friends ... and they just didn't understand why they were not informed about this matter much sooner. And so, all of these questions I had with my family members and my friends, it really formed the basis of starting this project with cyanotoxins.<sup>24</sup>

Karen's translation labor is evident in this excerpt in multiple ways. She described how she had to make sense of the situation for her mom—translating complex science in more understandable ways, in addition to changing between literal languages to communicate, because her parents speak little English. She also interpreted her mom's Spanish quotations into English for radio listeners, pointing to the role that many children of immigrants (some of whom are immigrants themselves) play, as they and their parents navigate bordered linguistic and cultural spaces. Significantly, Karen found



herself in a unique position, as she was able to translate the cyanobacteria issue for her family members, given her science major and intimate involvement with lab work. However, of course, for many in Salem, access to and liminal movement between technical and public spheres were not possible.

Like Karen's mom, another interviewee, Ofelia, expressed frustration about not knowing why the advisories were happening in Salem, including not understanding the science and why warnings about water safety and drinking suitability varied from one day to another. Ofelia is a first-generation Mexican immigrant and mother of three in her early 40s. She has been living in northeast Salem for 22 years and works as a food server. Last summer was the first time she had encountered a water advisory in Salem. During the interview, Ofelia shared an experience her coworker had during the advisories. She said: "Una compañera de trabajo miró que un señor llevaba toda el agua y una señora llorando porque quería un cartón de agua. El señor no quiso ayudarle y le dijo que busque su propio agua. No había humanidad." (A coworker of mine saw a man taking all of the water [at the store], and there was a lady crying because she wanted a pack of water. The man didn't want to help her, and he told her to look for her own water. There was no humanity.). Ofelia, like so many other Salem community members, struggled to understand what was happening. From her perspective, "La información compartida no era suficiente. Mucha gente entró en pánico y es por eso que el señor no quiso compartir." (The information shared to the community wasn't enough. A lot of people were panicking, and that's why the man didn't want to share the water he had.). During the conversation, Ofelia was also asked if she believed Salem is prepared for future emergencies. She responded, "No creo. La ciudad tiene que buscar formas para que la gente no entre en pánico y buscar formas para que todos tengan agua sin tener que ser egoístas." (I don't think so. The city needs to find ways to make sure the people don't start panicking and find ways to make sure everyone has water without having to be selfish.). She shared that better communication from the city would lead to less panic and fear, especially among non-English-speaking communities in Salem. She also conveyed her hope that, in the future, improved messaging would ensure all populations are receiving vital information and resources during water-related and other incidents.

Like Ofelia, Alonso shared his experiences during the advisories as another first-generation Mexican immigrant who has lived in Salem for a few decades. He is in his mid-50s and works as an assembler at a power management company. When asked what he knew about the water situation,

Alonso said, “nada verdaderamente” (nothing really). During the interview, he described his actions to ensure those directly affected by the advisories were taken care of. For instance, although Alonso tried to show a more apathetic response, he repeated having “un niño y perros” (a child and dogs) to care for, given his role as a father and pet owner. He lives one hour away from his workplace, so he would fill an empty milk jug with tap water from work and bring it back to his home. After he learned Salem had water distribution sites on the local TV English news, because he thought more information would be available on this channel than on Spanish news media, he continued to bring water from work and also started visiting a distribution site in Northeast Salem for additional drinking and cooking resources for his family. Alonso explained that this dual collection was because he trusted the water from his workplace more, as he did not think the Salem distribution tanks contained fresh water. With language barriers, he was not able to communicate with the English-speaking distributors about water quality. Although Alonso sometimes expressed that the water advisory was not a big deal for him, repeating multiple times during the interview that the water “no me hace daño” (does not hurt me), because he knew he was not part of the vulnerable population as defined by the city, the recounting of his actions revealed concern, as he cared for his “niño y perros.”

Together, these three testimonios point to connections between families, colleagues, and fellow residents, as the Spanish-speaking community navigated the water advisories, and the communication crisis that constituted it, largely without institutional support. The community emphasis is more than an apparent pattern, as this focus communicates a prominent cultural value. Interviewees expressed the importance of the right to know in an effort to inform and to take care of others. Given that many people treated this situation as a resource crisis, it is clear that culturally and linguistically adapted communication did not reach many residents, contributing to tensions and threatening conditions regarding water access. Differential access to published materials and material resources culminated in further segregation of Salem along cultural and linguistic lines. Without access to essential information, Spanish and other non-English speakers were denied their democratic right to know. However, the community came together to assist one another, (re)activating their own support networks by sharing resources and expressing concern for community members. Thus, the water advisories and ensuing lack of institutional support resulted in the strengthening of some communal ties within the Spanish-speaking population. Interviewee responses reveal how community is not experienced the same by everyone

nor is it static, as this relational dynamic adapts to shifting circumstances and some problems can fortify and reshape it.

Such community-oriented actions are not unique to this case, as evinced by Lloréns and Santiago (2018), who describe in their post-Hurricane Maria analysis how many women in southern Puerto Rico, who are part of different grassroots collectives, built solidarity and mutual support networks.<sup>25</sup> They document how these individuals came together to cook meals, distribute supplies, support youth learning about community gardening, and much more. Even though Latinx Salem residents encounter some different realities compared to those in Puerto Rico, their experiences are greatly impacted by the same white supremacist system. It also is important to recognize that disadvantaged communities often enact similar responses to state neglect and abuse, demonstrating the value of testimonio-based praxis, which seeks to draw connections among varied experiences (The Latina Feminist Group 2001). Furthermore, as different places experience water concerns, ranging from rural coastal areas to landlocked urban centers, conceptualizing water risk, community, and linguistic and cultural commonalities and differences offers a potentially fruitful site for continued community-centered contributions that feature alternative ways of being and knowing, beyond oppressive emergency management dictates. While many Spanish-speaking, Latinx communities practice mutual support, the need for institutional transformations remains urgent.

### **Communicating (in) the Murky Waters of Emergencies**

The problems highlighted in this essay illuminate several urgent communication dilemmas. Rather than direct reflections to only our community, the following insights carry some applicability beyond Salem, especially as various communities can learn from other crisis and emergency situations to enact more equitable responses. This mutual sharing ethic animates the RISE Network, headed by Puerto Rican disaster and energy studies professors Marla Perez-Lugo and Cecilio Ortiz Garcia.<sup>26</sup> The first author presented at RISE's November 2019 conference, which convened practitioners, professors, administrators, students, and others from across the United States and Puerto Rico under the unifying theme of "Transforming University Engagement in Pre- and Post-Disaster Environments: Lessons from Puerto Rico." In the spirit of generating and creating resources for coalitional networks committed to collaboration and colearning, we offer ideas for change, organized based on our three research questions. Notably,

these focal points do not exist neatly as their own entities, but rather flow into each other, demonstrating the need for an integrated, fluid approach that acknowledges adaptability, interconnection, and the leakiness of socioecological emergencies.

*How did Spanish-speaking, Latinx community members experience the water advisories, and how did they navigate uncertainties?*

Emergency communication will never be perfect, resulting from the contingencies and uncertainties that shape crisis and disaster contexts. However, varied experiences during the 2018 Salem water advisories provide an instructive cautionary tale. In this essay, we focus on how a seemingly natural blue-green algae bloom that affected a shared water supply had disproportionate outcomes that aggravated already existing stressors, inequities, and precarities for non-English-speaking, Latinx residents. However, this accounting refuses to tell a solely damage-centered narrative, as we seek to resist oppressive, master frames that only address depletion (Tuck 2009). Thus, we also point to the responses and communal bonds that Latinx, Spanish-speaking individuals created and continue to create in various spaces. By not offering linguistically and culturally appropriate resources and by maintaining white supremacist assumptions and practices, the city isolated the Spanish-speaking and other non-English-speaking populations. Even so, as evinced by interviews with Karen, Ofelia, and Alonso, many Spanish-speaking community members stood in solidarity with one another and did what they could in a time of little institutional support and potential threats to their health and well-being. Their testimonials demonstrate how community commitment informs communication practices, which are rooted in social networks, trusting relationships, and translational dialogue.

Looking to the future, this study, of course, cannot address all aspects of the linguistic and cultural dynamics of the water advisories—advisories that likely will occur again in Salem and elsewhere, due to regional and global climate disruption linked to algae blooms and agricultural runoff. Although we have considered different place-based experiences, more work remains in thinking about and studying the significance of regional and cultural differences among Latin American-origin peoples, as well as documented and undocumented individuals. Also, our focus on Spanish, given our own linguistic competencies and comfort, hopefully inspires future engagement with speakers of Eastern European, Vietnamese, Indigenous, and other languages to better support all community members in Salem

and in other multilingual spaces. In addition, our first interview excerpts from Karen evince the importance of intergenerational ties and familia for communicating entwined public health and environmental information and urge a more sustained study of how multilingual children of non-English-speaking parents navigate their environments as interpreters and the impacts of this responsibility. Finally, considering how labor hazards affect health and well-being, coupled with inadequate and inaccessible health care, also merits serious engagement, as those with disabilities often face some of the most negative consequences of climate and environmental disasters (Morris et al. 2018, Watts Belser 2019).

*How can emergency management officials make science communication about cyanobacteria and other public health risks accessible to local residents from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds?*

We argue that emergency management officials should diversify the channels for disseminating information by considering carefully how they distribute and present public information. In addition to sending messages to cellular devices via the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS), we also suggest social media posts in multiple languages. After all, as the first author learned with some of her students as they worked to invent their own IPAWS alert, crafting a one-size-fits-all message with a limited number of characters does not meet the diverse communication realities of most communities. For those who have social media, Facebook and Twitter are both popular platforms for learning about local news and events. Additionally, some studies show that visual aids, such as infographics, can improve people's understandings of a scientific issue much better than a block of text, supporting the importance of multimodal communication (Lazard & Atkinson 2014). Visual materials can also be an effective way to disseminate information to children, some of whom prefer videos rather than the written word. To reach older audiences, information about the incident or concern and the avenues individuals can pursue for institutional support should also be conveyed in print form (such as on posters) and posted in public spaces, specifically libraries, parks, restaurants, schools, and churches. Public spaces are underutilized communication sites that can reach many people, including those without houses.

Part of considering multimodal communication and diversifying channels involves adapting messaging appropriately for individuals from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Direct, literal translation is inadequate, as these translations often are inaccurate or transcreations that inhibit full

comprehension (Onís 2015). Although the City of Salem did provide some information in Spanish on its website, this material was not sufficient to ease the stress and confusion felt by many community members, evident in the interviewee testimonials informing this essay. At the time of the advisories, according to our conversations with city officials, materials in Spanish were translated ad hoc by a few staff members. These individuals' fluency and familiarity with different variations of Spanish; their training in scientific data and information translation; and their compensation (or lack thereof) for their linguistic expertise are relevant considerations for future preparatory and response efforts. To employ and improve the possibilities of the cultural model of risk communication, emergency management officials should hire trained professional translators and interpreters to bridge the gap that exists between technical and public sphere meaning making and understanding. They should likewise implement communication campaigns that involve several community members and organizations with direct, established connections with the Spanish-speaking and other non-English-dominant communities.

For many with Latin American origins, interpersonal connections and face-to-face interactions are an integral part of communication. This reality means some individuals are less likely to consult an impersonal website and more likely to rely on information passed by word of mouth. *Pasar la voz* (passing the word) is a concept that describes the process by which social networks disseminate information, especially regarding resources (Kvam 2016). Although this framework has been mobilized for understanding Mexican immigrant communication patterns and building allies' communication competence, *pasar la voz* should not be homogeneously applied to all Spanish-speaking individuals without critical reflection. Nonetheless, extant research on this concept offers an entry point from which more culturally centered emergency preparations and responses built on *confianza* might occur.

Public forums create one possibility for creating channels for *pasar la voz* and copresent communication. During these events, city and county officials should be present and willing to have a dialogue with members of the public, with compensated interpreters present and *promotores* (community leaders) as representatives. These forums create a space for providing information to people who may be responsible for relaying information to others, such as teachers, health-care providers, business managers, and even children to their parents. Public forums tend to be a deeply flawed mechanism, and their limitations are well documented (Pezzullo & Cox

2018). Nonetheless, these communal spaces carry some potential. To reduce participation barriers, organizers, in conversation with *promotores*, might consider meeting in familiar community spaces, such as churches, recreation centers, and community gardens. By demonstrating that city and other officials are committed to listening to and integrating feedback from residents, establishing a dialogue with everyone, and collaborating with more trusted groups, the local government can begin to cultivate more sustainable relationships with residents.

Although Anglocentric, monolingual governing bodies pose a major barrier to nondominant cultural modes of communication, possibilities exist for *intercambio* (exchange) via dialogue and reciprocity (Kvam 2016). Through *intercambio*, emergency management officials can learn about the culturally specific communicative needs of non-English-speaking residents. This process also may build and fortify relationships of *confianza*, especially if officials collaborate with *promotores*. That written, as Lisa Cacho (2012) and David Naguib Pellow (2018) point out, struggling for inclusion into a white supremacist state and structures that harm communities marked as expendable, devalued, and criminal can be a waste of energy, often prompting members of these communities to create their own communication ecologies.

Ethnic media also can enact *pasar la voz* by serving as sites of information sharing and community solidarity. These networks are “defined as media created by and for immigrant, ethnic minority, language minority, or indigenous populations – in order to increase broadband adoption and sustain connectivity in the communities they serve” (Katz et al. 2012, 80). For cities with radio and other forms of ethnic media, “it is important that environmental hazard managers coordinate closely with those who are translating the warning message from English into another language” (Lindell & Perry 2003, 112). Additionally, because reporters often find themselves in the dual role of journalists and first responders, adequately supporting their work and well-being requires preplanning actions that recognize their complex storytelling and support-giving role, while also acknowledging these individuals as affected community members (Nieves-Pizarro et al. 2019, 803). To assist local governmental transformations, hiring a team that directs messaging toward Spanish-speaking audiences and other marginalized language audiences would enhance information sharing and require collaborating with organizations and news outlets that already communicate to and are more likely to be trusted by these same community members. In Salem and the surrounding area, *Causa Oregon’s* Facebook page, *Univision Portland*, *La Campeona*, and *Radio Movimiento* (now *Radio Poder*) are

a few examples of established groups and communication channels. Additionally, English-language news media outlets also carry responsibility in helping with translating information. For example, during the 2007 fires in San Diego County, California, the *Union Tribune* collaborated with a Spanish-speaking paper to disseminate translated updates (Vongs 2007). Creating these networks before disasters hit marks a forward-looking orientation necessary for responding in more equitable ways during actual crises.

Given that trust toward government institutions was already lacking prior to the advisories for immigrants, asylum seekers, refugees, undocumented/DACAmented, and non-English-speaking community members, the urgent need to transform current relationships is obvious. At the most foundational level, top-down emergency preparations and responses should be demilitarized, a process that a county official described to the first author during a January 2019 meeting as “Emergency Management 2.0.” This call for demilitarization requires a radical transformation of current discourses and policies, as evinced in Salem’s case with the Oregon National Guard manning distribution sites. Additionally, emergency managers often dress and carry themselves in ways that enact a militarized persona, which is not surprising given that many individuals filling these positions have military experience. Certainly, the fear that this militarized presence can instill should cause major concern and must be addressed if city officials are ever to build connections, let alone trust, with immigrant and other racialized, ethnically marginalized, and terrorized community members. One possibility for doing this very hard and vital work is in educational spaces.

*What possibilities exist for university, governmental, and community collaborations, especially relating to emergency management communication?*

We contend that collaborative potential exists among university and other educational institutions, government officials, and the surrounding community. One way this collaboration can unfold is thinking about the role of children as communicators, as hinted above. Olmos-García observed: “Salem-Keizer is the second largest school district [in the state] with 40% identifying as ‘Hispanic.’ I wonder what emergency preparedness would look like for Latinx families if it was through schools?”<sup>27</sup> Officials need to provide bilingual resources to educators in these programs to reach families who only speak or prefer Spanish (and other languages). Multilingual teachers should not be expected to translate materials because that labor tends to be uncompensated and displaces institutional responsibility. To our



knowledge, the city already is doing outreach to school-aged children and teachers; however, a multilingual focus that resonates with Salem's diverse population needs more attention.

Another form of communication involves bringing together different actors for educational events. Since collaborating with emergency management and municipal water officials, this essay's authors and other research collaborators have organized and held several emergency preparedness workshops and other awareness-raising events in spring and fall 2019 on Willamette University's campus, which included information sharing by students from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, and the creation of flyers and supply kits that participants took home. Having learned from the water advisory situation's heightening of existing inequities in the city, student contributors were very concerned about the looming "Big One" earthquake, given that Salem falls in the Cascadia Subduction Zone impact area. In spring 2019, undergraduates presented information and kit-making materials to mostly Latinx middle school and high school students during two different workshops, urging participants to take the resources home and communicate what they had learned with their families. On another occasion, two environmental science majors headed an on-campus workshop for students living in dorm buildings, which are not expected to withstand a 9.0 or higher magnitude earthquake. Local emergency management officials have attended many of these educational events, and several have visited the first author's classes on various occasions. The dorm-focused gathering also included a local journalist, Arturo Sarmiento, who directs *Radio Poder* and hosts "Hispanidades" on the same community radio station on which



Figure 4. Undergraduates Denise Diaz, Karmen Chavez-Sam, and Maria Saldaña-Suastes organize emergency preparation materials for workshop participants in April 2019. Photo by first author.

Karen was interviewed. The opportunity to have officials present to listen to the comments of a Mexican American immigrant and radio expert, who also survived the deadly 1985 Mexico City earthquake, exemplifies the type of collaborative listening and learning that needs to continue in the future (Adler 2015).

We acknowledge this individual preparedness approach could be read as bolstering neoliberal logics of privatizing problems and social responsibilities, which is the city's primary response to emergency management (Cloud 1998); however, we argue these workshops and other educational interventions, given their target audiences, serve to resist ongoing disregard for communities ignored and oppressed by the state, county, and municipal governments. In fall 2019, in conjunction with the Great Oregon ShakeOut, a statewide earthquake awareness campaign, the authors organized a few tabling events to share informational flyers and emergency kit resources, given the university's lack of action.<sup>28</sup> To further address this problem to a broader, more diverse audience, two of the authors created a bilingual Spanish and English zine (a do-it-yourself magazine), which we shared with several local Latinx- and Spanish language-serving groups. To increase accessibility, we also posted this resource on our university's food pantry and clothing share center's website.<sup>29</sup> Though these efforts are not the form of structural change we had desired initially, tangibly supporting the sparking and strengthening of alternative networks of community and information sharing marks one of many possible contributions, especially because preparedness discourses tend to reach more privileged residents and many low-income, minoritized groups do not have the time or funds to prepare these kits.

Importantly, professors, staff, and students can facilitate these town-gown interactions and arguably have an ethical responsibility to do so, given institutional resources and connections—inviting new and continued research on a variety of hazards and socioecological dilemmas. In doing so, university actors can learn about, understand, critique, and directly participate in preparing for and responding to crises caused by regional and global climate disruption, extreme weather, pandemics, toxic spills, and other emergencies. These “wicked problems” (Carcasson & Sprain 2016) are shaped by uncertainty, confusion and paradoxes, multiple publics and stakeholders, conflicts and tensions, and a recognition that, rather than achieve some ultimate solution as an end goal, grappling with these urgencies requires a process-oriented approach that values and enacts interdisciplinarity. Although shocks (e.g., wildfires, earthquakes, tsunamis, droughts, heatwaves, water contamination, pandemics, floods) require urgent attention to understand how preparations

and responses function, including for and by whom, attending to everyday stressors (e.g., settler colonialism, transportation and health-care access, and economic injustice) also matters for studying how shocks and stressors interact to reimagine current conditions and futures. Thus, professors and other teachers can play a role in cultivating the understandings and competencies needed to better address these inevitable disasters by blending theory and practice to critically engage grave dilemmas that students will confront at some point in their lives.<sup>30</sup>

A local emphasis offers many important place-based experiences, but we also acknowledge that the hazards and harms amplified in this study are, in many ways, not unique to Salem. This reality points to how different knowledges and capacities for working collaboratively on these issues pose significant questions, dilemmas, and possibilities for other contexts throughout the Willamette Valley, the Pacific Northwest, the United States, and globally. As environmental justice scholars make clear, concerns with language, power, and oppression must be part of discussions about socio-ecological crises at local and global levels (Lloréns 2019, Lloréns et al. 2018, Sowards 2019b, Sze 2018, Ybarra 2018). Thus, while engaged scholars and practitioners consider place-specific impacts, studying global connections, displacements, and migrations is also significant. As colliding everyday stressors and exceptional shocks increase in frequency and severity, we are ethically bound to advocate for relations that support equity, dignity, and, to echo Ofelia's concerns, "humanidad."

### **Postscript**

The COVID-19 pandemic reveals that little has changed structurally with respect to public health communication and well-being outcomes for Latinx communities since the cyanobacteria situation in Marion County. Exemplifying these problems, Salem's neighboring city of Woodburn is home to 25,000 people, many of whom are immigrants and speak Spanish and Indigenous languages. The majority of residents work on farms and nurseries or in the restaurant and food manufacturing industries, and most of them labored throughout the pandemic, often without sufficient employer-supplied hand-washing resources or conditions for physical distancing. Additionally, as in other areas throughout the United States, poverty and economic injustice forced low-income and -wealth individuals to decide between wages and personal and community health. As free clinics, where testing and treatment could have been available, shuttered their doors, delays in county and Oregon

Health Authority outreach, in the form of communication, supplies, and financial support, also led to preventable disproportionate impacts and a reactive, rather than proactive, approach. A lack of public health messaging in accessible languages and in culturally adapted avenues likely contributed to increased disease spread and inadequate treatment. Meanwhile, undocumented statuses isolated and barred many Latinx individuals from essential resources, as reliance on shared vanpools and close living conditions often continued without other available options (Alexander et al. 2020).<sup>31</sup>

The consequences of these dynamics for public health experiences and outcomes are clear. Although 8 percent of Marion County residents live in Woodburn, this community accounted for 25 percent of known COVID-19 cases in spring 2020. A similar disparate outcome existed in Marion County more broadly, with Latinos composing about one-quarter of residents, but representing 35 percent of reported cases by late April. Marion County's infection numbers totaled almost three times the average of all Oregon counties. Considering that testing was not as high as in other areas, the infection rate was likely much higher than officially recorded. Compounded with these realities, racist and xenophobic thinking and communicating during the pandemic resulted (predictably) in scapegoating Latinx people. The head of *Mano a Mano* Family Resource Center Levi Herrera-Lopez reported having seen social media posts stating that Latinos should be “locked up” to stop community spread (*ibid.*).

Clearly, governmental responses to the novel coronavirus have further aggravated the existing problems and injustices highlighted throughout this essay. Yet again, Latinx individuals and organizations responded by mobilizing mutual support networks and communal resources. As they always have done, PCUN members and other allied group organizers and constituents rallied to communicate community realities and needs via *Radio Poder* and in many other spaces. In the continued absence of governmental support and the perpetuation of oppressive systems, these counterefforts and interventions represent vital sites for sharing, sustaining, and strengthening community in the struggle to live good lives.

### **Dedication**

We dedicate this essay to Willamette University student Abigail Agustin-Paz, whose memory we hope will be honored by taking seriously the arguments and experiences presented in this essay.

## NOTES

1. See “Harmful Algal Outbreaks and Drinking Water,” Clean Water Fund, at [www.cleanwaterfund.org/features/harmful-algal-outbreaks-and-drinking-water](http://www.cleanwaterfund.org/features/harmful-algal-outbreaks-and-drinking-water) and “Learn about Cyanobacteria and Cyanotoxins,” United States Environmental Protection Agency, at [www.epa.gov/cyanohabs/learn-about-cyanobacteria-and-cyanotoxins](http://www.epa.gov/cyanohabs/learn-about-cyanobacteria-and-cyanotoxins).

2. Between May 23–29, a few water sample results showed cyanobacteria levels high enough to be potentially harmful for vulnerable populations. A long holiday weekend and advice from Oregon Health Authority officials to avoid any unnecessary panic, and to follow the EPA’s recommended 10-day exposure and analysis period, contributed to the communication delay (Bach 2018b).

3. “Salem, OR,” Data USA, at <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/salem-or/#demographics>, accessed January 2, 2020; “Community Facts,” United States Census Bureau, <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>, accessed September 15, 2018. Please note that the Census Bureau’s American FactFinder service used in writing this article is no longer available; this data can now be found at <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/>.

4. *Latinx* is a contested gender-inclusive term that avoids the *Latina/o* binary. Although an in-depth discussion of this signifier is beyond this essay’s scope, other studies provide a detailed engagement with its significance and for whom (Onís 2017).

5. Although we cannot feasibly detail all of these crises, Hurricane Katrina epitomizes the problem of marking Black and other nonwhite communities as expendable, while also invoking the long-held dehumanizing, racist trope of animalization to legitimate oppressive responses and policies, including in media framings of the New Orleans Superdome. The Katrina case was shaped by everyday stressors and the extreme shocks of the hurricane and levee breaches, aggravated by emergency management maneuvers that disempowered, harmed, and led to the premature deaths of many local people (Veil et al. 2011).

6. Following Michelle Holling and Bernadette Calafell (2011), we do not italicize Spanish words to avoid further othering non-English languages.

7. The bulk of this essay was composed several months before September 2020, when Salem and the surrounding area made national headlines for toxic air conditions and evacuations.

8. “Community Facts,” US Census Bureau.

9. “Community Facts,” US Census Bureau.

10. As one author has witnessed directly, in Northeast Salem, McKay High School and North High School have some of the lowest graduation rates because of overcrowding, some staff members who do not understand immigrant experiences, and low family participation in school events, as parents struggle to provide for their children with often physically demanding and low-paying jobs.

11. “Community Facts,” US Census Bureau.

12. “Salem, OR,” Data USA.

13. We invoke “Spanglish” as an expression of liminal identity construction and multi-lingual belongings, rather than as a deficit (Zentella 2002).

14. This essay focuses on reported experiences by Spanish-speaking residents, given the authors’ own backgrounds, community commitments, and research interests. Although the testimonios included here point to some of the widespread problems revealed by this water

situation and the communication shaping (mis)understandings and inequities, these experiences, of course, do not represent everyone. For research on the importance of Indigenous languages and ways of knowing and being relating to environmental and climate concerns, consult José Castro-Sotomayor (2019).

15. In this example, the workers are completely erased visually, whereas the presence of white bodies is centered in this advertising juxtaposition. A notable disruption of the white-dominated wine industry in the Willamette Valley is the Haitian-American-run Abbey Creek Vineyard. The owner, Bertony Faustin, enlivens his business by playing hip-hop music, hiring Black employees, and producing films about the exclusive industry, as the “1st recorded black winemaker in Oregon” ([www.abbeycreekvineyard.com/](http://www.abbeycreekvineyard.com/)). There also is a winery called Cubanísimo, owned and operated by a Cuban American (<https://cubanisimovineyards.com/>).

16. Delia Olmos-García, interview with authors, December 2, 2019.

17. The Driver’s Licenses for All campaign, which led to the Equal Access to Roads Act, was successfully passed by voters and legislators in 2019 (Theen 2019).

18. Dr. Walidah Imarisha’s website ([www.walidah.com/](http://www.walidah.com/)) contains a timeline that includes the case of Vanport, Oregon, which is co-constituted by the material landscape and archival materials shaped by the flood of 1948. This event devastated the largely Black community and urges studying displacements, risk, racism, and international emergency management responses from the Red Cross (and other international aid agencies). In addition to learning from this public website, in summer 2019, the first author encountered a historical trace of this terrorism against the Black community while eating at a restaurant in Coos Bay, a rural coastal town several hours south of Salem. On each table were local trifold community “tidbits.” Illuminating the potency of white supremacy, one notable event described how the only recorded lynching in Oregon had occurred in Coos Bay in the early 1900s, when Alonzo Tucker was hanged. He was nameless, however, in the description, and his murder was presented within a frame of supposedly fun local facts. This trivialization of barbarism against the Black community is aided by misleading dominant discourse that paints Oregon as a progressive state.

19. OFIR’s website is available at <http://www.oregonir.org/>.

20. This critical geographer’s research draws on Malini Ranganathan’s (2016, 28) scholarship, which delves deeply into Flint’s historical context to critique illiberal liberal policies, explaining: “I traced Flint’s troubles to the project of separate and unequal housing carried out under the auspices of an ostensibly democratic and egalitarian liberal political order from the early 20th century onwards. Racialized property making and taking, I argued, were core to the seemingly benevolent program of urban renewal and improvement.” Ranganathan’s findings center the importance of historicizing racialized dispossession to make sense of contemporary crises.

21. The interviews included in this article received Institutional Review Board approval in 2019.

22. Keizer is the neighboring city of Salem and did not have water advisories in 2018, given that the community’s drinking water comes from a nearby aquifer.

23. The name of the first interviewee is the individual’s actual name, as her comments are publicly available online and aired on the radio. The second and third interviewees received pseudonyms, based on requests for anonymity.

24. “Local Water Concerns Inspire Willamette Univ. Research Projects,” *Willamette Wake Up*, KMUZ, July 18, 2018, at <https://kmuz.org/willamette-wake-up-7-18-2018-local-water-concerns-inspire-willamette-univ-research-projects/>.

25. In addition to this essay, Yarimar Bonilla’s and Marisol LeBrón’s (2019) edited collection *Aftershocks of Disaster* critically engages realities in Puerto Rico both pre- and post-Maria, including a chapter by Lloréns.

26. The RISE Network, accessed May 1, 2020, at <https://therisenetwork.org/>.

27. Delia Olmos-García, interview with authors, December 2, 2019.

28. The university’s campus safety team has made few efforts to communicate the substantial risks posed by this future cataclysm.

29. See <https://willamette.edu/student-life/soar/resources/earthquake-prep-zine/index.html>.

30. Some of this section’s language is derived from a general education pathways proposal that the first author composed. If this curricular approach proceeds in development and implementation, students will have an opportunity to tailor a portion of their coursework to the theme of “Crisis, Care, and Communities.”

31. Thank you to Professor Cindy Koenig Richards for sharing this article. The authors completed this essay a few months before the pandemic began and chose to highlight briefly the structural connections between governmental and community responses to the cyanobacteria and COVID-19 cases, given their similarities and intersections.

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