



NOTHING COULD PREPARE ME FOR what it was like to go through two category 5 hurricanes. While the storms themselves were traumatic, rebuilding afterward—which continues to-

day—has been the most impactful for my work. With little help from the U.S. government, I explore how the Virgin Islands' colonial history has continued to hold us back while we strive to heal, to grow, to move forward.

Growing up next to the ocean, I learned the many faces of the wind and the waves. Though the sea was often our lullaby, twice we lost our roof to its temper (hurricane Hugo, in 1989 and Maryland, in 1995). Preparing and rebuilding for hurricanes became a natural ebb and flow of life, at least for my childhood. Then, there was a lull in severe storms, and everyone on the island relaxed. I built an entirely new relationship with the sea. The ocean became my canvas, my creative partner as I developed my photography.

Before the hurricane season of 2017, I had plans to showcase a series about the Middle Passage—the sailing route that brought slaves to the New World. It featured images representing the African souls who were lost during that voyage, either from illness, injury, or often, by choice. Many Africans decided to surrender to the waves rather than face whatever lay ahead. Only the ocean could contain so much history and not be ruined by it. Every time I walk in, from the beach, until the ocean swallows me, I feel the emotional, historical, and cultural depths held within it. This connection with the sea was deep and reverent, but it did not reflect its agency.

Because while it is a container for all we have poured in it, it also wields the grand power of nature; it refuses to compromise its displays of force. We cannot understand, let alone fight its full power, only watch in awe. A hurricane is like all of nature shrieking at the top of its lungs; you have no idea when it will end. When it finally does, the silence is deafening. You have survived, but you don't know who or what else has. Or hasn't. Going outside is like stepping into a parallel universe. Everything has changed.

After Irma and Maria, my art was put on hold. First, simply surviving, and then rebuilding took everyone's full attention. Living became a day-to-day intention, instead of something that happens while we're focusing on other things. At the end of the day, there was no energy left for anything else. My first break from daily survival came in the form of a trip to Denmark in February of 2018. It was a very difficult decision to leave my family and home while we still didn't have power or basic necessities. But I knew I needed to return to photography. I knew I needed to begin rebuilding that part of my life. And the opportunity to look through the Royal Library's West Indies Photography archives was well worth it. Many of the photographs in the archives had never been seen by a non-government citizen, let alone a foreigner. I found images of my ancestors and the dirt road to my current home 200 years ago. But the most striking similarity, one I never expected, was the hardship. Rebuilding after the hurricanes was an eerie echo of the daily struggle during colonial times. The parallels could no longer be ignored. The Middle Passage tore the lives of Africans apart, leaving the ones who survived disoriented in a land they didn't recognize. But the struggle to live was only just beginning. And it would continue through colonial times and slavery, through abolition and decolonization, which continues to today.

My photography explores the connection between the recent physical trauma of the hurricanes, and the deep emotional and cultural scars of our colonial history—brought into sharp relief by the response of the U.S. government. We are not full citizens. We are still a colony. We are still struggling, still trying to heal wounds centuries old.



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Artist statement for the *Regrowth* exhibit,
Lost Dog, St. Croix, USVI, 2018