

Fragments of Disaster: Vulnerability, Power and Resistance in the 2023 Eastern Libyan Floods

HARRY SMITH 

ABSTRACT

This article builds on contemporary assemblage theory in human geography and disaster risk management to analyse Storm Daniel and the 2023 Eastern Libyan Floods. It conceptually synthesises McFarlane's (2021) notion of fragments with the Disaster Risk Management (DRM) Assemblage framework developed by Donovan (2017) to explore the lived experiences of disaster. The study draws on qualitative data, defined as the fragments of disaster, including humanitarian reports, eyewitness accounts, interviews, news media, images, and local literature — the broken and discarded remnants of catastrophe. The three primary fragments analysed are Mustafa al Trabelsi's poem *The Rain*, a political narrative from Eastern Libyan authorities, and humanitarian fieldwork following the disaster. These fragments are thematically analysed across three relational domains within the DRM Assemblage of governance and vulnerability, hazards and expertise, and values and ideologies. The findings reveal the disaster as a complex, multi-layered event produced through the convergence of environmental vulnerability, state failure, and historical marginalisation. Ultimately, the study shows how a fragment-based approach makes visible the resistances and power struggles that continue to shape disaster response and recovery in Eastern Libya, offering a bottom-up lens into the contested politics of disaster causation and justice.

CONTRIBUTOR

Harry is an MA graduate from the Department of Geography and Earth Sciences at Aberystwyth University.

Email: hj.smith2000@icloud.com

CRYNODEB

Mae'r erthygl hon yn ychwanegu at ddamcaniaeth cydosod gyföes ym maes daearyddiaeth ddynol a rheoli'r risg o drychineb i ddadansoddi Storm Daniel a llifogydd dwyrain Libya yn 2023. Mae'n dod â chysyniad McFarlane (2021) am ddernynnau ynghyd yn gysyniadol â fframwaith Cydosod Rheoli'r Risg o Drychineb (DRM) a ddatblygwyd gan Donovan (2017) i fynd i'r afael â phrofiadau byw o drychineb. Mae'r astudiaeth yn defnyddio data ansoddol, a ddiffinnir yn ddernynnau trychineb, gan gynnwys adroddiadau dyngarol, adroddiadau gan lygad-dystion, cyfveliadau, cyfryngau newyddion, delweddau a llenyddiaeth leol — gweddillion trychineb sydd ar chwâl a'u lluchio i'r neilltu. Y tri phrif ddarnau a ddadansoddir yw cerdd Mustafa al Trabelsi 'The Rain', naratif wleidyddol gan awdurdodau dwyrain Libya, a gwaith maes dyngarol ar ôl y drychineb. Dadansoddir y darnau hyn yn thematig mewn tri pharth cysylltiedig yn fframwaith Cydosod DRM, sef llywodraethu, bregusrwydd, peryglon ac arbenigedd, gwerthoedd ac ideolegau. Mae'r canfyddiadau'n cyfleu'r drychineb yn ddigwyddiad cymhleth, amlhaenog a grëwyd ar ôl i fregusrwydd amgylcheddol, methiant y wladwriaeth ac ymylu hanesyddol gyfuno â'i gilydd. Yn y pen draw, dengys yr astudiaeth sut mae dull sy'n defnyddio ddernynnau yn amlygu'r gwrthwynebu a'r brwydro dros rym sy'n parhau i lywio ymatebion i drychinebu ac adfer yn dwyrain Libya, gan gynnig cipolwg ar wleidyddiaeth gynhennus achosion a chyfiawnder trychineb, a hynny o'r gwaelod i fyny.

KEYWORDS

Assemblage theory; disaster risk management; fragments; Libya; Storm Daniel

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INTRODUCTION

In the days following Storm Daniel and the subsequent collapse of the Derna Dams in Eastern Libya, the BBC (2023) and numerous other Western media outlets reported on the reasoning behind the destruction, asking the question: ‘Why was the damage to Derna so catastrophic? The answer – nature, in particular record rainfall, overwhelmed dams and flash floods (BBC 2023; France 24 2023a; CNN 2023). However, behind these headlines and the briefly circulated images of destruction lies a disaster rooted in human decisions and historical processes. Disaster risk is increasingly being seen as shaped and controlled by human forces as processes are ‘reassembled and reframed as emergencies, or crisis-opportunities ripe for political and economic exploitation’ (McGowran 2024: 4). The events of September 10th-11th 2023, and the ongoing reconstruction, revealed a city suffering from a century of neglect, repression and exploitation. However, the focus on natural causation placed an element of blame away from the relevant authorities that rule Eastern Libya. At the same time, the political transformation of the disaster provides a stark example of McGowran’s (2024) reassembling disaster risk into politicised processes, which is characterised by the prolonging of risk and exploitation by relevant political authorities in a failure of disaster risk management.

In analysing disaster risk, academics have used assemblage theory to provide a conceptual framework that can handle the complex relational and emerging factors of disaster (Donovan 2017). Such is seen in McGowran’s (2024: 1) empirical investigation of landslide disasters in Kalimpong, India, focusing on the socio-material and geopolitical processes that ‘prolong and exacerbate the impacts landslides have on people.’ This is also seen in Gonzalez’s (2022) governance assemblage analysis of disaster risk management during the 1985 San Antonio earthquake in Chile. As Donovan (2017: 44) describes, ‘assemblage thinking can provide a means to open up disaster risk management by gathering together its diverse components and examining the relations between them.’ Despite this, criticism towards assemblage theory exists, raising issues of jargon-filled language and a loss of clarity by simply using assemblage as a descriptor (Dovey & Pafka 2017; McGowran 2024). Considering these criticisms and the application of the Disaster Risk Management (DRM) Assemblage, this article has the following aims:

- comprehensively analyse the 2023 Eastern Libyan Floods through three fragments that present different perspectives of the disaster, examining causation, response and resistance.
- focus on how embedded political and historical forces in Eastern Libya shaped the emergence of the disaster and the reconstruction that followed.
- apply fragment writing within the thematic approach of Donovan’s (2017) DRM Assemblage to engage with contemporary research within human geography and assemblage.

This study uses fragment writing as a method and conceptual approach, applied within the DRM Assemblage framework, to examine the emergence and transformation of the disaster in Eastern Libya. The first section offers a theoretical and literature-based overview of these approaches, establishing the thematic structure that guides the analysis, along with acknowledging and addressing critiques towards assemblage theory. The subsequent section examines three fragments, each analysed through assigned themes within the DRM Assemblage. The first fragment employs

a poem as an entry point into a discussion of governance and vulnerability in Eastern Libya prior to the disaster. The second fragment, drawing on an interview with a political actor, interrogates the role of power amidst disaster uncertainty and its implications for the initial response. The third fragment is based on comments from fieldwork reports and examines the humanitarian dimensions of resistance and reconstruction. The following discussion draws a pattern between the three fragments to produce a holistic view of the disaster, leading to a conclusion which reflects on the complexities of disaster causation. By adopting a thematic, fragment-based approach that serves as both method and conceptual lens, the study responds to Gillard's (2019) call for bottom-up study of disaster, centring the experiences of those most directly affected by the 2023 Eastern Libyan Floods.

DISASTER ASSEMBLAGES

Fully understanding assemblage theory's application to disaster studies provides an essential foundation for this study, particularly in framing the idea of disasters-in-the-making. As Donovan (2017: 1) states, 'assemblage thinking can provide a means to open up disaster risk management by gathering together its diverse components and examining the relations between them.' This aligns with the United Nations' Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) agenda, which emphasises managing risk rather than preventing so-called 'natural' disasters (UNDRR 2020). This theoretical shift is reflected in the work of Donovan (2017, 2021) and McGowran (2024), who draw on assemblage theory to explore how disaster risks emerge through complex entanglements of social, environmental, and political processes. Assemblage thinking allows for the integration of diverse forms of knowledge and the recognition of both human and non-human forces in shaping disaster outcomes (Donovan 2017).

A key dimension of this framing is agency, which in assemblage theory extends beyond individual actors to include infrastructure, technologies, and institutions. As Pelling et al. (2009) observe, local agency and the struggle for control are shaped by cross-scalar power dynamics. Bennett (2005) further argues that in the context of 21st-century complexity, recognising non-human agency is increasingly necessary. These layers of local, political, material agency often intersect or conflict, especially in post-disaster settings, as seen in McGowran's (2024) account of how geopolitical assemblages exacerbate landslide hazards and hinder recovery efforts in Kalimpong. In summary, these processes entrench existing political and economic power structures, resulting in a re-territorialisation of disaster (McGowran 2024).

Central to disaster assemblages is the concept of disasters-in-the-making and a focus on lived experiences. The former refers to a component of the DRM Assemblage, where a vast range of human and non-human influences underpin the emergence of disaster risk in a specific context (Donovan 2017). The institutional shift away from viewing disasters as inherently natural events has been widely accepted within disaster studies, largely stemming from the UNDRR's call to reframe hazards, captured in its declaration: 'It's time to say goodbye to natural disasters' (Mizutori 2020; UNDRR 2020). However, McGowran and Donovan (2021: 1605) raise a critical question: 'If disasters in X location are not natural, then what are they?' This question is closely tied to the broader application of assemblage theory, which emphasises the interactive characteristics and agency of various components. The DRM Assemblage highlights the relational,

more-than-natural, and more-than-human factors that contribute to disaster causation (McGowran & Donovan 2021). Adopting a critical assemblage approach in disaster studies offers one way to respond to this question. Accordingly, the DRM Assemblage is proposed as ‘an analytical tool which can be used to analyse these assemblages and apparatuses in relation to disasters-in-the-making’ (McGowran & Donovan 2021: 1609). Another key dimension of disaster assemblage research is the lived experience of those most affected by disaster events. This is a central focus in the DRM Assemblage framework and in assemblage-based research more broadly.

McGowran’s (2021: 10) research, for example, is underpinned by the ‘actual, lived experiences’ of various actors involved in confronting disaster and vulnerability. In Chile, an assemblage perspective on post-disaster reconstruction draws on the lived experiences and relationships of communities impacted by the mega-fire in the city of Valparaíso (Berroeta et al. 2020). This approach reflects a broader call within disaster studies to adopt bottom-up perspectives that emphasise embedded factors of causation. Recent research on slow emergencies aligns with this narrative, highlighting how localised vulnerabilities can gradually accumulate over time as attritional lethality, rather than manifesting as sudden or unpredictable events (Anderson et al. 2019). Gaillard’s (2019: S13) review of the field advocates for localised, bottom-up approaches that frame disaster analysis as a ‘participation in the sense of crisis.’ This is summarised as the ‘view from below’ (Gaillard 2019: S14)—an approach that assemblage theory, with its flexibility and nuance, is well-suited to support within the field of disaster studies.

CRITIQUES

Assemblage theory, in its Deleuzian origins, has often been critiqued for its reliance on dense and inaccessible language, limiting its accessibility to researchers (Dovey et al. 2018). Storper and Scott (2016: 31) notably criticise the ‘semantically inflated jargon’ present in contemporary urban theory, including, but not limited to, assemblage thinking. Dovey et al. (2018: 4) similarly highlight the ‘incomprehensible and indeterminate’ language often used within assemblage theory, further arguing that such tendencies undermine its analytical clarity. More broadly, Anderson and McFarlane (2011: 125) note that assemblage theory is frequently deployed as a provisional ‘descriptor’. This flexibility, while valuable, carries the risk that, as Anderson and McFarlane (2010) caution, almost anything can be framed as an assemblage, thereby diluting the theory’s critical potential. Storper and Scott (2016: 31) advance this critique, suggesting that ‘one searches in vain [in assemblage theory] to know what larger assemblages make, which assemblages are important.’ Although primarily discussed within urban theory, disaster studies have also acknowledged these criticisms. Disaster studies have sought to address these limitations by employing the DRM Assemblage as a means of focusing on how place-specific political, scientific, economic, and social imaginaries interact in the emergence of disaster and the ongoing ‘territorialisation of inequality and vulnerability in disaster events’ (McGowran 2024: 4). Gaillard’s (2019: S13) review of the field similarly emphasises the importance of localised, bottom-up approaches that analyse disasters from the perspective of those experiencing crisis ‘as a participation in the sense of crisis’ (Hewitt 1994: 8). Crucially, Gaillard (2019) and McGowran and Donovan (2021) argue for the study of disaster events through radical, transdisciplinary methods grounded in ethical sensitivity

and sustainable practice. Fragments, as explained below, responds to these critiques of abstraction and clarity.

Building on the above theoretical framework, this study adopts a disaster assemblage driven narrative to investigate the embedded historical and political legacies that created the conditions for disaster to occur. It also examines how these factors shaped the post-disaster response and how forms of resistance subsequently manifested. As defined by Donovan (2017) and further adapted by McGowran and Donovan (2021), the relationships and components of the DRM Assemblage are organised into six linked themes, which provide the structure for this analysis. Although the three fragments are broadly aligned with particular themes, the focus remains on the 'nature of the connections' between elements; thus, fragments cannot be neatly confined to discrete thematic categories, given their inherently relational and interconnected nature. The DRM Assemblage framework enables engagement with the complex, dynamic factors that attempt—and often fail—to manage disaster risk (McGowran & Donovan 2021).

FRAGMENTS OF DISASTER

As defined by McFarlane (2021: 4), fragments are 'not theoretical questions or conceptual abstractions; they are lived individual social and political struggles.' They represent more than simple material entities; rather, they constitute 'forms of expression' and 'types of knowledge' (McFarlane 2021: 4). Fragments are deeply embedded in political and economic critique, seeking to 'examine inadequate and broken material fragments on the economic margins of the urban global South' (McFarlane 2021: 14). In contrast to these broken and divided elements, assemblage theory emphasises agency, flux, and transformation (Anderson & McFarlane 2011). Fragments, whether physical, narrative, or otherwise, describe life on the political margins. McFarlane (2021) shows how life on these margins involves politicising the urban experience through collective and individual engagement with fragments. Similarly, an assemblage theory approach allows for a focus on power, politics, and relationality. Muller (2015: 33), for instance, utilises assemblage thinking and actor-network theory to draw attention to material objects in human geography—'bodies, documents, weapons, animals, infrastructure, earth.' While Muller's focus on materiality aligns with the mentality of fragments, McFarlane (2021) encompasses non-material elements such as local literature, discarded objects, and incomplete housing. As McFarlane (2021: 4) further defines, fragments are 'not theoretical questions or conceptual abstractions; they are lived individual social and political struggles.' These politicised fragments are characterised by their withdrawal from the whole and exist in a state of tension between connectivity and detachment. In a similar vein to assemblage theory's emphasis on flux and change, fragmentation is understood as a 'process of pulling together and falling apart' (McFarlane 2021: 14). Thus, analytical focus should not rest solely on the fragment itself but on the relations through which it is formed, dissolved, and transformed. Relations that are often political, economic, and social in nature.

Fragments may therefore extend beyond material artefacts to encompass particular people, events, or spaces, defined through relational processes. As such, fragments must be understood 'not just as nouns but as verbs' (McFarlane 2021: 3). Drawing from examples provided by McFarlane (2021)—such as a broken toilet floor in a Mumbai neighbourhood, the disconnected infrastructures of Cape Town's poorest communities, or the temporary structures of refugee camps in Berlin—it is evident that fragments

operate distinctly from assemblages. Fragments often describe what is left behind or broken from the wider world, whereas assemblage theory expresses the dynamic relations of agency and change that hold elements together. Earlier philosophical work also echoes aspects of this conceptualisation. Prior to McFarlane's intervention, Harman's (2015) Object-Oriented Ontology similarly emphasised the withdrawal of objects from direct relational processes, arguing that the true nature of an object remains partially obscured. Drawing on both Harman's (2015) objects and McFarlane's (2021) fragments it is evident to see they exist in a state of tension, the former directly withdrawn from relational processes and latter existing within relational process that are disconnected from the wider world. Taxier (2020) later expanded on this in the concept of 'allure,' which seeks to reveal deeper characteristics of objects beyond their immediate surface.

Overall, the fragment does not primarily foreground agency. It often represents spaces and experiences of detachment, neglect, and marginality. Fragments are not simply fixed units of agency; they seek to expose the relations through which agency is distributed and contested. Yet this does not negate the importance of agency in urban life; the lived experiences of those on the political margins, as captured in *Fragments of the City* (McFarlane 2021), remain central. In short, the fragment represents the end or failure of a process or object, defined through its relations to a wider environment from which it is detached and to which it remains subject to change. This study understands fragments as situated expressions of disaster experience that reveal the uneven social, political and environment relations that produce vulnerability and resistance. In this sense, fragments offer a powerful analytical entry point into understanding the fractured, politicised nature of the urban—and, by extension, disaster—experience.

Survivors' testimonies, news reports, humanitarian documents, images, and a poem constitute the fragments collected for this study. These fragments represent the shattered pieces of a more-than-natural event, both produced and lived by the residents of Derna. Although many of these fragments are not invisible, appearing as headline stories and widely circulated images in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, they are quickly forgotten and overlooked by the wider world. Even as their effects remain deeply embedded in the long-term recovery of ruined urban environments. These destroyed urban spaces embody McFarlane's (2021: 14) notion of the 'process of pulling together and falling apart.' Seeing through fragments offers both clarity and potentiality, complementing the relational processes of assemblage theory to deepen the understanding of the lived experiences and causation of disaster. Integrating fragments into the DRM framework enables engagement with place-specific disaster narratives as told by those directly affected (McGowran & Donovan 2021; Moezzi & Peek 2019). In the context of disaster studies, fragments offer a nuanced lens into the lived experience of disaster risk, focusing on the broken, often inactive elements of disaster-stricken urban environments. When combined with DRM Assemblage approaches, 'seeing through' fragments can contribute to the imagination of alternative, less vulnerable, and more resilient futures as suggested by McGowran and Donovan (2021: 1614).

METHODOLOGY

As McGowran and Donovan (2021) stress, the researcher is part of the assemblage; thus, this paper's engagement with these fragments reflects not only analytical intent to understand disaster causation, but also a moral and

political stance toward the injustices embedded in a disaster's emergence and aftermath. Injustices and perspectives drawn from and emphasised through the relational discussion of the fragments of disaster. From the perspective of a researcher, this study acknowledges the interpretive nature of a fragment approach. However, this shouldn't be seen as a limitation but a method that can be adapted to understand disasters beyond isolated events, that are complex and contextually unique events. Three fragments were purposively selected, each offering a unique and contrasting viewpoints within the DRM Assemblage to encompass causation, response and resistance of a disaster event.

Foremost among the fragments is a poem, *The Rain*, posted on social media on the day of the storm by Mustafa al-Trabelsi, who is among the estimated 20,000 dead and missing in Derna. Despite receiving brief coverage in both local and international news media, seemingly contrasting with the often-hidden fragments described by McFarlane (2021), *The Rain* can nonetheless be seen as a fragment, both in its content and its literary foundations. Literary fragments feature heavily throughout *Fragments of the City* (2021), such as short vignettes, personal observations, and poetic writings. These literary fragments serve to induce a sense of place, emotion, and often disconnection from a wider whole. Al-Trabelsi's poem is characterised by straightforward language, with each line relying on the previous for emphasis and meaning. The anaphoric repetition of 'it' generates a near relentless rhythm that portrays the rain as an unstoppable force that impacts and transforms everything in its path. The content of *The Rain* conveys a profound, place-specific emotion, describing Derna as a city already in a fragmented state. Moreover, the poem reflects an act of resistance, characteristic of al-Trabelsi's wider writings, particularly against the various authorities that have governed Derna since the 2011 revolution. In short, *The Rain* stands as a fragment in that it is a product of fragmentation, evoking a more-than-human narrative of resistance and emotion within a marginalised urban space.

The comments of Elseddisk Haftar, eldest son of Eastern Libyan strongman Khalifa Haftar, are drawn from a post-disaster interview with a Belgian news channel, posted to X and then picked up by France 24. With its lack of traction and wider coverage, this interview can be seen as a fragment. It captures a partial perspective of an individual that displays the top-down state narrative, an incorrect narrative that shaped the disaster, contrasting with al-Trabelsi's poem. Within this fragment, it is equally important what is left unsaid by Elseddisk and Eastern Libyan officials, these unsaid fragments are captured within the ideological embedded language of those responsible for such a disaster. His comments are an entry point into the power-driven response of state authorities and reveal the power-driven forces that underpin McFarlane's (2021) fragments. This further exposes the contradictions and detachment from the reality of al-Trabelsi's lived experiences of disaster.

In contrast, Gazzini's field work in Derna following the disaster is a collection of interviews, images and perspectives published by the International Crisis Group. Focusing on the post-disaster response phase, the fragments here provide a valuable overview of the humanitarian response that followed within the chronological structure the study lays out. In the conceptual approach of fragments, Gazzini's fieldwork shows the trauma, suffering and fears of those in marginalised spaces that often dominates McFarlane's (2021) fragments. They also can be framed within the potentiality of fragments, as the two rival governments of Libya sought to collectively respond to the disaster giving initial hopes of unity and

cooperation after over a decade of civil conflict. This represented not the end of Derna as a site of destruction and grief, but a space of collective resistance against the state forces that largely contributed to Derna's fragmentation. In summary, the DRM Assemblage conceptualises disaster as the relational gathering of political, environmental, and social relations, while fragments provide the methodological entry point, capturing lived, specific moments that reveal the fractures, vulnerabilities, and resistances within the broader assemblage.

GOVERNANCE AND VULNERABILITY: UNDERSTANDING THE STATE RESPONSE TO STORM DANIEL AND THE COLLAPSE OF THE DERNA DAMS

Crossing two themes of the DRM Assemblage, al-Trabelsi's poem is central to understanding both the vulnerability of Derna and the government's inadequate response to the disaster. Through the metaphorical imagery of rain, al-Trabelsi unveils the deep-rooted inequalities and struggles that define the broader theme of resistance. His poem also implicitly exposes the failures and ineffectiveness of the Eastern Libyan authorities in managing DRM prior to and during the disaster.

The Rain
Exposes the drenched streets,
the cheating contractor,
and the failed state.
It washes everything,
bird wings
and cats' fur.
Reminds the poor
of their fragile roofs
and ragged clothes.
It awakens the valleys,
shakes off their yawning dust
and dry crusts.
The rain
a sign of goodness,
a promise of help,
an alarm bell.

(Mustafa al-Trabelsi, translated from Arabic by Khaled Mattawa, and published in Wintour 2023. Reproduced with permission by Khaled Mattawa).

At the forefront of the poem's opening lines lies an explicit political critique by al-Trabelsi, referencing both 'the cheating contractor' and the 'failed state,' revealed through the imagery of the rain. From a Libyan perspective, Derna has long been situated on the economic margins in contrast to the capital, Tripoli, and the country's west. This marginalisation can be traced back to the Gaddafi period (1969–2011). Guided by his Third International Theory, Gaddafi sought the contradictory task of creating a direct democracy and a self-reliant economy for the masses, while simultaneously maintaining his own unchecked and undisputed leadership as a 'brotherly leader,' heavily reliant on foreign aid (St John 1982). Eastern Libya suffered behind the façade of free electricity, universal education, and state-funded mass housing projects (Monday & Nkelkerem 2021). As Asma Khalifa of the Khalifa Ihler Institute remarked after Storm Daniel, 'Gaddafi was never

interested in developing the country... in terms of infrastructure, the country is weak, no matter how wealthy it is' (France 24 2023b). Scholars have further argued that Gaddafi harboured a personal vendetta against Cyrenaica, including the cities of Derna, Tobruk, and Benghazi (Emeagwali 2023; Simons, 1993). Cyrenaica, the former power base of King Idris, whom Gaddafi overthrew in 1969, was subject to 'living with the sense of marginalisation and subsidisation' in favour of western Libya for decades under his rule (Szczepankiewicz-Rudzka 2016: 236). Broadly, a shadow state emerged in which Tripoli's elites were enmeshed in a 'complex interrelation' that perpetuated political and economic corruption (Joffe 2011: 14). These unaccountable structures of top-level mafia style corruption undermined infrastructural development during the Gaddafi period, with many major projects—such as dams, highways, and housing—never progressing beyond the planning stage despite extensive government subsidies (El-Khawwas 1986). During this period, two majority clay dams were constructed by a Yugoslav company between 1973 and 1977 in the Wadi Derna, designed 'for irrigation of agricultural land and water supply of Derna and the surrounding settlements' (Hidrotehnika-Hidroenergetika 1977, translated from Serbian). It is these deep-rooted institutional and ideological forces that proved detrimental to maintaining effective disaster risk management.

Storm Daniel formed over the Ionian Sea between September 5th–9th 2023, before developing into an intense weather system that eventually hit Eastern Libya on September 10th. The city of Derna experienced the collapse of two dams protecting the city on the night of September 10th–11th. As Donovan (2017: 11) has observed, 'complex power dynamics come into play when human systems and the earth system interact'; for Derna and the surrounding region, this interaction proved deadly. Within the DRM Assemblage, governmentality describes the strategies used by authorities to manage disaster risk and balance the protection of people with encroachments 'upon their freedom' (Donovan 2017: 11). In Derna, this balance was absent, creating an unstable space exposed to the forces of nature, with divided governance undermining disaster preparedness. Libya is divided between two competing governments, the internationally recognised Government of National Unity based in Tripoli and the Tobruk government, backed by the Libyan National Army (LNA) in the East of the country, controlling cities such as Benghazi and Derna. As the Libyan National Meteorological Centre issued a 72-hour warning for the storm making landfall, both governments held emergency meetings (BBC 2023; WMO 2023). Although evacuations were formally ordered by Eastern authorities on September 9th and 10th (Human Rights Watch 2024), the practical implementation was confused and fragmented. Derna's former mayor claimed he had ordered a citywide evacuation days in advance; however, residents later reported that warnings were inconsistent. These warnings were often limited to coastal areas, and that many were told merely to stay indoors (Saeed et al. 2023). A curfew imposed on the morning of September 10th, followed by reassurances from the Water Ministry about the dams' integrity, revealed a top-down, opaque disaster response that marginalized local agency (Khaleej Times 2023). The fragmented, contradictory actions of the authorities not only intensified the immediate disaster response failures but also revealed the deeper systemic weaknesses that had long made Derna vulnerable to such an event.

Another key theme within the DRM Assemblage is vulnerability, conceptualized as the outcome of social, economic, and political inequalities

(Donovan 2017: 12). In Derna, vulnerability was not only physical but embedded within decades of governance failures, marginalization, and infrastructural neglect. Al-Trabelsi's poem captures this duality. The author evokes the fragmented, lived experience of vulnerability while simultaneously voicing a resilient, place-specific resistance to the systemic corruption that shaped the disaster's conditions. Donovan (2017: 55) frames vulnerability in the DRM Assemblage as a crucial 'organizing idea,' encompassing factors such as poverty, education, healthcare, housing, gender, and political stability. This framing recognises that vulnerability and resilience are not static opposites but overlapping, often conflicting conditions within disaster studies. Al-Trabelsi's poem operates across this complex spectrum, narrating not just hardship but also the persistence of resistance amid structural failure.

The vulnerabilities of Derna are painfully visible in his descriptions of 'fragile roofs and ragged clothes,' a plain reference to the economic deprivation that has shaped life in the city for decades. However, viewing Derna's fragmentation through al-Trabelsi's poem also reveals a contrasting form of non-violent resistance often overlooked in portrayals of Derna that focus solely on extremism and violence (Sikorski et al. 2020). Resistance is fundamentally tied to fragments, as seen in Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (1999), from which McFarlane (2021) draws much inspiration. Benjamin's fragmentary methods—vignettes, montages, brief, intense excursions—form acts of resistance by arresting the dominant historical narratives that marginalise certain lives and spaces (Zambrana 2018). For Benjamin, resisting history's linear violence required 'capturing events in a flash,' outside grand narratives (Zambrana 2018: 15). In this light, Mustafa al-Trabelsi's poem becomes a fragment that interrupts the historical processes that contributed to Derna's destruction. In plain, arresting language, his critique of the 'cheating contractor' and 'failed state' moments before the dam collapse offers an intimate, fragmented snapshot that resists the systemic forgetting that typically follows disaster. It captures the texture of lived experience in Derna, both its vulnerabilities and its enduring calls for justice.

Extending the notion of vulnerability further, recent research into negative geographies provides an additional lens for understanding a fragment as sensitive and tragic as al-Trabelsi's poem. Negative geographies, as Mutter (2023: 165) argues, 'question the very possibility of approaching or doing anything with the negative.' The disaster in Derna and the death of Mustafa al-Trabelsi among the thousands that were killed or still missing (Saeed et al. 2023) embodies the ultimate form of the negative: a rupture that defies easy comprehension. Al-Trabelsi's poem thus operates within theories of negative geography, where the fragment does not merely hint at rupture but represents a 'fundamental cutting-off from the world' (Mitch et al. 2021: 18; Carter-White 2012). As Fitzgerald (2023) movingly reflects on al-Trabelsi's final Facebook post, 'we only have each other in this difficult situation; let's stand together until we drown,' the poem and the author's death together evoke a raw experience of finitude. As Rose et al. (2021: 19) observe, 'it is experiences of finitude that propel us into speaking and listening in the first place.'

Through this lens, *The Rain* tells a place-specific story of both vulnerability and resilience. Al-Trabelsi's metaphoric use of rain carries a duality: it is both a sign of goodness, especially in Derna's arid climate, and an alarm bell for transformation. The rain touches everything, from 'the bird's wing' to 'the cats' fur,' creating a shared space of suffering, but also one of potentiality.

Viewed as a fragment, *The Rain* embodies the complexities of vulnerability outlined by Donovan (2017), showing how different factors: political neglect, economic marginalization, ecological fragility, interweave beyond simple cause-and-effect models. Al-Trabelsi foresaw the disaster with chilling clarity, warning of ‘the disaster that will befall the valley and end everything... after which our cries will be of no use’ (Fitzgerald 2023). While a full discussion of negative geographies in disaster contexts warrants a study of its own, acknowledging concepts of mortality, death, and finitude (Dekeyser et al. 2022) is vital for understanding how humans are exposed to death through systemic vulnerability. The statistical scale of loss in Derna, together with the fragmented, intimate voice captured in al-Trabelsi’s poem, briefly pushed Eastern Libya onto the global stage. Recognising this interplay between negative geography and vulnerability within the DRM Assemblage is crucial for fully grasping the disaster’s lived dimensions.

HAZARDS, POWER AND EXPERTISE: POLITICS OF DISASTER FOLLOWING THE DAM COLLAPSE

Both the internationally recognised government in Tripoli and the Eastern Libyan government in Tobruk responded rapidly to the disaster as relief efforts began on 12 September (Al Jazeera 2023a). International humanitarian teams from across the Middle East and Europe, along with the European Union and United Nations, coordinated operations between Libya’s rival governments. On 14 September 2023, Prime Minister Abdulhamid al-Dbeibah, based in Tripoli, pledged relief efforts, reconstruction funds, and an investigation into the causes of the disaster, taking limited responsibility. (Africanews 2023). The initial unity seen in Libya was hailed as a miracle by local residents and a potential path to peace. However this was quickly undermined by the persistent forces of power and geopolitics, which created uncertainty and hindered expert interventions following the disaster. A telling fragment of this political dynamic emerged in the comments of Elseddik Haftar, eldest son of Eastern Libya’s military strongman Khalifa Haftar:

‘My father—thanks to his wise leadership—sensed things days before the disaster hit, issued an order for all citizens to evacuate the entire area. But given that this was without precedent in our region, many residents did not react’ (France 24 2023a).

Briefly noted by France 24 but largely overlooked in Western media, this fragment presents a contrasting narrative to al-Trabelsi’s poem and many survivors’ testimonies. It fits McGowran’s (2024: 3) observation that disasters are often ‘assembled and reframed as emergencies, or crisis opportunities ripe for political and economic exploitation.’ Within assemblage theory, fragments, as discussed by Harman (2015) and McFarlane (2021), are inherently disconnected from a wider whole. Elseddik Haftar’s remarks exemplify this: they attempt to detach the disaster from systemic government failure, framing it instead as an unforeseeable act of nature that was heroically anticipated by his father. This narrative manipulation reflects the hegemonic forces Button (2012) identifies, where disasters are used to reinforce existing structures of power rather than challenge them. In the Eastern Libyan context, Khalifa Haftar consolidated his authority through exploiting the country’s broader political fragmentation (Lacher 2024) providing a clear example of disaster assemblage dynamics at work. When contrasted with al-Trabelsi’s poem, which bears witness to vulnerability and systemic failure, Haftar’s fragment

reveals how disasters can be strategically exploited to obscure responsibility and consolidate authority.

Elseddisk claims the disaster was without precedent, a claim repeated by high-ranking officials across Libya. Aguila Saleh, Head of the Eastern Libya Parliament, plainly described the flooding as an ‘unprecedented natural disaster’ (Al Jazeera 2023b), deflecting calls for an investigation into the failings of the relevant authorities into the disaster. Derna’s deputy mayor stated that the way the city was built, putting ‘most of the population in the water’s direct path’ was to blame for the disaster, also acknowledging the issues with maintenance (Al Jazeera 2023b). Libya’s Prime Minister in Tripoli described how ‘the city is surrounded by mountains, so the flash floods quickly took over’ (Al Jazeera 2023b). The storm’s destruction was unprecedented, but the flood event was not, a distinction that Eastern Libyan authorities failed or refused to acknowledge.

Here the DRM Assemblage provides an analytical space to understanding the role of expertise, geopolitics and hazard assessment as a critical aspect of the flawed initial response of Eastern Libyan authorities. The previous fragment and theme of governance revealed the ambiguous and power-driven governmentality in Libya, and such forces of politics have undoubtedly been manipulated by the Haftar family. This is due to the uncertainty of disaster events that can be used as a reason for political action (Donovan 2017). McGowran (2024: 8) describes how characteristics of disasters-in-the-making are ‘used to solidify and cement, capital flows and political positions.’ One example points to Saddam Haftar, another of Khalifa’s sons, who now directs the disaster response as Head of the Disaster Response Committee (Insecurity Insight 2024). This is despite the complete lack of expertise Saddam Haftar has in disaster management and the claims of war crimes against him (Amnesty International 2022). Simply put, the ageing Khalifa, now 80, has placed his sons at the forefront of the response, which can be seen as a move to choose a successor to the LNA and Eastern Libya. Saddam’s appointment to head of the disaster response coincided with the removal of the entirety of Derna’s city council and the following media blackout in the city (Euractiv 2023). Amnesty International revealed his style of rule as the head of the LNA Tarqiq Bin Zeqad unit, responsible for unlawful killings, torture and abductions of civilians in Libya (Amnesty International 2022). The uneven power relations in Eastern Libya allowed for the creation of an expert body under the nominal control of the de facto regime despite the counterproductive lack of experience of Saddam Haftar. One Libyan social media user commented on Saddam Haftar’s appointment to lead the disaster response: ‘What is the official reason given when they gave him the assignment, other than that he is the son of Khalifa [Haftar]?’ (Insecurity Insight 2024). The existence of expert bodies in disaster risk reduction in Libya was lacking prior to the disaster; however, the expertise that did exist presented warning signs. The comments of Elseddisk Haftar and numerous other officials are in a total alignment with the DRM Assemblage and a contrast to expert opinion, research and perspectives that existed long before the disaster.

On a physical geographical level, Derna’s position at the end of a highland ephemeral stream has contributed to significant historical flood risk (Nemnem et al. 2025) (see Figure 1 below). Nemnem et al.’s (2025) recent study into the Wadi Derna’s flood risk traced events back to the 1950s. Those on the ground experiencing the disaster knew of the danger as one

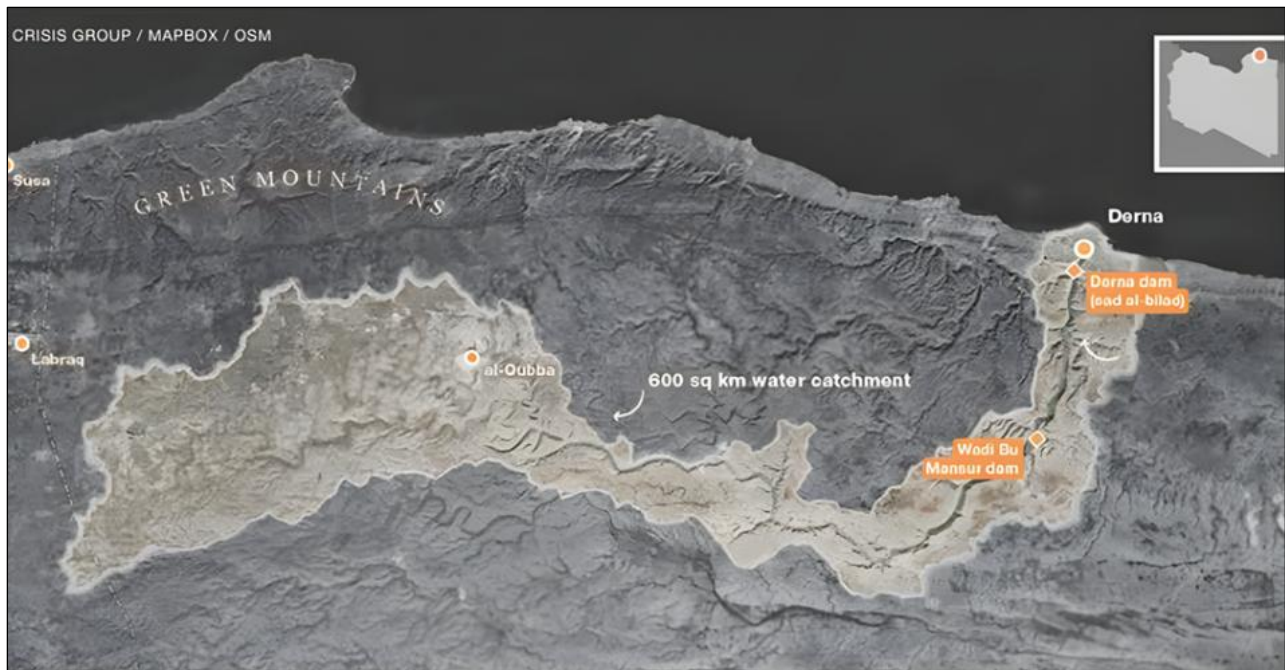


Figure 1: The Wadi Derna, note the location of the two dams, Wadi Bu Mansur (upper dam) and Sadd al-bilad (lower dam). Photo: Claudia Gazzini (2024a). Reproduced with permission from the International Crisis Group.

resident recalled to the UNHCR, ‘if the dams burst, the entire city would be wiped out.’ (UNHCR 2024). From the perspective of academics and residents, the city’s vulnerability to flooding was apparent, as the city and surrounding region have been historically subject to extreme environmental events. As remarked by Libyan historian, Shariff (2022), ‘environmental crises like drought, disease outbreaks, earthquakes, and flooding have long been a hallmark of the Northern African landscape.’ Mahgoub et al.’s (2024) research highlights the environmental vulnerabilities of the Wadi Derna, with barren lands and steep slopes of semi-arid basins result in an increase in flood events. Ashoor’s (2022) article also expresses the vulnerabilities of desertification and the need to increase vegetation cover to reduce such a damaging phenomenon. Research into Storm Daniel’s impact on Greece stated that deforestation and relatively high urbanisation rates have changed the landscape, creating an environmentally vulnerable space (Lagarias 2023). Comparing this with Ashoor’s (2022) research reveals the same vulnerabilities are reflected in Derna, undermining geographical and environmental resilience to the eventual disaster.

Even before the disaster, as stated in the previous fragment, the expert body of the National Metrological Centre issued an ‘extreme weather event’ warning 72 hours before Storm Daniel hit Eastern Libya (WMO 2023). This warning extended to an email sent to all government authorities and on news media. The clash of expertise and governance in Eastern Libya within the DRM Assemblage manifested in an abuse of power that begun with inaction that dismissed initial warnings from experts. Eastern Libya’s leading authorities then assumed knowledge and the position of expertise to blame natural forces for the disaster. This ripple effect of the DRM Assemblage did not see a ‘redistribution of power’ as often is the case with disasters (Donovan 2017: 12) but a consolidation of power through the reframing of emergency for political gain. This is seen through the removal of Derna’s local government, the appointment of the Haftar family to key positions and rhetoric about a natural disaster that no-one could have predicted or prevented, in essence shifting blame onto non-human forces.

VALUES, IDEOLOGIES AND SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT: RESISTANCE AND CONSEQUENCES OF FRAGMENTATION IN POST-DISASTER DERNA

The rhetoric of vulnerability and resilience has been present throughout the two preceding sections of this study. This final section of the DRM Assemblage takes a broader look at how resistance manifested following the disaster and the influence of values and ideologies that shaped the post-disaster response.

The detachment between the two main fragments we have explored is stark, contrasting in their views and experiences of the disaster. Staying with the political potential of fragments, the consequences of this neglect and deterioration of Derna will be addressed. The main fragment chosen here comes from the work of Claudia Gazzini of the International Crisis Group, whose images, interviews, and articles provide a powerful lens into the disaster. Claudia's work can be seen as an assemblage — a vast collection of stories, images, and perspectives that piece together the disaster. Through the DRM Assemblage, experiences of disaster can be seen through the voices of those most closely associated with the event (McGowran & Donovan 2021).

‘Many Derna residents are deeply wary of the security forces controlling the city after years of strife... some suggest this history could have led people to resist the police’s evacuation orders’
(Gazzini 2024b: 4).

The consequences of decades of fragmentation have manifested into entrenched values of distrust and resistance against the ruling authority in Derna and across Eastern Libya. Bonfanti et al. (2023: 1) describes the role of trust as ‘essential for adequately preparing communities to confront natural disasters’ in creating effective community responses and mitigating consequences. The processes of fragmentation undermined this in Derna, creating the environment for such a catastrophic disaster event. Thieme's (2021: 1093, 1097) use of detached objects at the ‘end of life’ without value or purpose provides a lens into the ‘fraught relationships’ with state systems such as education, criminal justice, or asylum systems. A collapsed apartment in Nairobi ‘made immediate’ the city's poor regulations and waste economy (Thieme 2021: 1099). Similarly, the immediate destruction in Derna sparked significant unrest during the reconstruction period as the trust between authorities and civilians was not present. On September 18th, just over a week from the initial flooding and well into the disaster response phase, hundreds gathered outside the still-standing Al Sahaba Mosque in Derna's city centre calling for the resignation of Eastern Libyan elites, such as the leader of the Tobruk parliament Aguila Saleh (Al Jazeera 2023b). The protesters' message was clear: ‘the governments (in Tripoli and Tobruk) have failed to manage the crisis’ (Al Jazeera 2023b). Collective empowerment transformed further into direct action; that same day, protesters set fire to the residence of the former mayor of Derna (Reuters 2023). Language of a more aggressive nature captured the collective outrage of Derna's residents: ‘the blood of martyrs is not shed in vain’ and ‘thieves and betrayers must hang’ (Mouawad 2023). Derna has a history of resistance against its ruling authorities, and this embedded ideology of resistance is part of a complex local and cultural process, as shown by the above fragment, which manifested into significant unrest following the disaster.

The resistance of Derna's residents soon clashed with the embedded ideology of the ruling authorities of Eastern Libya. Residents of Derna were

left to attend to the pieces and fragments of their city. OCHA (2023) reported on community-led reconstruction work; as one Derna resident described: ‘We say 90 per cent of the encouragement for people to start fixing their home came from community efforts.’ Despite the resilience of Derna’s residents, the disconnect between authorities and those seeking to aid in disaster relief continued. Behind the veil of humanitarian relief and promises of a transparent investigation into those responsible for the destruction, a crackdown characteristic of authoritarian regimes unfolded. As stated within the DRM Assemblage, ‘the language of disaster response can hide political aims’ (Donovan 2017: 13). Libyan Crime Watch (2024) gathered 11 extensive stories summarising this disconnect and the city’s continued fragmentation following the disaster. One story described humiliation and coercion during interrogation—being ‘intimidated and threatened’ by Haftar’s security forces after a protest in Derna (Libyan Crime Watch 2024: 33). Another detailed the restriction of aid groups and the prosecution of civilian volunteers, which ‘hindered or completely prevented aid deliveries’ (Libyan Crime Watch 2024: 25). The desire for justice, within a space of conflicting resistance and continued vulnerability, is further evident in Amnesty International’s (2024a) report detailing the perspectives of 22 residents of Derna. The post-disaster space of the DRM Assemblage can be summarised by the following quote: ‘Accountability and guarantees Libyans will not see a repeat of this tragedy are all the more pressing given the increasing likelihood of global heating resulting in further climate-induced disasters, exacerbated by Libya’s ageing and poorly maintained infrastructure, fragmentation of political institutions, and the power wielded by unaccountable militias and armed groups’ (Amnesty International 2024b).

‘Contrary to worries, the rival governments have found a way to work together’ (Gazzini 2024b: 3).

‘On the ground Libya’s rival governments appeared to have found a modus operandi to enable international aid to reach Derna... Once Tripoli approves the deployment, Haftar’s people step in to arrange logistics’ (Gazzini 2024b: 4).

Unity between East and West Libyan authorities did briefly manifest following the disaster, further representing the ‘messy and challenging impacts of values and ideologies’ within the DRM Assemblage (Donovan 2017: 57). This transformative nature of the disaster assemblage following the disaster is evident in the above fragment. However, this cooperation was short-lived, and disagreements between Tripoli and Tobruk over reconstruction soon resurfaced (UNOCHA 2023: 23). This can be placed within the DRM Assemblage further, as the ‘inequalities and vulnerabilities’ are reinforced through the continued territorialisation of place-specific political, economic, and social imaginations (McGowran & Donovan 2021: 1615). When seen as fragments, we can take a different perspective. The politics of attending, as McFarlane (2021: 120) describes, ‘helps form knots, openings and connections and potentials into social infrastructure... it seeks to improve conditions for people on the economic margins... to help people cope with the material fragments.’ Derna was, and still is, a physically fragmented city, largely destroyed by the flooding of Storm Daniel. The reconstruction efforts can be seen as part of the politics of attending, both by the community and governments working together. However brief, the cooperation between the divided halves of Libya was made possible by ‘this bringing into relation of people and knowledge fragments’, which is ‘often strategic, frequently temporary and purpose based rather than deep or

ongoing' (McFarlane 2021: 119). A temporary attending to Derna's and Libya's fragments for the necessity of disaster relief.

As further observed in the often-fragmented pieces of Gazzini's fieldwork, 'according to a Western diplomat in Tripoli, foreign governments typically notify Tripoli of their intention to provide support'; once approved, Haftar provides the planes, trucks, and personnel lodging to handle the deployment of foreign aid, then Tripoli 'sends a public thank-you note to the government in question' (Gazzini 2023b: 4). These physical, material, and social fragments, all products of the previously outlined historical processes, were brought together to allow international aid to reach Eastern Libya. These fragments transcended the norms and historical legacies of Libya, and while cooperation was not consistent, the brief attending to of fragments allowed for the continued reconstruction and relief effort in Eastern Libya in the months following the disaster. As the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC 2024) declared a year after the disaster: 'Residents are showing their resilience... Homes, amenities and critical infrastructure are all being rebuilt.' Seeing through fragments aids assemblage thinking beyond merely reinforcing existing forces of inequality and repression; it reveals an additional layer of potentiality despite the political machinations of Libya's divided governments. Despite this, the potentiality clashes with the embedded values of both state and local actors — between a need and call for justice, and the continued pursuit of political gain by Eastern Libyan authorities.

DISCUSSION

The fragments specifically selected for this study are deeply contrasting, representing different voices and knowledges. Drawing these fragments together into dialogue allows us to understand this disaster as an outcome of assemblage. A convergence of vulnerabilities, governance, resistance, and loss. Fragmentation here operates on two levels, to methodically reflect the disaster from different perspectives and to show the fragmented structures that produced the disaster. By framing the disaster as a purely natural event rather than acknowledging the long-standing historical neglect and governance failures, government officials intentionally deflected blame, denying the victims justice and continued a pattern of corruption and authoritarianism that has characterised Libyan politics for decades.

The role of the state was central to the emergence of the disaster in Eastern Libya. Governance within the DRM Assemblage was incoherent, highly politicised, and completely lacking any notion of civilian protection that a state entity is legally responsible for, described by Alexander (2007: 50) as the 'moral duty of governments to protect citizens against foreseeable sources of harm.' Through the DRM assemblage, the disaster can accurately be framed as foreseeable and even argued as inevitable. While a fully functioning DRM strategy was not present in Libya, the warnings to state authorities from numerous sources, both domestic and international, were clear and given with sufficient time to act. The DRM Assemblage seeks not to find a 'root cause' of disaster but instead emphasises the relations between complex components, which is evident across the three fragments discussed. The natural vulnerabilities of Eastern Libya presented a significant challenge for effective DRR. The Wadi Derna, seasonal flooding, and drought all combined to create a historically environmentally vulnerable region. Researchers hypothesised that the severity of Storm Daniel, with its higher precipitation than past Medicane events, 'can be ascribed to human-driven climate change' (Flaounas et al. 2024: 12). In the narrative of climate change,

the domestic challenges faced by Libya present a multi-layered challenge for DRR, as the United Nations stated: Storm Daniel 'reaffirmed Libya's susceptibility to climate-related disaster... the floods also highlighted the critical need for solid mitigation and adaptation measures' (UNDP Libya 2024). These comments emphasise the complex factors and interconnected strategies needed to address Libya's vulnerability to extreme weather events, which are predicted to become less frequent but significantly stronger (IPCC 2021: 9). While the role of climate change and natural forces is a key factor in this disaster, the flooding in Eastern Libya was not simply caused by extreme weather but must be considered within the DRM Assemblage. As the eventual disaster was socially and spatially produced, from the surrounding geography to Derna's neglect by successive regimes.

The DRM Assemblage also manifested resistance to the uneven structures, most evident in al Trabelsi's poem, where fragments act as political interruptions. Gillard's (2019) review emphasises the view from below, from those most impacted by disaster events. *The Rain* and several testimonies found throughout this study, presented through fragments, show popular resistance to the narrative of the state, a story told from below, rooted in commonality, sorrow, and justice. Al Trabelsi's poem and social media post on the night of the disaster speak from the threshold of death, capturing the vulnerability shared across Eastern Libya and the rhetoric of resistance that is at the forefront of the DRM Assemblage. Gazzini's fragments work with al-Trabelsi's poem, continuing the narrative of resistance in the reconstruction of Derna but also showing the fragmented state of the recovery, where dialogue between the divided governments was paramount in dealing with the fragmented state of Libya to allow a form of initial response. On a local level, resistance would transform into large protests and direct action by the residents of Derna against regional authorities. In this complex discussion of scale, the failings on a national level reveal the challenging impacts of political perspectives and motivations (Donovan 2017). Geopolitical actors on different scales of the assemblage sought differing interventions, initially a shared need for humanitarian assistance facilitated by the cooperation of Tripoli and Tobruk. However, local actors sought an internationally led investigation, captured in Amnesty's (2024a) report. In December 2023, 16 people, including local councillors and water management officials, were arrested. Despite this, 'all 22 residents [of] Derna interviewed by Amnesty International expressed their lack of faith in domestic investigations' (Amnesty International 2024a: 7). While national actors resisted such attempts, they reverted to past behaviours and practices of national rivalry that still dominate Libya. In discovering a common pattern across the three fragments, the events of Storm Daniel, the subsequent collapse of the Derna dams, and the humanitarian efforts that followed show that disasters are complex, multi-layered events operating at a range of scales. As Pelling and Dill summarise, 'disaster shocks open the political space for the contestation or concentration of political power and underlying distribution of rights' (2010: 34). The disaster can be accurately framed within Donovan's (2017: 17) call to emphasise the 'relationships between the components of disaster rather than a search for a root cause.' The fragments of disaster within the DRM Assemblage show this multi-layered event, with numerous complex and conflicting components. Perspectives drawn from residents, national actors, and humanitarian intervention help build a comprehensive narrative of the disaster.

CONCLUSION

This study critically builds on assemblage theory by addressing its tendency toward abstraction and indeterminacy. By using fragments as a methodological and conceptual tool, it becomes possible to reveal the lived experiences, vulnerabilities, and resistances that shape the DRM Assemblage. In this approach, the study has focused on differing components that make up Eastern Libya's DRM Assemblage during the events of Storm Daniel in order to evaluate the causes and responses to the disaster through McFarlane's (2021) fragments. The fragments were divided into the six themes of Donovan's (2017) DRM Assemblage, with two themes assigned to each of the relevant fragments. They represent an individual, political elite and humanitarian perspective of the disaster.

The first section discussed vulnerability and governance from the perspective and analysis of Mustafa al Trabelsi's poem, *The Rain*. Within this section, the uneven and vulnerable space of Eastern Libya was laid out, created through historical processes of authoritarianism and corruption that manifested into the total failure of governance in DRR. Namely in the lack of evacuations, the imposed curfew, and the disregard for expert knowledge that would have lessened the impact of the eventual collapse of Derna's two dams. The second fragment engaged with hazards and power under disaster uncertainty. This fragment came from a top political actor in Eastern Libya, providing a contrast to al-Trabelsi, a distinction reflecting the disconnect between the state and those most impacted by the disaster. This fragment introduced the Haftar family, a dynasty that has been consolidating power in the aftermath and sought to hijack the narrative of disaster for political gain. Finally, Gazzini's fieldwork provided a post disaster narrative, from a humanitarian and external perspective. The values and ideologies that perpetuated into the humanitarian response under the DRM Assemblage were evident in resistance to further state failures and a critique of government led investigations.

While references to the differing fragments were made throughout this thematic section, a clear pattern is evident between the three. It reflects the complexity of disaster events and emphasises the multi-layered components that gathered to result in the unparalleled destruction in the city of Derna. This study has shown that by using McFarlane's (2021) fragments, it is possible to capture the fractures, vulnerabilities, and resistances within Donovan's (2017) DRM Assemblage framework. This combined approach helps us to understand how the disaster unfolded within a space already broken, shaped by Libya's contextual vulnerabilities, the failure of state actors, and the resistance of survivors to demand the justice that continues to elude them.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval was granted by Aberystwyth University prior to data collection. Consent has been given to the author for the full use of The Rain by Mustafa al-Trabelsi translated by Khaled Mattawa originally for the Guardian and then for New Lines Magazine. Consent was also granted by the International Crisis Group for the images used throughout this article.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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