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Ruin Nation

In Puerto Rico, Hurricane Maria laid bare the results of a long-term crisis created by dispossession, migration, and economic predation.

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In Puerto Rico, Hurricane Maria laid bare the results of a long-term crisis created by dispossession, migration, and economic predation.

A sugar worker sharpens his machete on a plantation near Ponce, Puerto Rico, in 1938. (EDWIN ROSSKAM/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS)

In communities and towns left moribund by the death of the sugar industry in Puerto Rico, land sits fallow, and industrial complexes from earlier eras have been left to rot. Overgrown vegetation and stray dogs rule, and every other house sits empty because the people who lived there either died or "*se fueron pa'lla fuera*" (migrated to the mainland).

What is the connection between the desolate remnants of sugar mills and towns in Puerto Rico, the people who remain on the island, and the people who leave? These ruined landscapes have parallels in the mainland cities where so many Puerto Ricans have migrated—they go "seeking a better life," but instead land among other ruins in post-industrial U.S. cities like Hartford and Bridgeport, Connecticut, and many others.

In Puerto Rico *el cañaveral* (sugarcane field) has been imagined as a romantic symbol of an economically prosperous and bucolic era in the island's history. This ideal comes from nineteenth century Puerto Rican artists, writers, and musicians, who from the safe distance of their studios in San Juan, Ponce, Guayama, and Mayagüez, extolled the world of cane. Yet work and life in the sugar cane plantations was far from romantic or prosperous for its workers. The sugar cane fields do not represent an emancipatory past that we can look to today as a source of salvation or model of economic prosperity. In fact, the sugar industry has always been based on extraction, and from its very beginning has led not to prosperity but to great suffering in Puerto Rico and throughout the Global South. It was a system built on the genocide of Indigenous people, the enslavement of Africans, and the continuous exploitation of people, animals, land, water, and other natural resources. The vast majority of individuals who lived in el cañaveral experienced poverty and uncertainty while working within that system. The disaster precipitated by Hurricanes Irma and Maria and their effects are part of this long-term trajectory of suffering and ruination in Puerto Rico.

My analysis of Puerto Rico is situated within my own family history. As theorist Donna Haraway wrote in her 1988 article "Situated Knowledges," "vision is *always* a question of the power to see—and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices. With whose blood were my eyes crafted?"

I am the great granddaughter and granddaughter of landless sugarcane workers. When my mother was a child, even she worked in the sugarcane harvest to help her parents. My ancestors worked the land in Puerto Rico their entire lives, but never owned land, and therefore did not amass wealth they could pass down to my family. Poverty marks my memory of childhood on the island. Sometimes we did not have

Routledge Taylor & Francis Group

Sugar workers on a planation near Ponce, Puerto Rico, in 1938 (EDWIN ROSSKAM/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS)

food to eat or money to buy it. Sometimes we did not have a place to live. We spent the decade between the late 1970s and late 1980s caught up in what Jorge Duany calls the *vaivén* (coming and going) between the island and the mainland, moving between Arroyo, our hometown, the San Juan metropolitan area, and *el barrio* in New York City, over and over again. This migratory circuit is not unfamiliar to the island's poor, who have often been compelled to follow the ebbs and flows of the job market.

With a sixth grade education, my mother's job prospects were limited to janitorial and kitchen work, and she did both, often simultaneously, throughout her working years. Before our final, permanent move to the mainland, we had been living for a year as informal dwellers in an abandoned house with no electricity or running water. Then, my mother came down with a debilitating illness, so she decided to move in with a friend who lived in San Angelo, Texas, where she hoped to get health insurance benefits through the state, a much needed surgery, and follow-up treatment. On that trip, we flew from San Juan to Newark, where my older brother, who had just been honorably discharged from the Navy, picked us up in his car. Together the three of us drove to Texas. That was 1987.

Our life would not unfold in Texas. We would live

in our car, and in family members' apartments in New York City and Boston before landing with our suitcases at my aunt's door in Hartford, Connecticut. Part of my extended family who had first migrated to New York City wound up in Hartford in the 1960s to work in the tobacco fields and the poultry industry. By that time, Hartford had become an impoverished town, suffering the effects of permanent decline and the ravages of disinvestment, where Puerto Ricans, and particularly the "lumpen proletariat" such as my family, made a life at the margins. Returning again to Haraway's question, my eyes were crafted by the blood of generations of dispossessed people expelled from the island by dire conditions wrought by extreme poverty. My family and other socioeconomically-disadvantaged Puerto Ricans are economic refugees.

As my family's history reveals, Puerto Rico's crisis is not new. Rather, it has been unfolding and deepening over the entirety of the 20th century and into the current. State-sponsored migration has functioned as an "escape valve" to so-called overpopulation and unemployment. All the while, high unemployment and staggering poverty rates, government disinvestment in public services, and crime have been constants. Therefore, we must understand what is occurring in Puerto Rico as a long-term crisis. The disaster precipitated by the recent hurricanes is part of an already-unfolding phenomenon. In Puerto Rico, societal vulnerabilities result from a long history of colonial subjugation, economic hardship, environmental injustice, infrastructural neglect, and, at the local island level, a broken rule of law. Hurricane Maria's winds exposed the vulnerabilities created by ubiquitous socioeconomic inequality and neglect of the island's rural regions, like fault lines buried under shallow soils.

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Cultural Nationalism and the Commonwealth

Some of the problems Puerto Ricans are grappling with today date back in part, to Luis Muñoz Marín's modernization project, Operation Bootstrap, as well as to the creation of the *Estado Libre Asociado* (Commonwealth) in the mid-20th century. The Commonwealth project promoted local autonomy along with a cultural nationalism based on Puerto Rican cultural identity. At the same time, economic policies promoted an American-style infrastructure and residential building boom, automobile-dependent development, and a consumerist ethos. The new Commonwealth set up a dilemma: it at once fiercely articulated cultural nationalism as a unique set of spiritual beliefs and values, while adopting a stricter work ethic and emulating American economic values.

As I write in my book, *Imaging the Great Puerto Rican Family,* emergent mass media via photographs, newspapers, television, films, art, and radio constructed and indoctrinated Puerto Rican identity. Notions about a traditional Puerto Rican culture, best exemplified through the flag, songs, poetry, dance, art, and objects, and in the tragic efforts of pro-independence figures, such as Puerto Rican nationalists Pedro Albizu Campos, Lolita Lebrón, and Rafael Cancel Miranda, created the core of the political apparatus. Arlene Dávila has described the ways that both the Commonwealth political machinery and later the corporate sector "sponsored identities" in an effort to construct an "authentic" Puerto Rican culture. This kind of cultural nationalism was not centered on working and valuing the land and safekeeping the environment. Instead, it focused on the affective, something that could be easily carried by the thousands of Puerto Ricans migrating from the island, rather than the material. This, in effect, allowed for a deterritorialized identity to flourish that made Puerto Ricans "*Boricua* even if born on the moon," as Juan Antonio Corretjer noted in 1980 in his poem *"Boricua en la Luna"* (Boricua on the Moon). As a result, Puerto Rican identity and nationalism became separated from the idea of making a life on ancestral land and protecting the environment for future generations.

The commonwealth government promoted and fiercely defended Puerto Rican cultural nationalism while it emulated a U.S. economic consumerist ethos and acquiesced to the total subjugation of the Puerto Rican economy to U.S. control, regulations, and most significantly, its use of land. In the 20th century, the

A rally against austerity in Puerto Rico in October, 2017 (RUDY CARDOSO/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

U.S. federal government's use and control of land included as many as 25 military installations in Puerto Rico. A number of American multinationals set up oil refineries, all of which have now been closed, as well as pharmaceutical companies, medical devices, and electronics manufacturing plants. In the last 20 years, the manufacturing industry has severely contracted, leaving in its wake the shells of empty manufacturing facilities. This contraction began as a result of President Clinton's 1996 legislation to phase out Section 936 over the next 10 years. The law had given U.S. corporations tax exemptions on income originating in U.S. territories since 1976. In 1992, then Governor of Puerto Rico, Rafael Hernández Colón, said that if Puerto Rico were to lose its tax benefits from Section 936, while facing increased competition with the enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) agreement, it could lead to the total collapse of the island's economy. Similarly, Louis Nuñez, then president of the National Puerto Rican Coalition warned that NAFTA would not only threaten jobs on the island, but that it would also eliminate many of the jobs Puerto Ricans relied on throughout the urban Northeast. In Puerto Rico, the repeal of Section 936 coincided with the beginnings of the 2006 global recession devastating the island's already struggling local economy.

Tourism is a growing sector in the island's economy, but the construction of multinational hotel chains on the coast has altered local uses of land, access to the shore, and in some instances has negatively affected local ecosystems such as wetlands and mangroves. This is a great paradox and obstacle to a more emancipatory understanding of the complexities of life in Puerto Rico for Puerto Ricans: on the one hand, Puerto Ricans are expected to be staunchly nationalistic and

The cultural nationalism cemented by the government in the mid-century continues to operate with a religious-like fervor and clouds sober understandings of the political-economic situation in Puerto Rico.

oppose American incursion on the island's culture, but on the other hand, they should work in American jobs at American companies, buy goods sold by American retailers, consume American media, eat American food, use American technology, join the American military, and drive everywhere. The problem is that the divide between the cultural and the socioeconomic is a false one, and not a viable way to understand the sociocultural and political spectrum in Puerto Rico. Supporting U.S. economic interests means also supporting American political and cultural interests, because they are intrinsically and intimately linked.

The cultural nationalism cemented by the government in the mid-century continues to operate with a religious-like fervor and clouds sober understandings of the political-economic situation in Puerto Rico. Its focus on what makes Puerto Rico appear exceptional obscures larger global processes of late capitalism. In fact, Puerto Rico is just one nodal point within a larger constellation of "failed states," like Haiti, Greece, Argentina, Cuba, and Venezuela, and "failed cities" like Detroit, characterized by financial insolvency, depopulation, high unemployment, diminished state and municipal services, political dysfunction, blight, and ruination. Such conceptions have characterized Puerto Rico as a financially failed state run by a locally-elected government that borrowed irresponsibly and is now unable to pay its astounding debt. This led to the Federal government's undemocratic creation of The Financial Oversight and Management Board for Puerto Rico in 2016, or "*la junta*." As Michele Wilde Anderson has noted, "takeover boards" like the Junta sacrifice "deliberative democratic values," and are "socioeconomically biased," making democracy available only to those cities and states who can afford it. It is in effect a "dictatorship for democracy," as Clayton P. Gillette has skeptically called it.

The idea of cultural nationalism in Puerto Rico is not useful in a world that requires us to think post-nationally to have a fighting chance against the logics of growth and extraction subsidizing the wealth of a few at the expense of a suffering majority. When Hurricane Maria made landfall in Puerto Rico, it battered a society already in the grasps of a humanitarian crisis. Long before the 2006 economic recession thrust the island into an increasingly ruinous path, Puerto Ricans were suffering. The social forces of five centuries of colonization by Spain and then the United States, which largely constructed the island as a site of extraction—with its people at times invisible and at others dispensable—has been a source of devastating and continuous injury to the national body and psyche.

Forced Migration and Separation

In the case of Puerto Rico, we cannot ignore the rupture created by the "forced" migrations of the island's people over the last 100 years, which has been a significant cause of suffering and a source of deep familial and socio-cultural trauma. Migration has divided families and an entire people into two groups: people who are from the "island" versus people from the "States," who live in diaspora. This division has become a source of internal oppression among Puerto Ricans themselves, an observation that led the late Puerto Rican Studies scholar Juan Flores to write about the "divided borders" of the Puerto Rican nation. The island has historically viewed the diaspora negatively: the people who emigrated turned their backs and became something other than Puerto Rican. They became degenerate, Americanized, hybrid Puerto Ricans. At the same time, much of the diaspora has viewed Puerto Rico with nostalgia and romance—a source of authentic culture seemingly unchanged.

Until the 2006 economic recession, migrants hailed largely from the island's poor and working classes. The lack of economic opportunity almost always fueled the decision to migrate. When the recession hit the island with great ferocity, migration extended to include educated, professional classes and the children of local elites. Migration now affects all social classes. And many members of the second, third, fourth, and even fifth generation of Americans born to Puerto Rican parents in the States have become part of an educated professional class, wielding a modicum of power over

local and federal politics. The diaspora has become the island's most indispensable ally. Driven in part by the images coming out of Puerto Rico in the immediate aftermath of the storm, members of the diaspora quickly organized to respond to the disaster.

Yet it appears as if these same images had the effect of producing a fatalistic non-responsiveness from the federal government. I see this as due in part to the federal government's misconception of Puerto Ricans as a less advanced people closer to nature who are more able, and in fact are used to, withstanding the fallout from irregular access to or even a lack of "modern amenities" like electricity, clean water, and communications. On September 30, 2017, President Trump wrote a tweet about Puerto Rico that said they "want everything done for them when it should be a community effort." And later, during a visit to the island on October 3, 2017, he remarked, "you've thrown our budget a little out of whack because we've spent a lot of money on Puerto Rico." In the midst of the unfolding catastrophe, the Trump administration responded to requests for aid coming from San Juan with reminders of the island's debtor status and outspoken disdain for a child-like dependency of a people too accustomed to having their problems solved by the federal government. Ultimately, the U.S. federal government has treated Puerto Rico with callous disregard since the hurricanes.

Cultural nationalism has obscured processes that have historically resulted in Puerto Ricans acquiescing to egregious policies, treatment, and corruption from the island's political class. They have even, at times, supported their own oppressors, voting them into office time and again, instead of supporting non-mainstream party candidates and pursuing possible alliances with progressive groups like Latinx, African American, and Native American civil rights organizations. Is it perhaps time to reconsider what nationalism brings to the table and what it impedes?

The disastrous situation in Puerto Rico is not exceptional. Extractive global capitalism has been at work for 500 years and has progressively led to the ruination of the Global South and parts of the North too, from Greece to Spain and Flint. Nature alone cannot account for the disaster in Puerto Rico. The American industrial model of growth, conceived for an ever-expanding world, for countries such as the United States and not for islands like Puerto Rico, abuts the limits of an island ecology. Simply put, growth models of consumption, expansion, and extraction will not work for long anywhere, but especially so in a small place.

An Unnatural Disaster

Hurricane Maria must then be understood as an unnatural disaster. In other words, as climate change contributes to conditions that create extreme weather events, their impact is much higher when they hit societies whose vulnerability to disaster is the product of a harsh social calculus. It brought endemic risks, vulnerabilities, and hidden crises into view in particularly dramatic ways, affecting the infirm and disabled, those without access to transportation, those living in isolated areas, and those in extreme poverty with greater intensity.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, many compared the slow federal response to Puerto Rico's disaster to the slow response over a decade earlier to New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. To understand the similarities between the two places, I return to my family's cultural history. With the decline and eventual death of the sugar industry in both Puerto Rico and New Orleans, working men lost their livelihoods. The women in my family had worked as housecleaners, launderers, and cooks when the men began to migrate stateside to work in the fields, and eventually sent for the women and children. Some returned to make a life on the island against all odds, but many never did. Increasingly, our hometown emptied of the young, and as my Aunt Lydia once remarked, "only the old and dead live here now." Today, thousands of hectares of land are devoted to growing and testing genetically-modified seeds and to developing agro-chemicals. Racial inequalities, poverty and dispossession, landlessness, and environmental injustice lead to similar outcomes whether in Puerto Rico or New Orleans.

Who and what is left behind in the wake of the storm reveals often-hidden or ignored features of society. Disasters produce migration and other sociopolitical transformations. In the case of Puerto Rico, global economic forces exacerbated by U.S. colonialism have long made migration part and parcel of people's reality. Will we continue to react to each disaster as separate, unrelated events, or begin to think systematically and embrace policies of prevention and mitigation? n

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