

# The coloniality of disaster: Race, empire, and the temporal logics of emergency in Puerto Rico, USA<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This essay uses the case of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico to discuss “the coloniality of disaster”: how catastrophic events like hurricanes, earthquakes, but also other forms political and economic crisis deepen the fault lines of long-existing racial and colonial histories. It argues that disaster capitalism needs to be understood as a form of racio-colonial capitalism and that this in turn requires us to question our understandings of both “resilience” and “recovery.” The article focuses on the “wait of disaster” as a temporal logic of state subjugation and on how Puerto Ricans responded to state abandonment through modes of *autogestión*, or autonomous organizing. It concludes that while resiliency can be coopted in service of a neoliberal recovery, it can also be the site for gestating new forms of sovereignty and new visions of postcolonial recovery.

## 1. Introduction

In September of 2017, two back to back hurricanes hit the US territory of Puerto Rico causing unprecedented damage, leaving residents without electricity for nearly a year, deepening an already existing fiscal crisis, and bringing about massive social change that many are still struggling to understand. Since Hurricane Maria, I have been trying to think and write about how this storm ripped the veil off Puerto Rico’s colonial status, as much for those observing from afar who had perhaps never stopped to contemplate Puerto Rico’s relationship to the United States, as well as for local residents who were forced into an affective reckoning with the kinds of structural violence they had been enduring for decades.

In this project, I seek to examine how climate change, the shifts brought about by the epoch of the Anthropocene, and the governmentality of debt with its neoliberal calls for austerity and resilience, are all shaped by what some describe as the coloniality of power.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, I ask whether colonialism itself might not be best understood as

a kind of disaster or, as Nelson Maldonado Torres (2016) suggests, a veritable catastrophe.

This has led me towards an engagement with the large cannon of work on “disaster-ology” within the social sciences, which allows me to extend a series of already well-established arguments: First, the fact that there is no such thing as a natural disaster: all disasters are socially produced (Oliver-Smith, Hoffman, & Hoffman, 1999; Wisner, Blaikie, Blaikie, Cannon, & Davis, 2004). Second, that disasters should not be understood as sudden events, but rather the outcome of long processes of slow, structural violence (Carrigan, 2015; Davies, 2018; Kwate & Threadcraft, 2018; Nixon, 2011). Thirdly, that “Vulnerability” (both social and environmental) is not a natural state but the product of racio-colonial governance (Schuller, 2016; Wisner et al., 2004). Lastly, that, despite lip service to the contrary, disasters do not operate as “great levelers.”; their effects are experienced differentially through pre-existing hierarchies of race, class, and gender and in fact they often sharpen those relations of inequality (Gómez-Barris, 2017; Nishime & Hester Williams, 2018).

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<sup>1</sup> On the coloniality of power see Quijano (1998, 2000), Mignolo (2000), and Maldonado-Torres (2007). On the relation between race, colonialism and the anthropocene see Verges (2017), Haraway (2015), and (Alvater et al., 2016). On the coloniality of debt see Zambrana (2018); Mun-iz Varela (2013); Godreau (2018) and Hudson (2017).

Given all this, my focus is thus not on what Hurricane Maria has caused, but on what it has revealed: namely, how it has laid bare the forms of structural violence and racio-colonial governance that had been operating in Puerto Rico for centuries.<sup>2</sup>

One of the first things Maria revealed is precisely the place of Puerto Rico within a broad US archipelago of racialized neglect. This ties it to sites of climatic disaster like New Orleans (Giroux, 2007, 2015; Danziger & Danziger, 2006; Dyson & Elliott, 2010), but also to places of urban ruin and social neglect like Detroit (Desan, 2014; Sugrue, 2014). This in turn requires us to interrogate the United States as a racial-imperial formation and to critically assess the intertwined nature of racial and imperial governance.

Additionally, Maria reveals the insufficiencies of certain theories of “disaster capitalism” that fail to show how it is the “slow violence” of colonial and racial governance which sets the stage for the accelerated dispossession made evident in a state of emergency (Schuller & Maldonado, 2016). That is, the accelerated forms of extraction and dispossession evident in the wake of modern disasters are conditioned by the subjectivities and technologies of the colonial encounter. For this reason, I argue that disaster capitalism needs to be understood as foundationally a form of *racio-colonial* capitalism, that emerges directly out of the capitalist incubator of plantation slavery (Beckert, 2015; Beckles, 2013; Johnson, 2013; Mintz, 1977, 1985; Williams, 1961).<sup>3</sup>

This in turn requires us to question our understandings of “resilience, or the ability to absorb and bounce back from experiences of shock (Barrios, 2016; Fast & Collin-Vézina, 2010; Kaika, 2017; Mullings, 2005). In recent years, innumerable governmental and international agencies have been promoting resilience as a desired state for communities and nations. The United Nations and the World Bank have numerous campaigns aimed at making cities and communities resilient. There are even resilience scorecards that allow governments to measure up against international targets and indicators (UNISDR, 2017). Following the September 11 attacks, as FEMA fell under the jurisdiction of Homeland Security, the idea of resilience has expanded and become increasingly tied to the security apparatus, becoming a prescribed quality for not just the neoliberal state, but the security state as well (Anderson & Adey, 2011; Coaffee, 2008, 2016; Dunn Cavelti, Kaufmann, & Søby Kristensen, 2015). This suggests a new ideology in which the state is imagined as incapable of eliminating threats—both political and environmental—or addressing their causes. Instead, communities and individuals must bear the brunt of mitigating rising threats of violence—both slow/structural and spectacular.

This push for resiliency must be approached with a great deal of caution. We certainly want our buildings and bridges to be resilient, but do we really want our communities to become well-adapted to structural (and infrastructural) violence? Some see these rising calls for resilience as part of the larger dominance of neoliberal forms of governmentality across the globe, in which citizenship is increasingly being refashioned as individualized self-care. With the increasing cuts in social safety nets, all individuals are increasingly being called upon to take on entrepreneurial modes of self-care and self-management (Muehlebach, 2012). However, we must ask: which communities have historically been required to demonstrate resilience and incessantly forced to endure both the shocks of neoliberalism and the slow traumatic violence of colonial extraction? And is it possible that the push towards resilience has actually made them disproportionately vulnerable to the current

challenges of climate change?

With these queries in mind, my hope is that ultimately this project can help us develop new ways of imagining what recovery might look like. That is, if we understand disasters to have deep colonial histories, how can we formulate visions of repair that take those longer trajectories into account? How can we develop visions of recovery that do not simply re-establish a previous state of inequity, or prepare populations to endure future forms of structural violence, but which instead offer substantive forms of transformation and redress?

This paper is divided into three broad sections. I begin by offering an “affective map” of life in Puerto Rico after Maria. Here I give a sense of the lived experience of the storm and its aftermath, focusing on the temporal logics that transformed a state of emergency into a state of endurance (Povinelli, 2011). The second part explores the economic and political landscape that set the stage for the storm: how Puerto Rico was already in ruins, already prey to vulture, disaster, and imperial capitalism, and already a site of increasing calls for neoliberal resilience. The final section examines how local residents are trying to reimagine the island’s political future in the aftermath of this catastrophic sedimentation and how neoliberal calls for self-reliance converge with anti-colonial projects of self-determination. Here I address the dual meanings of *emergencia* as a state of both emergency and emergence.

## 2. The wait of disaster

*“If there is only one thing I’ve come to understand about the colonies, my dear man, it is that one does nothing here but wait.” – Marlon James, A Book of Night Women*

One thread that runs through this essay is an attempt to think about what we might call “the temporality of disaster,” or how catastrophic events (including colonialism and climate change) impact our experience of time, progression, social action, and political possibility. I approach these questions through the politics of time because one of the most striking things about the aftermath of hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico was how it operated as a moment of temporal rupture. In the immediate aftermath of the storm, residents felt trapped in a state of suspension. For weeks on end, there was no school, no work, no electricity, no phone service, no internet, no television, and no public services. With hospitals closed or only able to treat the most critically ill, sick patients were sent home unable to receive services such as cancer treatments or dialysis. Without electricity, funeral homes were unable to embalm the dead. (Although given the impassable roads, some are said to have buried the dead in their own backyards.) For weeks on end, roads remained blocked; food, water, and gasoline were scarce, and cell phone towers were down rendering most phones inoperable.

I’ve written about temporal ruptures like this before, particularly in my work about labor strikes in the French Caribbean (Bonilla, 2015). There I looked at how social movements—like general strikes, hunger strikes, or political encampments—create breaks in quotidian routines, providing liminal moments of temporal suspension in which new futures can become imaginable. However, the temporality of a social movement is quite different from that of a disaster. In the context of social movements, the present seems to expand in the sense that it becomes overly eventful. Social movements are known to produce a kind of sped-up time. As Lenin famously noted, there are decades where nothing happens, and then there are weeks where decades happen.

The temporal mode of emergency also comes with a heightened state of awareness, a surge of adrenaline, a perceived need to move fast, to act quick, to fix, to save, to repair, to restore. This in turn creates the expectation of change: a desire and perceived need to move out of the present state. That is, there is an assumption that the temporal mode of *emergencia* will be fleeting, quickly shifting over into that of *recovery*.

<sup>2</sup> Although little remarked upon, Hurricane Maria passed through Puerto Rico precisely on the 100th anniversary of the extension of US citizenship to local residents.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the notion of racial capitalism see Robinson (2019). I use the term *racio-colonial* capitalism to stress the co-constitutive nature of race and colonialism and foreground the importance of conquest and colonial outposts for the development of modern capitalism. (For more see Walter Rodney (2018) and Eric Williams (1961).

Emergency is not expected to be an enduring state.<sup>4</sup>

However, in post hurricane Puerto Rico, this feeling of urgency was met with a crushing wall of inaction. The present did not expand in its eventfulness, but in its persistence. Time passed, and nothing changed. Gone was what Reinhardt Kosselleck (2004) once described as the “otherness of the future.” The present no longer felt ephemeral, quickly dissolving into something new. Instead, the present lingered longer than it should. This created a frenzied state of repetition in which each day felt eerily like the last. Indeed, as one woman I interviewed in the town of Comerío—who had spent the previous four months fighting with FEMA to get a tarp on her roofless home—told me, if anything, each day felt worse.

What characterized life after Maria thus was not progress but delay, deterioration, degradation, and the forced act of waiting. Before the storm hit, residents waited for María itself. They stockpiled provisions, gathered those they called family, took stock of what they held dear, and prepared themselves for the worst. Then, for nearly 24 h rain beat down steadily on fragile homes, water poured in through windows and leaky roofs, gusts of wind ripped windows straight off their hinges, and rivers spilled out of their banks pushing residents onto their rooftops in search of safety. Many of those I’ve interviewed spent the entire storm holding on to a door that Maria seemed intent on ripping away. Some had to leave their flooding homes mid-storm and wade through chest-deep waters to find safety. Others have children who still wake up in the middle of the night afraid that they or their parents might be drowning.

Those of us in the diaspora went through our own process of suspension. We held our breath from across the ocean. We heard the howling winds through phone lines and social media posts. We felt the lights go out and the cell towers drop. And we panicked when suddenly our loved ones fell out of digital reach.

Everyone waited for the storm to pass, thinking foolishly that the winds and rain would be the worst of it. We didn’t realize that the true disaster was not the storm itself, but what was laid bare in its wake: the neglected infrastructure of an island in crisis, the economic cleavages of a society marked by profound disparity, the naked disdain of an imperial state, and the forms of structural neglect and social abandonment that had already come to characterize this bankrupt colony.

After the winds subsided, residents once again waited for roads to be cleared, for the lights to come back on, for stores to re-open, for cell phone service to return and for running water to be restored. They endured long lines that lasted anywhere from six to 8 h to obtain basic necessities such as: food, fuel, water, and the ice needed to refrigerate life-saving medications such as insulin. Without electricity or communication services, merchants were unable to accept credit cards or public assistance payments. Thus, some of the longest lines were at the bank, where residents waited to procure the cash needed to purchase what few items were available in stores. For those without savings, many of whom had not received income since the first of the two back-to-back storms it was impossible to participate in the hurricane economy—they, most of all, were left to wait.

For those who lost their homes, there was no line, just the labyrinth of bureaucracy. They were told to sign up for FEMA assistance online, which was impossible for most since they had no electricity, internet, or cell phone service. Once they figured out how to fill out their paperwork, they were then told to wait in their destroyed homes without cleaning or repairing the damage, dwelling in disaster until the fabled FEMA inspectors could come to calculate their loss.

The wait reinforced the feeling of insularity. Those inside felt trapped. They ambled around holding their phones to the sky searching for a signal so they could let the world know that they had survived and that they were “okay,” even though what it meant to be “okay” in post-Maria Puerto Rico was unclear. For some, being “okay” meant they didn’t have

electricity or running water. For others, it meant they lost their roofs but not their homes. For many it meant they lost everything but their lives.

Those too sick, too old, too young, or too impatient to weather this period—or those for whom Puerto Rico still be homeland but not necessarily home—headed to the airport in record numbers, often abandoning their cars in the parking lot, keys and all, for the bank to repossess.

Many residents expressed frustration with this sense of stalled time. The halt of capitalist flows and the halt of modernity suddenly made it clear that Puerto Rico was one of *those* islands. Puerto Ricans had long imagined that long lines, shortages, rationing, and a dependency on the diaspora were things experienced elsewhere. It was believed that US-led development had raised Puerto Rico above the standard of living of its Caribbean neighbors. Many thought that being a US citizen meant not having to stand in line for food or going to a river for water.

Thus, the first couple of days everyone waited patiently, grateful to be alive and understanding that bouncing back from a disaster takes time, but feeling confident that the government had an emergency plan in motion. That is, there was an assumption that the temporal mode of *emergency* would quickly shift over into that of *recovery*.

But the cavalry never arrived. Government trucks did not turn up to clear the debris. Instead, neighbors had to clear their own paths with machetes. Tankers of drinking water didn’t appear, so residents headed to the river with buckets, or built their own make-shift infrastructure out of PVC pipes that connected directly to mountain springs.

They drank rain water or opened up wells that were later revealed to be toxic (Hernández & Dennis, 2017). Food was not delivered for weeks, so community kitchens sprung up, sometimes feeding a single block, sometimes feeding half the town. For weeks on end, there were no aid workers, no helicopters, no military hospitals, no distribution centers. The state simply left its citizens waiting. When government aid finally arrived, it was a slow and insufficient trickle with none of the “shock and awe” that many had come to associate with the “most powerful military in the world.” Meal boxes distributed by the federal government offered merely a can of sausages and a bag of skittles. This and an infamous roll of paper towels hurled by the president, stood in sharp contrast to the imagined bounty of empire.

The Diaspora agonized over this delay, this immobility, this impotence. New migrants talked about having survivor’s guilt, feeling like they had abandoned ship. They combed news and internet feeds for traces of their communities. Multiple online groups were created for keeping track of reports from different parts of the island. If people couldn’t hear from their loved ones directly, they could at least console themselves by finding out if the bridge to their town was still standing, or if anyone from their neighborhood had shown proof of life.

With government aid indefinitely stalled, those on the outside took it upon themselves to lead the recovery. Before post offices had even opened, they began filling care boxes. They strategized on social media about the best way to send items, calculating how many cans of food could fit in a flat rate box, and wondering if it was possible to mail a gallon of water. A young woman I met at a university event described the feeling as one of *catatonia*: a mental state marked by purposeless activity, immobility, and stupor.<sup>5</sup>

Many of those who were able to survive the storm were lost to its wake. They succumbed to what anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot once described as “ordinary accidents and ordinary diseases”—so ordinary that anywhere else they would have been treated or altogether avoided (Trouillot, 1990). They contracted banal diseases like conjunctivitis due to lack of sanitation, and more deadly ones produced by the presence of animal corpses in rivers and rat droppings amongst the debris (Sosa Pascual & Sutter, 2018; Sutter 2018b). Some were run

<sup>4</sup> For more on emergency as a “mode of eventfulness” see Anderson (2015, 2017), Berlant (2011) and Choi (2015).

<sup>5</sup> In the months following Maria, a new podcast named *Catatonia* was developed by journalist and artist Huascar Robles to discuss precisely these issues. <https://www.huascarroble.com/catatonia>.



over in the night by cars due to the lack of street lights, others were killed in accidents at intersections without traffic signals. Others, who suffered from sleep apnea, choked in the night because electricity could no longer power their CPAP machines (Sutter 2018a).

Surgeons operated by the light of their cellphones (Cummins, 2017). With hospitals overrun or closed, home births rates increased, but so did suicides (Acevedo, 2018; Liautaud, Giraldo, & x Paoli, 2017). One woman who tried to take her own life left a final Facebook post commenting on the public demand for strength and resilience: “We’re so obsessed with strength,” she wrote, “We’re told we have to be strong, resilient, and what not and we believe it.” She signed off by posting a YouTube video of Sting singing “Fragile.”

At one point, people thought that what was needed in Puerto Rico was more media coverage. But the media came. They documented. They managed to keep the story alive. Puerto Rico was featured in news reports to an unprecedented degree, but this made no difference. The suffering continued. It wasn’t a secret; it was a public display. Even reporters from US news outlets felt as if they were trapped in a state of suspension and repetition. CBS News reporter David Begnaud said to his anchor, “I’ve never covered a natural disaster where the emergency was endless” (Begnaud, 2017).

Nearly two years later, the social landscape remains stubbornly unchanged. The leaves that were ripped off trees by hurricane winds have now grown back, and the environmental ravages of the storm have started to fade, but infrastructure remains in shatters. Most buildings look battered: the violence of the hurricane winds chipped away their paint, shattered their windows, and blew off their facades. Even fast food restaurants have only empty poles where their signs used to be. Unrepaired windows remain boarded up, other buildings are completely abandoned. Electric cables still dangle perilously in the air, mere inches from the cars passing beneath them. Utility poles still litter the ground like forgotten corpses, or lean precariously against homes as vegetation grows around them. Over a year after the storm, an estimated 60% of traffic lights are still not working. Most public lighting remains out of service, and throughout local towns an enduring feeling of abandonment and ruin prevails.

Residents have become accustomed to this landscape. They’ve become adept at circumventing the power lines and debris that still surround their homes, and they’ve figured out how to deftly maneuver intersections without traffic lights. At a crossroads in Guaynabo, a road sign popped up (see Fig. 1) showing a broken streetlight. It’s telling that I witnessed heated debate and speculation at a dinner table over whether this was an artistic statement or an actual government-produced sign. In other words, some were willing to entertain the idea that the government might never repair the traffic system, and would instead simply create a new iconography of disaster.

Well-meaning observers speculate: would this happen in a US state? The answer is Yes. The answer is Flint, where austerity measures led to a poisoned water supply that has yet to be remedied. Indeed, to understand Puerto Rico, we must place it within this larger archipelago of racialized neglect, connected through deep currents of racialized governance (Meyers & Hunt, 2014). Just as police brutality runs on a loop in the US via cell phone videos of police assault and murder, so do images of neglected populations: abandoned urban spaces in Detroit, poisoned water reserves in Flint, displaced communities in New Orleans, and Puerto Ricans left to wait on rooftops for aid that refuses to arrive. (See Fig. 2) These are not mistakes or even events. These are the logics of disposability at work. As Christina Sharpe asserts, *this* is the weather, the total climate, an environment in which black and brown bodies are rendered disposable (Sharpe, 2016).

Those who were quick to assert indignantly “But these are US citizens!” seemed to forget that citizenship does not save you. Citizenship doesn’t mean you won’t be shot dead in plain daylight by a police officer, or left abandoned without food or water for days on end—on a rooftop, at a superdome, in a prison cell, or in a flood zone. It is precisely the second class citizenship that Puerto Ricans have long



Fig. 1. Street sign in Puerto Rico. Photo by author.

experienced—the legal categories in which they have been purposefully placed through the technologies of racio-colonial governance—which ensures that for years on end Puerto Ricans will continue to wait under blue tarps, much like residents of New Orleans waited in FEMA trailers, pushed to the limits of bureaucratic exhaustion. This is not the result of failed inclusion, but of successful occupation.

Sociologist Javier Auyero suggests that waiting is a temporal process through which political subordination is produced (Auyero, 2012). He argues that recipients of government assistance are often made to wait days, months, even years for the bureaucratic machinery of state assistance. Auyero shows how temporal delay operates as a governmental technique and an assertion of state power. However, as some anthropologists have suggested, waiting also implies the existence of a certain horizon of expectation, a faith in the chances of an arrival (Hage, 2009; Janeja & Bandak, 2018). Waiting (*esperar*) implies hope (*esperanza*). It involves anticipation, a form of thinking and living towards the future (Adams, Murphy, & Clarke, 2009). But what happens when you stop waiting? What happens when you give up?

In Puerto Rico at present many have given up by taking their own lives, or by getting on a plane, but you also have those who have given up on the government by individually taking on the task of recovery: clearing roads, setting up community kitchens, delivering aid to forgotten residents, building roofs, and even directing traffic at intersections.

One of the popular hashtags that emerged in the storm’s wake to highlight these efforts was #Puerto Rico Se Levanta (Puerto Rico Rises). The slogan was first used by the Puerto Rican government to inform the public about the Post-Irma recovery process, along with stylized



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New Orleans in 2005. Puerto Rico today.



11:18 PM · Sep 25, 2017 · Twitter Web Client

54.7K Retweets 80.5K Likes



Fig. 2. Tweet comparing Puerto Rico to new orleans.

graphics detailing recovery efforts on social media<sup>6</sup>. In these government posts, #PuertoRicoSeLevanta represented an assertion of governmental efficiency and care at a time of crisis.

However, after Hurricane Maria there was no government. The head of emergency management made a statement to the press asking citizens to stay calm and wait because there was no working government, and there wouldn't be for several days. (Shortly afterwards he went on vacation.) For days on end, there was no communication between the central offices in San Juan and the different towns throughout Puerto Rico. For months, there was little progress or accountability about how and when state aid would arrive. Residents and local mayors were left in limbo, forced to sort things out on their own.

During this period, the hashtag #PuertoRicoSeLevanta morphed from an assertion of governmental care, to a demonstration of individual resilience. With this shift, the meaning of "Puerto Rico" in #Puerto Rico Se Levanta was transformed from indexing a state apparatus to signaling a body politic forced to self rely in the absence of the state. The slogan was subsequently used to show images of residents coming together with their neighbors and finding creative solutions to the lack of infrastructure, such as building washing machines out of bicycle parts or generators out of lawnmowers. Some of these posts showed residents taking on government roles such as setting up *centros de acopio* (aid centers), delivering food and water to rural areas, and taking charge of

intersections that lacked working traffic lights. In other words, the hashtag was used to show how residents were stepping into the roles of an absent state.

They say it takes twenty-one days for new habits to cement. The great majority of Puerto Ricans spent well over a hundred days without electricity, running water, or traffic signals — that is, without the invisible infrastructure of daily life.<sup>7</sup> Feeling abandoned by the government became habitual. Being forced to self-rely became ingrained. Many have celebrated Puerto Rican's resilience in the aftermath of the storm, indeed, it's quite remarkable that there was so little violence, looting, or unrest. However, one must wonder: what will these increasingly individualized and privatized form of resilience and self-reliance produce in a place that was already bracing itself for austerity? At what point does resilience become a form of neoliberal endurance?

### 3. Bankrupt states and resilient individuals

It is important to remember that the 2017 storms arrived just two years after the previous Governor of Puerto Rico had declared that this US territory was on the verge of a financial "death spiral" (Walsh, 2016). Years of overborrowing to compensate for a deflated economic base had led to a multi-billiondollar debt, which the state was now incapable of

<sup>6</sup> For an example of these kinds of posts see <https://twitter.com/fortalezapr/status/906223691792617477>

<sup>7</sup> As Starr and Bowker (1995) argue, infrastructure is often invisible until it breaks or fails. See also Cowen (2017) on the infrastructure of empire.

servicing.

The local government tried to file for bankruptcy, but Puerto Rico was mysteriously written out of the bankruptcy law by an unexplained 1984 amendment to the tax code (Greenberg, 2016; Lubben, 2014). Puerto Rico's territorial status thus leaves its municipalities unable to declare bankruptcy—a right only afforded within the 50 states. It is also unable to follow the path of sovereign nations like Argentina by defaulting because it is written into the territorial constitution that government debts must be serviced before any other public expenditures.

This dates back to the moment when Congress established Puerto Rico's civil government in 1917 (after nearly two decades of military rule). At that point, it decreed that any bonds issued by its government would be free from taxation. Later, in 1952, when the United States convinced the United Nations to remove Puerto Rico from the list of non self-governing societies, it was written into the island's new constitution that the repayment of public debt must take priority over financing public services. In other words, one of the founding principles of territorial status was its establishment as a site of US investment and Puerto Rican debt.

When Puerto Rico's commonwealth status was established, it was portrayed as a temporary measure. Its proponent, Luis Muñoz Marín, suggested that the territory needed time to industrialize and strengthen its economy in order to either become a US state or develop as an independent nation. However, here too residents were left waiting. The industrialization efforts that followed did not succeed in elevating the island's economy to the level of a US state. Even before the hurricane, Puerto Rico's gross national income was roughly one third the level of the fifty states and close to 45% of the population lived at or below the poverty line.

The causes of the current economic crisis are complex. In many ways it is linked to the larger financial crisis of 2008, but it was also precipitated by the elimination of tax incentives to US businesses during the Clinton administration in 1993.<sup>8</sup> This led to a massive loss of revenue as manufacturers moved to sites with lower operational costs. As manufacturers moved away, so too did the military, which closed most of the bases on the island causing even greater economic compression. The latter was a clear indication of the loss of Puerto Rico's geopolitical importance in the wake of the Cold War. It's telling that at the same time that the Obama administration refused to offer a financial package to address Puerto Rico's economic crisis, they sought to re-establish diplomatic ties with the Cuban government.

Puerto Rico's debt crisis was also fueled by the particular financial apparatus that are Puerto Rican bonds, and the role they played in the global financial crisis. In addition to having constitutionally guaranteed repayment terms, bonds issued by the Puerto Rican government also have the unique and singular quality (unavailable within any of the 50 states) of being triple tax exempt, which makes them free of tax obligations at the state, federal, or local level (Walsh, 2015). This made them irresistible to Wall Street financiers, who kept finding new and creative ways of re-packaging what had clearly become a shell game. In fact, it was the Lehman Brothers firm (before its crash) which helped establish the island's sales tax system in 2016 as a way of skirting constitutional limits on public debt.<sup>9</sup>

As a result, Puerto Rico accrued an unfathomable amount of public debt. As its ability to service that debt came into question, the loan terms became less and less favorable—resulting in what some describe as the societal equivalent of a payday loan. Most of its Capital Appreciation bonds, for example, have an effective interest rate of 785% (Bhatti &

Sloan, 2016).

Numerous civic groups have called for the cancellation of the debt, or at the very least its audit. The local government petitioned for the right to declare bankruptcy, but instead Congress passed the 2016 Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA), which allowed restructuring under the control of a congressionally-appointed Oversight Board locally referred to as “La Junta,” which was charged with shrinking the local government's budget through the implementation of austerity measures and the reduction of public services.

Many compare these austerity measures to those imposed elsewhere, such as in Greece. However, in the Greek case, austerity measures represented a *pre-condition* for the extension of a larger aid package, whereas in Puerto Rico austerity was implemented with no accompanying assistance. The PROMESA law did not provide any transfer of funds from the federal government. If anything, it imposed a new economic burden on the Puerto Rican government which subsequently had to pay the board's overhead—to the tune of over \$200 million dollars a year.

As with emergency boards that have been put into place in other racialized and indebted societies such as Detroit and Flint, the board's main task has been to shrink the state apparatus, which has meant closing schools, consolidating agencies, suspending public services, and privatizing public infrastructure (such as airports, highways, and utility systems), all while raising the sales tax and government fees. As mentioned above, Puerto Rico didn't even have a sales tax before 2006. By 2017 it reached 11.5%—the highest of any US state or territory. These revenues however are earmarked for debt repayment, not maintenance of public services.

The debt crisis thus paved the way for infrastructural vulnerability and social abandonment long before hurricane María. For example, the electric grid had not received proper maintenance. Just a year prior to María, there had been an island-wide three day blackout that demonstrated the weakness of the grid (Stanchich, 2016). The water system was also in crisis. A report from May of 2017 showed that 70% of the island's drinking water was possibly toxic (Lloréns & Stanchich, 2019; Cotto, 2017). A report on the hospital system had also tried to sound the alarm about the inability of the health system to respond in case of a crisis (González, 2018). We now know that it was these infrastructural failures which led to María's high death toll—estimated to be somewhere between three and five thousand (Sosa Pascual et al., 2018; Sosa Pascual et al., 2019). This makes Hurricane María the deadliest disaster on US soil in recent history, with an even higher death toll than 9/11.

Puerto Rico's ongoing crisis had also spurred a historic migratory wave even before the hurricane hit, with more Puerto Ricans already residing in the continental United States than in the Puerto Rican territory (Cohn, Patten, & Lopez, 2014). It is clear that many of those evacuating are not imagining a return, not imagining a collective future, just an extended state of emergency.

While migration rates continue to climb, the current government has been focused on attracting new “stakeholders” to come to Puerto Rico under Act 20/22, a pivotal piece of legislation that allows wealthy elites from the states to use Puerto Rico as a tax haven (Neate, 2016). Passed in 2012, the legislation was established to bring capital investment to the island once it was barred from borrowing. The law originally carried certain restrictions requiring direct capital investment and job creation. Under the current administration, however, these rules have been lifted. Now, any new transplant from the US who spends half the year on the island can receive exemptions from federal and local taxes, capital gains tax, and taxes on passive income until the year 2035, regardless of whether they generate employment or invest in the local economy (Bonilla, 2018). This makes Puerto Rico the only place on US soil where such income can go untaxed. (Of course, this is only available to “new arrivals” not current residents or those originally born in the territory who have since migrated.)

Originally designed to attract wealthy financiers, the law has ended up luring tech entrepreneurs, cryptocurrency devotees, digital nomads,

<sup>8</sup> For critical resources on the background and social implications of the debt crisis, see [www.puertoricosyllabus.com](http://www.puertoricosyllabus.com).

<sup>9</sup> A portion of the newly created sales tax (now at 11.5%) would be used to securitize new bonds that won't be counted as part of the money borrowed by the government (Scahill, 2018).



and tax dodgers who choose their countries of residence based on economic incentives, regulatory freedom, and “value opportunities,” rather than on cultural or political ties.

Puerto Rico’s status as an unincorporated US territory suits these untethered entrepreneurs. Since Puerto Rico is neither a nation nor a US state, new arrivals are able to retain their US citizenship while opting out of tax obligations. One of these wealthy part-time residents, Peter Schiff, the CEO of Euro Pacific Capital, was quoted by CNN as saying “Yeah, I’m saving a lot of money ... It’s the closest thing to renouncing your US citizenship without actually doing it ... You’re still an American, you’re just out from under the IRS” (Gillespie, 2015). In a recent GQ magazine article, another recent arrival justified his decision similarly. He explains, “I was looking at different tax havens: Andorra, Lichtenstein, Monaco. But the problem is, you have to give up your US passport. When I heard about *this*, it was too good to be true. But it’s real. I live in paradise. I live at the Ritz-Carlton. I drive my golf cart to the beach club for breakfast. Then I go to my sunset yoga class on the beach” (Barron, 2018).

Some argue that these new arrivals will offer a much-needed boost to the local economy, however these self-described “ex-pats” tend to live in isolated enclaves, and even then for only part of the year—carefully avoiding hurricane season, for example. They provide little in the way of long-term, secure employment, particularly as the majority of those arriving are part of what the governor describes as members of the “human cloud”—untethered digital nomads who can set up shop anywhere because they require little local infrastructure (Bonilla, 2018). It is this disregard for social infrastructure, combined with a broader libertarian ideology that scorns the state apparatus, which makes Puerto Rico such an attractive destination for these digital nomads. Unlike long-term residents, these new arrivals are not concerned with the withering capacities of an already moribund and bankrupt non-sovereign local state. For them, state retreat is strategically useful.

By claiming Puerto Rico as their primary residence, these new arrivals lose the right to vote in US presidential or congressional elections, but when asked about this, they seem unconcerned. One new arrival quoted in a GQ article said he didn’t care about voting: “We’ve got a civil war going on. Red versus blue. We’ve got four percent unemployment, and I feel safer being here than in Miami or New York. The world’s going to shit, and that doesn’t mean Puerto Rico won’t go down further. They are already way down.” In other words, Puerto Rico has already been forced to deal with the precarity, disparity, and increased vulnerability that is forecasted for the world as a whole in the age of the Anthropocene. While some experience disasters as triggers of dispossession, others spout ideals of “Anti-Fragility” seeing moments of crisis—both environmental and economic—as possibilities for creative destruction (Taleb, 2012).

Some argue that climate change will serve as a great leveler and that it could bring about greater social consciousness around the globe. However, reports have shown that although the “super rich” are highly concerned about apocalyptic futures and an impending class war, they are not preparing for these scenarios by investing in social infrastructure, but rather by generating individualized doomsday survival strategies through the construction of stealth bunkers and the exploration of space travel (Osnos, 2017; O’Connell, 2018). In the Caribbean, this results in self-sufficient mansions complete with solar panels, water desalination plants, helipads, and massive emergency supplies—none of which require a functioning state. Given the fantasies that continue to circulate about remote and uninhabited deserted isles, it is perhaps not surprising that tropical islands would become a fantasy scenario for an apocalyptic future.

I once asked one of these wealthy expats how he felt about moving and doing business in a place with unreliable public services, spotty internet, and frequent power outages. He responded immediately that *he* lives in Condado—the most expensive enclave of San Juan—where the internet is faster than Silicon Valley, and all the buildings have underground electric cabling and reserve water tanks. He also stressed that the

hardships experienced after María had strengthened his resolve to move here. The ability with which Puerto Ricans were able to carry on with little protest or violence in the face of disaster—in other words their resilience—had convinced him that this was a safe place to ride out future storms.

It is concerning that the local government views these groups as important new “stakeholders” in Puerto Rico’s future and has created advisory groups and other official channels to involve them in the articulation of Puerto Rico’s recovery. At a time when the government was already reducing public services and enacting austerity measures that disproportionately impact the poor, these new constituents could help tip the scales towards a recovery that centers on “individual responsibility” at the same time that local populations are left without collective safety nets.

While the local government tries to lure new wealthy non-Puerto Ricans to the island, it simultaneously continues to increase austerity measures for locals. One of the first measures passed by the Rosselló administration was a labor reform act that eliminated sick days, extended the probationary period, and allowed workers to be paid less than minimum wage. These reforms are a response to arguments made by certain economic analysts, such as a writer for *Forbes* who had suggested that Puerto Rico’s problem was that it had applied “rich country policies” to a poor society (Sotomayor, 2015). In other words, the writer suggests that Puerto Ricans took their US citizenship too literally and imagined they were entitled to the same kind of infrastructure and living standards of a US state.

The debt crisis that preceded the hurricane had already begun to shift expectations about what it meant to be a US citizen in Puerto Rico, what economic rights you were entitled to, what services you should expect to receive from the state, and what kind of political futures were imaginable in a bankrupt colony. Although the semblance of a benefactor state remained alive through federal programs such as Pell grants and food stamps, the local government was no longer seen as capable of protecting its citizens by offering them a safety net or even basic services. As a result, preparing yourself for things such as a natural disaster had increasingly come to be seen as an individual duty, not a state responsibility.

As one man I interviewed explained,

“We have to change that attitude that the government has to provide for us, because we will never get back on our feet that way. Here we depend too much on the government and the government is bankrupt. The government doesn’t work. So now we have to work harder because the government can no longer help us.” (Research Interview June 2017)

Many I’ve interviewed emphasized this idea that it was up to individuals to prepare for the storm. They had to fill their gas tanks, stockpile food and water, and withdraw money from the bank *before* the storm hit. Some even considered it irresponsible, given Puerto Rico’s decaying infrastructure, to lack a home generator or solar panels.<sup>10</sup>

What is absent from this narrative is the fact that for many hurricane preparedness had become impossible. The debt crisis had left individuals in a deep state of vulnerability, that was both societal, (in terms of fragile infrastructure) as well as personal (in terms of financial precarity) at the precise moment they were being called upon to act as agents of their own recovery. I was struck by the irony of all of this as I stumbled upon a banner in front of one of Puerto Rico’s banks which declared “*Un nuevo Puerto Rico está en uno*,” meaning that a new Puerto Rico lies within each individual. On the one hand, the slogan emphasizes the importance of individualized recovery, on the other hand it also

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, a year after María the hashtag #AUnAñoDeMaría [#OneYear-AfterMaría] went viral on Twitter with dark satirical takes on these discourses, mocking those who suggested that a year after María you were irresponsible citizen if you didn’t have these items.

suggests that the future of Puerto Rico is already here, already gestating within its residents.

### 3.1. From self-reliance to self determination

*"They want everything to be done for them when it should be a community effort."*

– Donald Trump, Twitter.

In the weeks after hurricane Maria, there was a great deal of outrage over a statement Donald Trump made on Twitter about Puerto Rico. In response to the Mayor of San Juan's critiques of federal efforts, he said that Puerto Ricans wanted everything done for them. He came under fire with good reason. However, as is often the case with Trump, his words spoke to broader shared expectations, not just about the distribution of state resources, but also about disaster recovery and its agents.

As mentioned above, in the days following the storm, the slogan "*Puerto Rico se levanta*" went viral on social media and in real life. It was spray-painted on battered buildings, and written onto cars, often accompanied by the Puerto Rican flag, which was suddenly everywhere. It's interesting to contrast this with the role played by national flags in other disaster landscapes. In New Orleans, for example, US flags were raised as calls for help, but also as public reminders of residents' entitlement to government aid. The Puerto Rican flags that emerged after the hurricane, however, were not calling for government assistance, but rather asserting that citizens didn't need the government in order to move forward. When I asked one local schoolteacher about his decision to place a flag above his home, he explained, "Those of us who raise the Puerto Rican flags are saying we can do it on our own. We can raise ourselves on our own. We are the protagonists of our recovery."

The Puerto Rican flag has always been a symbol of independence. It was once seen as subversive and was censured but later became commodified and was channeled into a form of cultural nationalism that co-exists with the US presence on the island (Dávila, 1997). It is thus not surprising that businesses quickly began incorporating the flag and the slogan "*Puerto Rico se levanta*" into their publicity ads. The Medalla beer company issued a new Puerto Rico "restart" can for its products. Billboards promoting pain relief medicine declared that small pains would not stop Puerto Rico from rebuilding and hip boutiques in the tourist enclave of Condado exhibited the slogan on store windows, along with displays of expensive clothing ill-suited for the hard work of digging yourself out of a flood. You could also purchase a Puerto Rico se levanta souvenir t-shirt or baseball cap at the airport, and I even discovered a Puerto Rico se levanta series of Hallmark cards at a local Walgreens (See Figs. 3 and 4). The greeting cards included notes thanking the receiver for acts of kindness, encouraging the reader to stay positive in the face of difficulty, and calls for collective unity.

For some, the overwhelming presence of nationalist affect in the wake of the disaster might seem like an assertion of independence in the face of imperial neglect. One can also view it as the cooptation of collective sentiment in the service of a neoliberal recovery. This is similar to the role of volunteerist affect that Vincanne Adams (2013) saw underpinning the New Orleans recovery and which others have also described as key to the production of neoliberal state retreat (Muehlebach, 2012).

It is interesting that "*Puerto Rico se levanta*" is a double entendre—it could mean that Puerto Rico is getting back on its feet, but it could also mean that Puerto Rico is having an uprising. The fact that this latter meaning was so little discussed or rallied, shows how seemingly depoliticized the recovery efforts were. Even though some residents spent nearly a year without electricity, there were very few protests or demonstrations. Some communities placed banners outside their neighborhoods simply noting the fact that they still didn't have electricity. Others held torch-lit processions to call attention to their plight. Interestingly, none of these actions were held in front of state agencies or sites of governmental power. Instead, communities mostly turned inward. In the

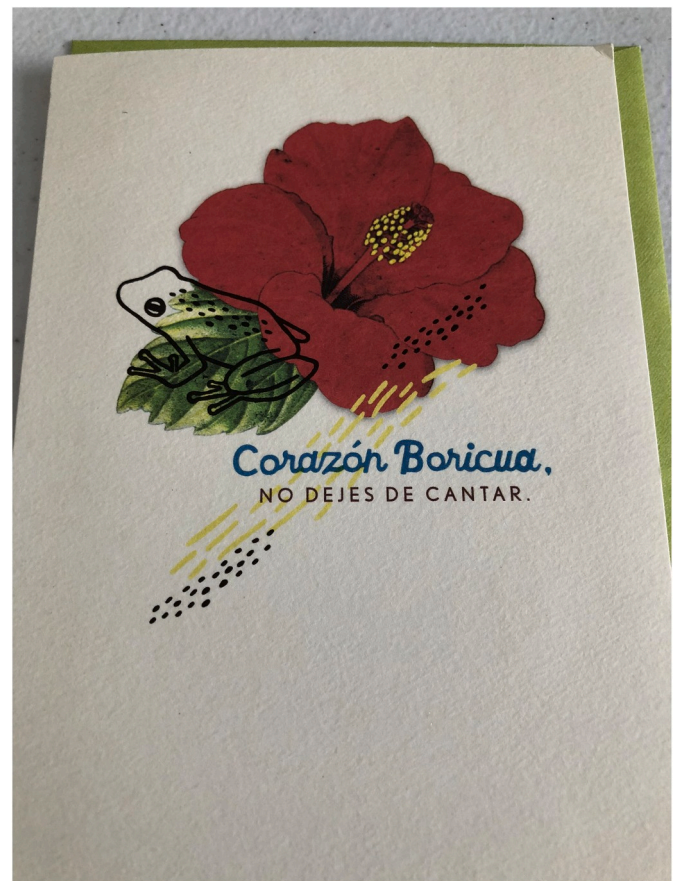


Fig. 3. "Puerto Rico se levanta" greeting cards. Photo by Author.

town of Quebradillas, residents managed to bring the freeway to a standstill during a protest, refusing to let business carry on as usual. Yet, the slogan for their demonstration "*Tratamos de Levantarnos*" (We are trying to get up) seems almost apologetic, suggesting that they bore the responsibility of raising themselves up from their plight even as the state failed to provide even the most basic services (Cyber News, 2017).

As stated previously, in the initial aftermath of the storm, many Puerto Ricans came together to set up community kitchens, organize solidarity brigades, clean up debris, place tarps on roofless homes, distribute solar lights, and take charge, if not of the recovery, at least of the emergency in the face of an absent state. Some examples of these kinds of organizations include Casa Pueblo, an organization that emerged from 1980s environmental activism around the town of Adjuntas (Massol Deyá, 2018). Long before Maria, Casa Pueblo was promoting solar energy, sustainable development, and self-sufficiency through a well-established network and protocol of community action. Another example is Comedores Sociales, an initiative that emerged out of the 2010 university strike and the Pre-Maria protests against the Fiscal Control Board and in favor of auditing the debt (Roberto, 2019). Additionally, new groups spontaneously emerged to fill in the gaps left by absentee state agencies. Some of these were temporary solidarity brigades, but others became new non-profit organizations that continue to operate and serve their communities years after Maria.

These efforts are reminiscent of the maroon politics that long characterized Caribbean societies in which parallel communities developed on the margins of the colonial state. They also echo projects forged by diasporic communities throughout the US. This includes the breakfast programs, health and education services developed by groups like the Black Panthers, the Young Lords, and the Brown Berets, which were themselves in dialogue with indigenous groups and other communities struggling against internal colonialism. As well as contemporary forms





Fig. 4. Puerto Rico se levanta greeting cards. Photo by Author.

of "DIY urbanism" that have developed in places that have also been abandoned by the state, such as Detroit (Kinder, 2016). All these efforts reflect contexts in which the state has never been a site of political guarantees, but of exploitation at worst and abandonment at best. In the colonial context of Puerto Rico, these initiatives represent the search for an alternative form of sovereignty. That is, going off the grid or engaging in self-reliance in the context of contemporary Puerto Rico becomes a broader kind of freedom project that sees self-sufficiency and community care as a possible way of breaking with US dependence (Massol-Deyá, 2019; 2020).

These emerging initiatives are small and localized. They are not territory-wide, instead they are each tied to particular constituencies or municipalities and are not necessarily interested in carrying out what in a different era one would call a mass movement. For some observers there is something frustrating about this because their efforts don't look like a modernist political project. That is, they do not constitute what anthropologist James Scott would describe as an effort to "see like a state" or think like a state (Scott, 1998). In other words, they do not resemble a modernist nation building movement.

These various efforts are often described through the concept of *autogestión*, which before Maria had already become a watchword in Puerto Rico. Particularly in the wake of the debt crisis, it had become common to hear people talk about the need to *autogestionarse*. Taken literally, *autogestion* can be translated as self-reliance or self-management.<sup>11</sup> Yet, *gestionar* can have a different meaning, not just of management but of gestation (like a fetus), that is, it can be imagined as the

process of incubating and developing a new being.

At a post-Maria event at the University of Puerto Rico, local scholar and filmmaker Mariolga Reyes Cruz (2018) explicitly talked about these projects as forms of gestating sovereignty. In a speech titled "Por quienes esperamos" ("Who are We Waiting For" or "The Ones We are Waiting For") she said that Maria had demonstrated that Puerto Ricans didn't need to wait for anyone. While both local and federal governments stalled, Puerto Ricans had taken care of themselves. She asserted that the *autogestión* initiatives emerging after Maria were not simply about taking on the task of recovery but about reimagining the future.

Cruz went on to directly connect the wait of Maria to the wait of colonialism—the wait to resolve political status that Puerto Ricans have been engaged in for over a century—and suggested that in both cases what appeared to be a wait was actually a gestation process. While waiting for decolonization, she argued, community organizations in Puerto Rico had forged new visions of sovereignty: food sovereignty through back-to-the-land movements, territorial sovereignty through land occupations and community trusts, energy sovereignty (*soberanía energética*) through solar power initiatives, and even political sovereignty through a reimagining of the means and forms of collective action. She also spoke of what one might call a diasporic sovereignty forged by Puerto Rican communities abroad who mobilized in the wake of the storm to send aid in the face of governmental failure.

Looking to the future, she said it was now time to knit together these forms of sovereignty (*es hora de entretejer soberanías*). It is unclear what this process will entail and where it will lead, but for Cruz, and many others, this archipelago of sovereignty (which reaches beyond the territory and into the diaspora) offers a ray of hope within an otherwise bleak landscape. After both local and federal governments abandoned their citizens, forcing them to wait, and in a context where over a decade of austerity and over a century of US empire had already whittled down the expectations regarding state capacity and care, these islands of sovereignty offer an alternative.

However, while Mariolga and other activists are busy gestating new sovereignties, the government continues to recruit new stakeholders who have their own vision of what might emerge out of the ruins of Maria. At an investor's conference in New York, just a few months after Maria, I observed as the governor and his cabinet members urged US entrepreneurs to take advantage of Puerto Rico's economic and colonial crisis. Among the many competitive advantages they ascribed to the territory was precisely the resilience of its population. Resilience, it seems, is good for business.

#### 4. Imagining repair

I would like to end by giving the final word to one of the participants in my study, a woman that I shall call Annie, who echoed in her own way the same arguments that Mariolga Cruz was trying to make in her remarks at the university.

Annie is an extremely youthful and stylish 71-year old retired school teacher, with short salt and pepper hair who is always relentlessly energetic and upbeat. I had originally met her while conducting research about Puerto Rico's economic crisis. After the hurricane, I was unable to reach her for months because both her landline and her cellphone had stopped working. I later learned she had spent the hurricane alone at home, in a working-class suburb on the outskirts of San Juan, and later rode out the blackout with her daughter in Florida. I caught up with her a year later after she was settling back into her life in San Juan.

With her characteristic upbeat style, she said that she suffered little during the hurricane. She had done everything she needed to prepare. She had stockpiled food, water, and batteries. She had her medicines, and she had cash. In other words, she was a responsible, self-sufficient citizen. Her home suffered little damage, and in the days following the storm she says she was happily in the "bubble" of her working-class neighborhood. Her aunts, uncles, and cousins all live nearby, so they were able to spend those early days together taking care of each other.

<sup>11</sup> Others have defined this form of practice as "autonomous organizing" (Garriga-Lopez 2019).

Everyday, her younger cousins would venture out to get water, ice, hot meals, and other supplies, and they would come back with stories of long lines and shortages, but for Annie these were just that: stories. They were something you heard about, something that happened to someone else, not something you lived through. She kept referring to those events as things that happened “*afuera*” – outside of her little bubble.

After a few weeks of this, her daughter in Florida sent for her and Annie says it was then that she truly discovered the magnitude of the disaster as she watched images of devastation flash across the screen. Still, she still insisted on cultivating resilience: “I’m very positive. I always try to get rid of the negative so I can manage daily life because if I start crying then I can’t get organized. And you have to stay organized. If I lose it [*Si me voy en brote*], I can’t think ...” I asked her if she finally “lost it” once she got to Florida, but she said no: there she got busy once again, filling out paper work, figuring out a new city, learning how to take the bus, “I didn’t want to fall into sadness, so I just saw it as an adventure.”

She started to sound almost manic as she narrated what she described as herself in “*el survival mode*” but then she paused and said: “Honestly, I’m now sadder than I was in that survival mode, because that mode gives you energy and excitement. Now I am back here. Now we are supposed to be back to normal, but here we are ... still waiting. I’m no longer in survival mode, now I have to absorb everything that happened.” She said it in precisely this way: *absorber lo que ha pasado* – take the hit, absorb the shock.

She talked about the despair she felt when she looked around and the landscape was still in ruins. She also talked about the pain of losing her best friend: “We are not sure what happened to her. She was fine before Maria, and now she is in an assisted living facility and has lost her ability to speak.”

Part of what upsets Annie is that climate change itself is no longer “a story,” no longer something you hear about happening elsewhere. She is worried that nobody seems to be thinking about this, that they are not rebuilding more sustainable structures, or turning to alternative energy sources: “*Nena*, we have this sun beating down on us everyday. We should be using that. It should be doing something more than just giving us skin cancer.” She is also extremely upset at how the recovery is unfolding: all the profiteering that is being revealed and the fact that rich parts of town have streetlights and look like nothing has happened, while her neighborhood still has no street or traffic lights.

I asked her what she thought a fair recovery would look like and if she wanted more policing—since she mentioned several times that she was worried about crime and mad that only the rich areas were getting police protection. She laughed and said no, of course not, what she wants is to see people’s needs attended to. She then went on to think in larger political terms, saying:

We have to work towards something new. I know it won’t be independence because these 120 years of *colonialismo americano*, and the ones we had before with the Spanish, have made us think that we can’t be independent. And there are no leaders ... so that alternative is not possible. In any case, she said, what we need is real sovereignty, not that *soberanía de papel* – where they give you sovereignty on a piece of paper, where they have some big ceremony and the US declares us independent, that is not going to solve our problems on the day to day. That’s not what we need. What we need is real sovereignty, emotional sovereignty, mental sovereignty. This is not about the Olympics, or Miss Universe, or a seat at the U.N. It’s about feeling fully human [*que nos sintamos gente*], it’s about feeling like a people [*que nos sintamos pueblo*].

In other words, for Annie, real sovereignty is about addressing the dehumanization of colonialism, a matter that mere independence does not tackle.

She went on to say that statehood is out of the question as well because, “If this disaster has proved anything, it’s that the US doesn’t care about us. And it’s not because we’re crap; it’s that we just don’t

matter to them. I’m not even mad about it.” When I asked her why the US didn’t care, she retorted:

For whatever reason! For whatever reason. Because we are not white, we do not have blue eyes, because we don’t have oil. For whatever reason, they are no longer interested in us. They had their military bases here; they threw their bombs; they contaminated the land, and they left. They’re done. It’s like when a husband uses a woman and gets tired of her and leaves her. They are not interested, and there is no point in chasing after them because they are done. It’s over.

Perhaps it goes without saying that Annie is divorced. However, comparing the Puerto Rico-US relationship to a bad romance, is a common practice. Even politicians and pundits recur to it repeatedly. Yet, Annie gave it a particular spin: she went on to talk about how Puerto Rico was constantly chasing after the US as if it was Prince Charming, but she said the truth is “the US is not a prince; it’s just a frog.” She explained, “They have tremendous problems, huge racial problems, terrible poverty, health problems—they basically have all the same problems we have. So, if they can’t resolve their problems, how are they going to resolve ours?” She concluded by saying:

We have to find something that works for us. We have to create something new. And I think that’s where we are headed. There is a new movement that is being forged here. It still hasn’t been born, but it’s about to be born. A new future for Puerto Rico is already developing.”

Her words gave new meaning to the bank’s eerie slogan, “A new Puerto Rico lies within.”

## 5. From recovery to redress

The events that have been unfolding in Puerto Rico over the past few years, and those that have unfolded elsewhere in other sites of racial-colonial disaster, require us to think more expansively about what disaster recovery should look like and how to build models of recovery that aren’t about bringing places like Puerto Rico back to their previous states as sites of imperial capitalism, but which instead can help us reimagine the very nature of the debts incurred and the damages caused. As Deborah Thomas (2019) and others have argued, this is about the larger need and desire among colonized people to find new ways of being human in the wake of the Plantation. For Annie, and others like her in Puerto Rico, the search for a post-disaster future is thus about more than just repairing roofs and restoring streetlights. It is also a matter of attending to the deep inequities and long histories of dispossession that had already left certain populations disproportionately vulnerable to disaster.

This also a question of temporality and futurity. The victims of disaster, including the disaster of colonialism, have repeatedly been forced to wait for repair. It is easy to fall into pessimistic thinking about the future outcomes of all of this, particularly as ideologies of shrinking states and resilient individuals continue to deepen long-standing debts and inequities. However, among Annie and many others in Puerto Rico, there is a hope that this period of extended waiting, this arrested post-colonial present, is actually a period of gestation. It is worth noting that *emergencia* in Spanish carries a double meaning: suggesting both a state of emergency and a state of emergence. Perhaps, for this reason, many in Puerto Rico remain in a hopeful wait, that what might seem to be a stalled present, could actually be the dawn of a new political future.

## Declaration of competing interest

None.



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