



A PANDEMIC RECKONING

By Yarimar Bonilla

In Puerto Rico, 2020 began with a jolt. The month of January brought the onset of an earthquake “swarm” that rattled the southern coast, bringing buildings, schools, and emotional nerves to the ground. In just one month over 2,500 seismic events were registered by the local seismic network, with over 272 “felt events” of magnitudes between 2.0 and 6.4. Most of the quakes came in the wee hours of the night. As a result, thousands found themselves sleeping in their cars, in tents, or on park benches, afraid to reenter their homes. That is, if their homes were still standing.

As with Hurricane Maria, the tremors were followed by scandals of political corruption, the mismanagement of emergency aid, and the failure of state agencies. Once again, locals were left to their own devices, forced to take recovery and community care into their own hands. While the Department of Education dithered in inspecting quake-damaged schools, parent groups and community organizations began setting up home schooling and donating tents for makeshift outdoor classrooms. While the government stalled in delivering aid, caravans of citizens created traffic jams bringing emergency supplies to earthquake-impacted neighborhoods.

Unpredictably but unsurprisingly, the earth kept shaking, and citizens eventually became accustomed to the unstable ground. Hurricane Maria taught many to live without electricity or running water. Now the earthquakes forced us to sleep in our

running shoes, with our survival kits by the door. After all, Puerto Ricans are experts in resilience. We've learned how to live with state failure. We've become accustomed to crisis. Because of this, when the COVID-19 outbreak began in March, it was quickly treated as yet another chapter in our compounding disaster. This feeling of layered crises is perhaps best seen in the popular memes that began to circulate on social media in the wake of the pandemic. One example is that of a book cover for an imagined illustrated guide to recent Puerto Rican history. It features three emblematic objects: a gas canister like the ones used to fill generators during power outages after Hurricane Maria; a backpack representing the survival kits that residents were exhorted to prepare during the onset of the quakes; and a surgical mask, the latest emergency object that residents are now obliged to acquire in order to mitigate the latest threat to the body politic.

Like other forms of crisis and emergency, the pandemic is a socially produced event, driven not by biological forces or natural hazards but by the deeply rooted social inequalities that shape our experiences of those hazards to begin with. The pandemic is thus also a disaster in the manner often described by anthropologists and other social scientists: a totalizing and disruptive event that reveals long-standing fragilities and creates new possibilities—both economic and political. Disasters do not only destroy or damage, they also reveal. They peel away the blinders of habit and routine, and they cast new light on what might otherwise remained obscured.

In the wake of Hurricane Maria, many began to see Puerto Rico's colonial relationship in a new light. Across the United States many "discovered" that their nation was actually an empire. As historian Daniel Immerwahr argues, one of the particularities of the United States is the way in which it has

successfully “hidden” its empire.¹ The very name of the country suggests a federation of sovereign states, when in actuality as a polity it is a collection of states, territories, tribal nations, and other ambiguously defined jurisdictions. This messiness is obscured by its contradictory name (or its lack of a name, as many Latin American writers have suggested) and by what Immerwahr describes as the “logo map” of the United States that veils its far-flung territories.

However, before empire could be hidden, it first had to be assembled. In its early era of colonial expansion, the United States was concerned less with hiding its colonial possessions than with reconciling its contradictions. While claiming to be “The Land of the Free” where British colonial rule was successfully challenged, the United States simultaneously asserted its “manifest destiny” as the site of territorial expansion. However, the affective tensions of asserting freedom, empire, progress, liberty, and expansion atop coerced labor, colonial warfare, and native genocide were not easily reconciled.

US political leaders were thus caught in a white supremacist liberal double bind: on the one hand, manifest destiny empowered them with a mission, nay a duty, to expand and join the ranks of imperial Europe. But the nation’s stated principles of equality and anti-imperialism made it difficult to justify the incorporation of new territories without offering them entrance into the union of states. As a result, expansion into places like Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Philippines brought up thorny questions about the character and purity of the nation. Incorporating societies of “alien races” ran counter to the racist thinking of the time, which was focused on eugenics and ideas of racial purity. At the same time, acquiring these territories *without* incorporating them politically ran contrary to the liberal democratic principles of their new nation.

Double binds are typically thought of as moments of impasse, but that is not always the case. Aporetic moments can also be generative. In this instance, a new legal category was invented: that of the “unincorporated territories.” This would distinguish settlements like Arizona, New Mexico, and Oklahoma, which were *incorporated* but not yet admitted as states because they were still in the process of settlement, from sites that were *un-incorporated* and thus not intended for annexation. The latter were said to “*belong to but not be a part of*” the United States. They were described as “*foreign, in the domestic sense*” and placed in a legal category of their own—unfit for either citizenship or sovereignty.

In Puerto Rico in 1952, the status locally referred to as the “ELA” (an acronym for *Estado Libre Asociado*) was developed as a way of meeting the rising calls for self-determination around the globe. This status was glossed in English as “commonwealth”: an empty phrase that simultaneously evoked formulas of statehood, independence, and dominion. The English translation of *Estado Libre Asociado* similarly evoked a multiplicity of forms by suggesting that Puerto Rico would now be Free, a State, and Associated—when in fact it was none of the above. The slippery semantics of the ELA were a purposeful attempt at appeasing the various claims from local residents for independence, supported by a large constituency at the time, while also appealing to those who favored statehood, a formula which was locally growing in support even as Congress remained firmly opposed to the prospect.

At the moment of its founding, the ELA was described as an agreement “in the nature of a compact”—a legal euphemism that sought to mask the fact that it was *not* an agreement between two equal parties, or even a binding piece of legislation. The language of the Public Law 600 was so vague that political

scientist Peter Fliess wrote at the time: “Even if it were binding, one still would not know *what* was binding.”²

Luis Muñoz Marín, the main proponent of the commonwealth and Puerto Rico’s first locally elected governor, assured Puerto Ricans that this new status would put a definitive end to “all traces of colonialism” and grant freedom, dignity, equality, and a permanent union with the United States. Nevertheless, within Washington the bill’s sponsors assured Congress that the law would leave the relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States intact; Muñoz Marín himself testified in a Senate committee hearing that “if the people of Puerto Rico should go crazy, Congress can always legislate again.”³

The main outcome of the slippery and ambiguous ELA was thus a symbolic one, though it did allow the United States to successfully petition the United Nations to remove Puerto Rico from the list of non-self-governing societies—thus freeing the US from submitting routine reports on its political conditions. The symbolism of the date chosen for the ELA’s signing, July 25—the same day as the US Navy’s landing on Puerto Rico’s southern coast in 1898—further served to cloak Puerto Rico’s colonial status while inadvertently creating a palimpsest.

Although often viewed as a unique relationship, the formation of the ELA was part of a larger process of political experimentation following the end of the Second World War. Around the same time of the establishment of the ELA, both the Dutch and French Antilles were engaging in similar forms of non-sovereign incorporation to their metropolises, while in the British Caribbean the West Indies Federation and later the Commonwealth of Nations were taking shape. Meanwhile, in what became independent nations, forms of decolonization were being forged that allowed for “flag independence” while severely

limiting economic and other forms of sovereignty.

During the mid-twentieth century, residents of *both* independent nations and of the many commonwealths, departments, and other postcolonial experiments in the Caribbean were offered the promise of a bright postcolonial future by both local political elites and former imperial powers. Throughout the region, modernism, development, and economic growth appeared to beckon on the postcolonial horizon. In the first decades following the formation of the ELA, Puerto Rico did experience rapid industrialization and economic progress, due in great part to the postwar New Deal policies and tax incentives that lured American manufacturing to the island. These results were celebrated as exemplars of US-led capitalist development, and Puerto Rico was showcased as an alternative to the left-wing politics in other parts of the region. A 1970s promotional film for Puerto Rico went so far as to describe the territory as “Progress Island” and represent it as a site of rapid development and unstoppable growth.⁴ However, the main beneficiaries of these policies were not Puerto Rican residents but rather American companies that reaped profits, tax breaks, and a captive market for their products.

As in other parts of the Caribbean, the promises of decolonization in Puerto Rico soon began to fade. As early as the 1970s—as the global economy experienced significant shocks due to rising oil prices—it was already becoming clear that development via foreign investment was not leading to sustainable growth. By the 1990s, when the Clinton administration removed the tax incentives that had once lured manufacturing industries to the island, Puerto Rico’s economy began a historic downturn. As a result, local administrations turned to heavy borrowing—with direct assistance from Wall Street—to compensate for and mask a deflated economic base.

By 2015, Puerto Rico’s governor had declared that

the territory was at risk of descending into what economists describe as a “financial death spiral.”✘ For many, this was just a confirmation of the looming sense of doom that had already presided over the society for decades. Following the governor’s declaration that Puerto Rico’s debt was “unpayable,” the federal government denied the island the right to declare bankruptcy. Instead, the government passed what is known as the PROMESA law (Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act), which allowed for the imposition of a undemocratically appointed fiscal control board to manage the island’s finances in what for many represented a return to a previous era of overt colonial rule.

Our colonial status, long adorned by euphemisms and legal sleights of hand, was suddenly and violently asserted by the federal government as it became clear that we had no ability to negotiate the terms of our foreclosure. Caught in a political limbo with neither the protections of a state nor the fiscal sovereignty of a nation, we found ourselves unable to define the nature of our debts, the severity of our austerity, or the limits of our endurance.

When President Trump arrived in Puerto Rico hurling paper towels in lieu of emergency assistance, many in the United States were scandalized. But in Puerto Rico, Trump’s spectacle was simply an unvarnished version of the state violence that has long tied us to the nation. His tweets and stunts are but an extension of how Congress has long treated federal programs as colonial benevolence rather than a national responsibility.

In Puerto Rico some have speculated that COVID-19 might become the United States’ “Maria moment”: the point at which residents discover that they live in a “failed state” with gutted infrastructure, inefficient state agencies, and a populace that emerged from the 2008 economic crisis with stark divisions between those who can live through a hurricane, an earthquake, or a pandemic, and those who cannot.⁵

This might also be the moment in which Americans discover that the future is a cancelled promise. Puerto Ricans, and many others across the globe, long realized that climate change, neoliberal austerity politics, the dismantling of social safety nets, and unsustainable global capitalism were heralding a troubling future. Long before Maria, young people in Puerto Rico were grappling with bleak prospects of even finding employment, much less achieving a better standard of living than their parents. It is thus with great irony that we view a headline from the *Wall Street Journal* lamenting the state of millennial graduates from top universities in the United States who, due to the COVID crisis, are now said to be “walking into a hurricane.”⁶

This feeling of *déjà vu* is not exclusive to Puerto Rico. Within the United States itself, what is for some a sudden crisis is for others simply the extension of an already existing state of insecurity. While some only begin to discover a negligent government capable of putting their lives at risk, residents of Flint, Michigan, enter the pandemic on the sixth anniversary of their still-unresolved water crisis. As controversy swirls around the nature of a newly revalued “state sovereignty,” indigenous communities wrestle with their decimated ability to manage their own affairs and care for their own communities. And while some discover the limits of federalism, others have long known that the US is a federated empire structured precisely to ensure an unequal distribution of rights.

The truth is that the pandemic is also a disaster in the broad sense: a sudden catastrophic event but also a revelation of failures, an episode that exasperates already existing inequalities, and a moment of reckoning. Many across the globe are currently struggling with feelings of collective mourning, grief for the loss of loved ones, for the sacrifice of strangers, for vanished personal goals, projects, and plans for the future. For some this is experienced as a sudden crisis, but for others it is yet another

chapter in a larger narrative arc of shock, trauma, and forced endurance.

However, we must be careful to not romanticize this knowing *déjà vu* through well-worn tropes of resilience that reduce the harm of repetitive trauma, the slow wear and tear produced by structural violence, and the risks that come with being deemed both “essential” and expendable. Indeed, it is partly their overrepresentation as essential workers in industries such as healthcare, sanitation, and the food service industry that has placed African Americans, Latinos, and other minority groups at greater risk of exposure to COVID-19. But it is their already constituted vulnerability that makes this exposure much more deadly.

In the context of Puerto Rico, the COVID crisis has been depicted in memes and other popular representations as simply the latest “season” of a long-running drama that has featured hurricanes, earthquakes, mass uprisings against government corruption, and years of austerity measures and colonial governance. Yet the way the pandemic is experienced in this space of catastrophic sedimentation might offer some lessons to a world that now collectively faces a post-disaster future.

It is telling that in the United States there have been two kinds of protest movements in the wake of COVID-19. On the one hand there are protestors who long for a return to “normal” and resent how the lockdown has restricted their individual “freedoms.” On the other hand there have been those supporting rent strikes, demanding greater social assistance, and requesting more protective gear for essential workers, signaling how both the risks of the virus and the burdens of the lockdown are unfairly distributed.

The very same day that armed protestors stormed the Michigan capital with loaded weapons, activists in Puerto Rico carried out a “caravan for life” demanding increased testing, more

government accountability, and greater social assistance for those struggling with food insecurity, domestic violence, and police brutality during the lockdown. Much of this work has been carried out by feminist and LGBTQ activists who have also been using the lockdown as a time in which to educate residents about the rise of gender and transphobic violence, to denounce predators, and to seek justice for the victims of hate crimes.

While some seek to narrowly circumscribe lockdown politics into a false debate between social and financial health or the limits of individual versus collective rights, Puerto Rican activists are questioning the very terms of these debates. Across communities for which COVID-19 has arrived with *déjà vu*, demonstrators emphasize how gender violence, poverty, food scarcity, colonialism, racism, and austerity were already threatening community health, long before the arrival of the novel virus.

These communities are also forging new ways of thinking about state obligation by pushing back on the scripts of coerced resilience that have for so long placed an uneven burden of care on individuals. Rather than simply accepting that citizens must work to “flatten the curve,” these communities are also calling upon the government to “raise the bar” and provide an infrastructure and social safety net that can protect us from future pandemics, disasters, and the ordinary crisis of pervasive health and wealth disparity.

At present Puerto Ricans, like many others, are being precipitously ushered out of lockdown even as rates of COVID-19 continue to climb. This is not because the state has taken the necessary public health measures; in fact Puerto Rico remains dead last in terms of testing rates across the United States and its territories. Contact tracing has yet to be properly implemented and even basic statistical modeling and information sharing have failed. However, as in other parts of the world, business

owners are exerting pressure to get back to business, suggesting that employers are the best equipped to ensure the health and safety of their workers—all while Washington debates immunity legislation to protect employers from litigation if they fail to do so.

The debates over how to reopen the economy unfold as earthquakes continue to shake the island, and hurricane season threatens once again. Indeed, the greatest concern for many here is not simply how to overcome COVID-19 in order to return to a comforting normality but rather how the COVID crisis will worsen preexisting disasters and further hinder our ability to respond to those yet to come.

¹ Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2019).

² Peter J. Fliess, “Puerto Rico’s Political Status under Its New Constitution,” *Western Political Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (December 1952): 635–656.

³ Juan R. Torruella, “Why Puerto Rico Does Not Need Further Experimentation with Its Future: A Reply to the Notion of ‘Territorial Federalism,’” *Harvard Law Review Forum* 131, no. 3 (January 2018): 79.

⁴ “1970s Puerto Rico USA Promotional Film ‘Progress Island USA’ San Juan 83994,” uploaded by Periscope Film, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdTQGNZMYPI>.

⁵ George Packer, “We Are Living in a Failed State,” *Atlantic*, June 2020.

⁶ “Class of 2020 Job Seekers May Be ‘Walking Into a Hurricane,’” *Wall Street Journal*, April 29, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/video/class-of-2020-job-seekers-may-be-walking-into-a-hurricane/D54FC13E-FE9A-4C00-860C-E359C7541085.html>.

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