



# SAN JUAN AND PHILADELPHIA\_ IN COMMON, THERE IS NO WEALTH

CHRONICLE OF THE SECOND HALF OF 2020

*By* Joel Cintrón Arbasetti

**1**

***To Flee from Gas and Fly Mid-Pandemic***

*June 1, 2020*

The crowd clambers up a slope on the side of the highway. They are fleeing from tear gas thrown by the police. A cloud of asphyxiating, stinging smoke envelops them. They flee, but the cops, with their protective gear and gas masks, keeps throwing hot cartridges. Some people are carrying their bikes, on their shoulders, up this hill toward a cement wall full of creepers and a steel fence they will also have to scale. A helicopter hovers. An officer arrests a woman with a red shirt as if she were a rag doll, dragging her down toward the highway to make the arrest. Those who struggle up the incline are wearing their facemasks. There is audible crying. Amidst the collective, unintelligible murmur, the only phrase that rings out loud and clear is, “I can’t breathe.” It can be heard over and over. But in this particular instant, in

contrast to the march, the phrase is no longer a chant. Those who are climbing, can't breathe.

Signs, bicycles, umbrellas, sneakers, gloves, water bottles, and backpacks are strewn across the weeds.

Thus, ended the third consecutive day of protests in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, following the May 25 assassination of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, at the hands of a white police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Today, a sunny June 1, more than a thousand protesters were marching on Philadelphia's streets. A little before 5:00 pm, a section of the march walked onto Interstate Highway 676, close to Center City. They stopped traffic. After a while, the police arrived and began shooting tear gas canisters. Protesters tried fleeing by climbing up this rugged incline. But it seems the police strategy was to teach them a lesson for protesting, hoping this would dissuade them from prolonging the marches. The preceding days were intense. Patrol cars were set on fire in the center of the same city where the U.S. Constitution was signed.

I observe the slope scene on my laptop; it's already nighttime, almost 10, and I'm lying on my bed, on the second floor of a reinforced concrete house I rent in the municipality of San Juan, Puerto Rico's capital city, which is populated by more than three hundred thousand people. Drifting through the aluminum sheet window, I can hear the neighborhood's soundscape to my left: Santurce, sub-neighborhood Hipódromo, Aibonito Street, bordering on the Barriada Figueroa, La Colectora. The soundscape: the explosive motors of ramshackle trucks. Some carry imported goods down the highway. These goods come

out of San Juan's port. Standing on my balcony, from afar, I see the port's giant crane arms lifting boxcars to a flank of the "John F. Kennedy Expressway," a pestilent route that connects San Juan to the Cataño, Bayamón, and Guaynabo: part of San Juan's Metropolitan Area ("Área Metropolitana de San Juan"), home to more than two million of the island's three million inhabitants. This port defines an essential part of what makes up the "Commonwealth" in Puerto Rico: the "common" comes down to a corporate conglomerate that controls the entry and exit of goods. According to the Cabotage Law, the cargo ships that arrive at the island's ports have to be crewed, flagged, owned, and built "primarily" by the United States. The same regulation applies to states, but Puerto Rico is not a state. Nor is it an independent country, but rather a "Commonwealth." The "Commonwealth of Puerto Rico," unlike Virginia or Pennsylvania, does not translate into Spanish as "Commonwealth of Nations, but "Estado Libre Asociado" or "Free Associated State," which, to make a long story short, can be translated as "Colony." Under the capitalist economic regime that dominates us, the literal translation, "Common-wealth," would also be inadequate.

The most distant but persistent sound belongs to the planes that descend into Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport. When I am in the air, and we are commencing our descent onto the island, from my window seat, I always find my street. My reference points include a grey square that is a giant Walmart near the Parada 18 in Santurce and a white circle that is an old (probably empty) water reserve. Despite the noise, and given that it is the most violent neighborhood in the second most violent capital in Latin America and the Caribbean (after Caracas), with 53.5 homicides for every 100,000 inhabitants (in 2019 there were 172 violent deaths in San Juan, 606 in the whole island), in this sector,

the sub-neighborhood Hipódromo, one breathes a homey air; a bucolic environment that at night is bathed in neon lights pulsing from billboards almost a mile away. The sound of the truck motors that speed down the highway sometimes gets tangled with gunshots or the gunshots get tangled with the motors, until it becomes clear what we are hearing is an automatic weapon. The noise of police sirens or ambulances or firetrucks is not as constant as that of weapons or shaky motors.

As I watch the police brutality video on that June day, from my room in Santurce, I recall the bitter taste of tear gas from the strikes at the University of Puerto Rico against the 2010 and 2011 tuition hikes and the May 1 protests against the Financial Oversight and Management Board imposed by the U.S. Congress. I remember the Summer of 2019, when massive protests and violent confrontations with the police made then-governor Ricardo Rosselló resign; the desperation of a giant mouthful that seeks breath but only succeeds in swallowing more gas that continues penetrating deeper still into one's lungs. The drowning.

I saw the beginning of the Summer 2019 protests from the opposition direction, staring at my laptop on the second floor of a house in Kensington, North Philly. I've spent a year coming and going between the two cities, in order to see my partner, Heather. Today, June 1, at 9:42 am, I bought another ticket to that city, Philadelphia.

In a big U.S. city (Philadelphia is the sixth largest city and the and the poorest of these six), one easily forgets the rest of the state. I've always gone to Philadelphia, never Pennsylvania, much less the "Commonwealth of Pennsylvania." Nor do I live in the "Commonwealth of Puerto Rico," which is impossible to visit

because it doesn't exist. What does exist is the nonincorporated territory, administered by the same two parties belonging to the technocratic elites since 1948 and subject to the mandate of the United States Congress.

My flight to Philadelphia is Delta 357. It leaves on June 4, at 3:40 pm. It makes a stop in Atlanta at 7:20. I arrive in Philadelphia at 10:30 on Delta 2116. I'm supposed to return, but I never bought a return ticket.

I'm going to take a plane mid-pandemic.

I will quarantine myself in a West Philadelphia church.

## **2**

### ***Churches for Gentrification***

*June 4*

I arrived in Philadelphia on a rainy night. We crossed the street running up to the red church door that opened with a four-digit security code. The church exterior is built with grey brick, in a Victorian style, designed by the architect Frank Furnes and built in 1900 on 4700 Kingsessing Avenue. In 2017, it was converted into a complex that houses 21 apartments. The lent studio where we quarantined has a spiral staircase shaped like a conch that leads up to a mezzanine containing a bathroom and a bed. The window frames are concave with a stained-glass tip. The brick columns are adorned with chapter. Is this another example of gentrification or a display of historical preservation? The church was set to be demolished in 2014, but it was saved with the aim of converting it a housing complex. Each studio rents for \$1200 monthly. Does preservation necessarily lead to gentrification? Is

there another alternative? In Spring Garden, an area much closer to downtown Philadelphia, the neighborhood where Edgar Allan Poe lived and that later began Philly’s first Boricua barrio in the ‘50s, there was a church. It was called La Milagrosa, and it was a meeting place for the Latinx community. Now it is an expensive condo building. After riots and massive arrests, the Boricuas were expelled from Spring Garden towards the Northeast, to zones such as Hunting Park, Kensington, and Fairhill—the current Boricua barrio with a growing Dominican population (as the saying goes, “Puerto Rico and the Dominica Republic, two wings of the same bird.”) Philadelphia is the second city with the largest Puerto Rican population outside New York. From the ‘50s to today, the Boricua community—along with the other non-rich, non-white communities—still faces the threat of displacement posed by gentrification.

### 3

#### ***Earthquakes: Welcoming a Poet***

In 2018, the city of Philadelphia named the Puerto Rican poet Raquel Salas Rivera as its Poet Laureate, in other words, the city’s poetry ambassador. Raquel lived out their childhood years in the U.S. and, at the age of 14, moved to Puerto Rico. At 26, he headed to Philadelphia to complete a PhD in Comparative Literature and Literary Theory at the University of Pennsylvania. He published five poetry books in Spanish, some with self-translations into English. He is an editor and a translator.

On December 8, 2019, after eight years in Philadelphia, at the age of 34, Salas Rivera returned to San Juan, Puerto Rico. He received the 2020 New Year with the island in his heart. And the New Year and his island received him with shaking arms: earthquakes in

the Southern and poorest half of the island, a seismic sequence that reached a climax on January 7, the day after Three Kings Day. That morning, a little before sunrise, the earthquake reached a scale of 6.4 and was felt throughout all of Puerto Rico. There was an island-wide blackout. The aftershocks continued for months and still continue to this day. Hundreds of people in the south lost their homes. Thousands returned to refugee camps and darkness, reminiscent of hurricanes Irma and María that hit Puerto Rico in September 2017. Irma only grazed us, but María entered the island as a category 5 hurricane. There were thousands of deaths and the government tried to hide them.

The hurricane and the earthquakes crowned more than a decade of economic depression caused by a global capitalist crisis; the neoliberal politics adopted by the two parties that share power in Puerto Rico; the colonial politics of the U.S. Congress; and the economic interests that mutated from military and agrarian interests; and mono-cultivation of the land. This went hand in hand with cheap industrial works and their tax exemptions; mass migration to the U.S.; the pharmaceutical plantation; experimental transgenic companies; multinationals for mass consumption; government bonds emitted with great gains for banks and financial entities; and, later on, the debt.

In 2014, Puerto Rico declared bankruptcy with more than \$70 thousand million in debt. In 2016, the government entered a debt restructuring process that would take place via the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA). This law, signed during the Barack Obama administration, imposed a Fiscal Control Board that was placed in charge of government finances. It is an organism similar to the Pennsylvania Intergovernmental Cooperation Authority (PICA), which

supervises finances of the city of Philadelphia, but with the much greater power to rule over a whole country, one that can't vote for the legislative body that selected the seven members who make up "la Junta" (FCB). While the country goes through what has been described as the largest crash in the history of the U.S. municipal bonds market, dozens of investment firms, insurance companies, and venture capitalists battle it out in court to collect an odious debt that, if properly audited, would most probably be declared illegal. In this recent interval of successive crises, emergencies, and states of exception that define the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the government's only economic plan has been to market the island as a fiscal paradise of tax exemptions for the rich, millionaires, administrators of investment firms—many of them fraudulent—, and cryptocurrency speculators. Thus, along with mass migration, many millionaires or aspiring millionaires arrive on the island, in what could be called tax-exemption tourism.

But, sometimes, there is the arrival (or return) of poets.

[let's say you go to philadelphia  
to look for the coats much needed  
by the abuelas, the angelías, the río maunabo, etc.  
you work hard, look for a license with a renewed address,  
buy three four five hundred coats,  
go to the local branch and say  
*here they are.*  
*i would like to pay that debt.*  
*but without looking up they answer*  
*here in philly we don't accept coats.]*

\*Fragment of "'coats are not exchanged for coats'" from *lo terciario/the tertiary* by Raquel Salas Rivera.



## 4

### ***The Monster That Eats Flags***

*June 6*

On June 6, protesters marched from the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA) to City Hall, paralyzing Philadelphia's Center City. According to Billy Penn, it was the largest march for social justice the city had seen. That day, it was 88 degrees out and a helicopter flew through the gray sky above our heads as we parked on Fraternity Street, Mantua Hood, and then proceeded on foot toward the Museum steps. These steps, which Silvester Stallone raced up as Rocky Balboa, are visited by dozens of tourists daily, even in the midst of a pandemic. That day, they were packed with hundreds of people protesting against police brutality. We reached City Hall, built in the Second Empire architectural style, whose giant tower is crowned by William Penn, Philadelphia's founder. In the wake of the toppling of colonial statues throughout the U.S., this would be the highest aspiration, to topple William Penn, the Quaker slave-owning colonizer. Although it may still seem impossible, those days I overheard evening conversations, amidst the flies of summer, in front of working-class Kingston homes, about the best method of accomplishing such a mission. Someone suggested a giant crane and I suggested the services of Puerto Rican Tito Kayak, who among his many accomplishments, once climbed and planted a Puerto Rican flag on the Statue of Liberty in order to denounce the island's colonial status.

At an intersection near the Museum, there waited a military vehicle whose carrier was packed with soldiers, protected from the sun by a sand-colored canvas cloth, wearing sunglasses and surrounded by boxes full of water bottles. Other soldiers walked

down the street carrying M4 carbines, an automatic assault rifle, crossing in front of citizens that marched to protest social injustice and the police state, demanding the defunding of the police under the Black Lives Matter slogan. Some soldiers blocked a street while others ate Fudge Pops, protected by fusil, helmet, camouflaged bullet-proof vest, and good-natured smiles that seemed to say they didn't want to be there. But there they were. And the whole world knows all it takes is an order for them to drop the ice-cream and grab the riffle.

Using the Spring Garden bridge, we crossed the Schuylkill River until we reached the Museum. On our way, scattered across the grass, we saw pieces of cardboard, paintbrushes, tempera, and small plastic cups: materials for sign-making. I wanted to make one that read, "Looting is protest." I decided to take a lighter route in order to avoid any possible discussions and instead wrote, "Corporations are looters." Heather wrote the phrase, "Austerity is state violence." When we almost finished painting, a boy of three or four came up to us and showed us his sign. His father stood behind him wearing a surgical mask, and his mother stood much further back wearing a surgical mask and carrying a baby in her arms. Both let the boy move freely, as if he were alone. Showing us the sign with great pride—his piece of painted cardboard that was a tumult of red brushstrokes, an abstract protest, or a premonition—he explained its meaning in English and in detail. The red tumult was the ending of a story he and only he understood, and thus, we stood before a revelation. All that red was explicable: a monster, we have no idea what kind, started eating flags (we also don't know what kind, but let's assume they are American), and the monster ate so many, I mean so many flags, that he ended up vomiting them all. And that was the red: the vomit of a flag-eating monster. His small index finger

pointed at the strokes, as he explained that the sign was product of his current state of human development: “I don’t know how to form letters, but I feel like I know the numbers.”

The father came closer, read Heather’s sign and said that now he’d have to find a way to explain to his son the meaning of “austerity.” When it is an everyday occurrence, austerity is something so vulgar that it almost doesn’t need an explanation. But, undoubtedly, it’s a difficult concept for someone who doesn’t have to live it. Still, I was surprised that, at such a young age, the boy understood that flags, along with statues, borders, and police stations, were something to be abolished, gobbled up, and vomited. There goes someone with an upside-down U.S. flag, but that isn’t really a flag, it’s an anti-flag. Another flag that’s worth it, is a flag on fire. In the city’s center, in front of City Hall, when the protest felt truly massive, I saw another flag (or anti-flag) I’m meant to identify with: the Puerto Rican flag dressed in black.

#### 4

### ***Trump Visits Philadelphia***

*September 15*

On Tuesday, September 15, at 5:00 pm, I turned off on 6abc Action News and left the apartment after watching Air Force One land in Philadelphia International Airport. I began walking toward the intersection of 46th and Walnut Street, West Philly, heading toward the same destination as Trump, who sped there in his vehicle and security contingent: the National Constitution Center, on the other side of the Schuylkill River. It was an hour-and-17-minute walk towards downtown Philly. In a car, it would take Trump less than 15 minutes. His visit was part of the 2020 presidential campaign and the electoral battle for Pennsylvania, a

decisive state in the upcoming elections. Trump would take part in a “Town Hall Event,” a presentation targeting undecided voters. There had been a call for a protest right in front of the building.

The street numbers in West Philadelphia count down toward the east. From 46th to 10th, nothing seems to indicate that Trump would be in the city today, his first visit after a summer packed with street protests and confrontations with the police. On the Walnut Street’s sidewalks, in front of the Chinese Christian Church—next to the Association Islamic Charitable Projects—they pass, as they do every afternoon: joggers, dog walkers, the stuttering woman who asks passerby for change, the UPS worker with his brown uniform. Further down, the students with their UPENN (University of Pennsylvania) shirts, the motorcycle crews that are running red lights and doing wheelies, the cars playing trap at full-volume, the high-rises that can be seen in the skyline behind the Schuylkill, September’s good weather, the afternoon drifting in on a few clouds, and people and cars forming Center City traffic.

Starting at 9th and Arch, I started to see a noticeable increase in police presence and blocked streets. The National Constitution Center was on Arch between 6th and 5th. The protestors took up the middle of the street in front of the Independence National Historical Park Visitor Center. Behind a table, a group of activists gave out stickers that read Trump/Pence OUT NOW RefuseFacism.org #OutNow! A paper mâché Trump marionette with devil horns and a Bible made its way down Arch. One sign said: Fuck Off Trump. Large speakers played music in the space between speeches: Janelle Monae, “I Like That”; Marvin Gaye, “What’s Going On”; dancers improvising; Bob Marley, “O’Clock Roadblock”; Frank Ocean, “Sweet Life”; Curtis Mayfield, “Back

to Living Again”; Shop Boyz, “Party Like a Rockstar.” A pantless woman with a Trump mask and a blazer performed mid-crowd. A man carried a piece of cardboard and a megaphone, offering JESUS OR HELLFIRE to the protestors, fully protected by a line of cops.

## 5

### ***Proud Boys in West Philly***

*September 19*

In September, a flyer started appearing all over West Philadelphia light posts and walls that read:

***PROUD BOY FASCISTS ARE COMING  
DEFEND  
WEST PHILADELPHIA***

Proud boys are a fraternal order of neo-fascists who glorify white supremacy, patriarchy, and authoritarian leaders like Trump. They are a violent far right organization and they are targeting our neighborhood for a Saturday rally in “the belly of the beast.” Stand together with your neighbors to drown them out, shut them down and kick them out!

***THIS SATURDAY: SEPTEMBER 19 CLARK PARK***

***12:00 PM***

***bring noisemakers, shields, signs  
and all of your friends & comrades***

The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) identifies the Proud Boys as a “general hate group.” The SPLC is a non-profit organization that monitors hate and extremist groups throughout the U.S. and exposes their activities. In 2019, this organization

identified 940 hate groups throughout the country. Its Hate Map shows 36 in Pennsylvania. Philadelphia has the Be Active Front USA, described as Skinheads, various groups classified as Black separatists, and the Proud Boys. The group was founded during the 2016 elections by VICE Media cofounder, Gavin McInnes. It is a self-described “fraternal group” of “western chauvinists” with an agenda to fight against political correctness and “white guilt.”

Clark Park is an important gathering place in West Philadelphia. It’s a green area populated by trees, benches and tables. People picnic on the grass and play sports or instruments. There is usually a farmer’s market on Saturdays. West Philly is known to be a diverse neighborhood that includes the following racial, ethnic, and political groupings: white, Black, Indian, Bangladeshi, Mexican, Vietnamese, Ethiopian, a large queer community, anarchists and anti-fascists. On Saturday, September 19, around noon (the day the Proud Boys were supposed to march), there was already a great deal of movement at the park. It was more packed than usual. Someone sold pizza under a tent, a girl gave out an anti-fascist newsletter. An older gentleman gave out flyers with a touch of nostalgia that filtered through his small, round glasses and came off as a spark of joy. What makes this man so content, this white activist over seventy that hands out a sheet of paper with the Socialist Resurgence logo?

I take one and read the first paragraph: *Fascists thugs like Proud Boys, militias, and Nazis are mobilizing, emboldened by Trump’s racist rhetoric and often helped by police. From Charlottesville to Portland they are on the march.*

I don’t know if the man was remembering the older days of activism when clearly-formed enemy groups gave a more

concrete sense of a political struggle that mostly happened on the battlefield of abstract language; but, if this was the case, shouldn't he instead be upset or sad that he still has to fight these fascist groups? Or can we attribute his smile and happiness to the number of people who have shown up to reject fascism? The park is full. According to *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, there are more than 500 people here. A notable group dressed all in black, with black umbrellas, backpacks and shields, has gathered in one of the park's two main sections. It is a black bloc, the self-proclaimed vanguard of the riots. Its members stand at the frontlines, confronting the police during protests. The umbrellas are useful in hiding its members from the camera's lens. Yet, no matter much they've covered, it is evident that they are mostly young, white, and 20-something.

The atmosphere in the park, more than that of a protest or counter-protest, feels like that of a family outing. People are walking their dogs, babies in carriages take sunbaths, and someone is dressed as Gritty, the official mascot of the Philadelphia Flyers, wearing a black shirt with an anti-fascist symbol: a circle and three arrows. There is a sound system, people give speeches, and only one skirmish takes place. Suddenly, a faction of black bloc starts running toward a provocateur that apparently has a weapon. This open field stampede across the green grass bowl in the middle of the park, amidst slides and jungle gyms, of a group dressed in all black, with covered faces, gloves, and backpacks, is a scene at once infantile and medieval. The group chases the fascist to his car and breaks in the windows. On a nearby street, leans a bicycle police contingent. Amongst those gathered, it's easy to identify the detectives with their jackets, their badges, and their pistol handles poking out of their belts.

One of the black bloc members becomes upset that I'm taking photos. That's how I find out what the umbrellas are for. They explain how they can be identified even when covered. They have a particular voice; I wonder if they are disguising it for protection. I comment that their group needs some more color. They say that isn't true, that not everyone in the group is white, and that those are just lies the liberal press perpetuates to discredit them. They tell me they have been to Puerto Rico, went to Naguabo, and mention a supposed Taíno god I've never heard of. Before taking leave, they ask me my name. After answering, I ask theirs and they say: "Not this time, but I'll find you again."

The Proud Boys never show up. Later, on the social media, they claim the march was a staged event created to expose Left radicals. One week later, sixty self-proclaimed Proud Boys march through Center City.

## 6

### ***The Assassination of Walter Wallace Jr.***

*October 27*

The ceaseless drone of police helicopters has been filling West Philly homes all morning, as they restlessly circle the area.

Yesterday afternoon, a white cop murdered Walter Wallace Jr. on the 6100 block of Locust Street, a half-hour walk from where I live. As evening fell, dozens of people congregated between 54 and 55 on Pine St., in front of the 18th precinct. Wallace was a Black, 27-year-old mentally ill resident. He had a knife in his hand when the police arrived and was shot more than ten times, in front of his home, his mother and their neighbors. The scene was caught on a cellphone video and later posted on social media.



That night, I left the apartment at 10:21 and headed by bicycle towards the protest. There were light showers and some fog. When I arrived, I tried to penetrate the crowd, but in that very moment, a group of protesters came running toward me, zigzagging between parked cars. I couldn't see what was happening up ahead, but I could tell that there was a multitude and, from what I could gather on Instagram, it faced a row of cops.

After a while, a group of teenagers (between 16 and 19 years old), from the surrounding West Philly community, arrived carrying a box full of big empty bottles, which they immediately began launching. More cops, on foot and on bike, started appearing from lateral streets. The teens easily dispersed the police by walking toward them, screaming, "Get the fuck out of here!" This was eventually followed by the arrival of a riot squad that formed an immovable line, once again blocking the street. I tuned onto a website that allows one to listen in on police radios. I searched for the Southwest police zone and heard there had been disturbances on the corner of 52nd and Market St. I grabbed my bike and headed over. There was a giant dumpster on fire in the middle of the street, police cars with shattered windows, broken storefronts, open warehouses, people carrying boxes full of new sneakers. The most powerful image delivered that night, showed a vandalized cop car parked in front of a McDonalds. As the night progressed, the car eventually caught fire and finally exploded. This was a celebration, a release that will not stop police brutality. The next night, two cops stood right there, in front of that same McDonalds that, like other area businesses, met the day with boarded up windows, as if this expecting a hurricane. This time, the protests were quickly contained, dispersed by the toxic mist of the new election cycle.

## 7

### **Expecting Chaos**

*November 2*

One day before the election, the sun began setting at 5:25, with a temperature of 45 degrees and a mostly clear sky. The boarded-up businesses kept reminding me of hurricane season storm shutters in Puerto Rico. It doesn't help that people, in their homes, are discussing the possibility of preventative shopping, food storage, stockpiling. But no hurricane is on its way, just the elections; just Trump giving indications that he's getting ready for a "coup"; just the deployment of the Pennsylvania National Guard to City Hall, spurred by a fear of riots.

## 8

### **A Bitter Victory**

*November 7*

It's 11:50 am. Through my window, I can hear screams, car alarms, and the beating of kitchen pots. Today people celebrate the virtual victory of U.S. presidential candidate Joseph Biden. I prefer to think that the celebration is a response to Donald Trump's defeat, in a city where the vote has been decisive. Meanwhile, in Puerto Rico, parallel elections are taking place. Pedro Pierluisi is the projected winner, a candidate belonging to the same political party as Ricardo Rosselló, the ex-governor dethroned by massive protests in summer of 2019. In San Juan, there is a tight mayoral race between the right-wing candidate belonging to Ricardo's party, and a "liberal" or left-leaning candidate that is part of the new party, Victoria Ciudadana. Vote counting in San Juan has been delayed by a series of irregularities: lost suitcases containing votes, which have slowly

been reappearing, and accusations that there have been duplicate votes, phantom votes, or even intimidation from the right-wing candidate's supporters, whose party remains in power.

## 9

### **“safety briefing”**

*January 20, 2021*

Another tense day. More than 20 thousand National Guard members from all states and other territories of the United States of America were deployed to attend President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration in Washington D.C. Today is Trump's last day at the White House. Certainly it will not be the last day of Trumpist fascism. On January 6, for many Latin people the Three Kings Day, a white supremacists mob of various denominations violently stormed into the United States Capitol Building protesting the alleged fraudulent presidential election.

There is fear that the violence will continue today in the inauguration of the Democrat president. Not only in D.C., but in every part of the country. The Commonwealth of Puerto Rico will be contributing to this new chapter of USA paranoia with 127 soldiers of the 92nd Military Police Brigade of the National Guard. They departed last Saturday from the Muñiz Air National Guard Base in Carolina. For Barack Obama's oath of office in 2012, 8 thousand soldiers were deployed, for Trump's in 2016, 10 thousand soldiers, and today there are 22 thousand troops deployed.

General José Reyes, of the Puerto Rico National Guard, warned the boricua soldiers that extremist groups, like the Proud Boys, could be present in the inauguration, according to a report by

Sofía Rico for the Puerto Rican news media Noticel.

“The Proud Boys group leader is Enrique Tarrio. He lives in Miami and is of Cuban descent. This group was created around 2016. Many members speak Spanish and could try to take advantage and infiltrate our troops of Puerto Rican soldiers because they speak Spanish too. They have announced that they will not be wearing the colors that usually distinguish them (black and yellow) and that they will be infiltrated among people. So, (the message) is like a ‘a safety briefing’ to our soldiers, this is the moment where you can’t trust anyone. There are different groups, but I mentioned the Proud Boys since some of their members speak Spanish”, Reyes declared.

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Capitol Building, in Harrisburg, the capital of this state with a population of more than 12 million, is totally surrounded by barricades. Extreme security measures have been taken and the FBI is on a state of alert, here and in the whole nation. In Philadelphia the police commissioner said there were no specific threats but the officers are prepared.

Today in Walnut Hill, West Philadelphia, Philadelphia, the most populated city of the Pennsylvania Commonwealth, part of the Delaware Valley and the Northeast Megalopolis, the morning was slightly cloudy. At 11 a gust of wind came in with snow. In Knockbox cafe, in the Spruce Hill area, customers are listening to the presidential inauguration on MSNBC. From a car and from the windows of a house in Locust St, near 47 Street, you can listen to the voice of Lady Gaga singing the United States anthem while the snowy gusts of wind increase in power turning Southeast. The temperature is 37 degrees and it is expected to

lower to 23 degrees at night. The weather forecast never detects the presidential changes. In the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, Caribbean tropical archipelago north of South America, slightly cloudy, 81 degrees of temperature, 127 National Guard soldiers less, and 14 new COVID-19 related deaths.

*Commonwealth* is organized and curated by Beta-Local co-directors Pablo Guardiola, Michael Linares, and nibia pastrana santiago and former co-director Sofía Gallisá Muriente; ICA at VCU Chief Curator Stephanie Smith; Noah Simblist, Chair of Painting + Printmaking at VCUarts; and Kerry Bickford, Director of Programs, Nicole Pollard, Program Coordinator and Nato Thompson, Sueyun and Gene Locks Artistic Director at Philadelphia Contemporary.

COMMONWEALTHS.ART

