



**Yarimar Bonilla and Marisol LeBrón (eds)**, *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019. ISBN: 9781642591781 (cloth); ISBN: 9781642590302 (paper); ISBN: 9781642590869 (ebook)

**Ed Morales**, *Fantasy Island: Colonialism, Exploitation, and the Betrayal of Puerto Rico*, New York: Bold Type Books, 2019. ISBN: 9781568588995 (cloth); ISBN: 9781568588988 (ebook)

*Aftershocks of Disaster* by editors Yarimar Bonilla and Marisol LeBrón and *Fantasy Island* by Ed Morales mobilize related metaphors to frame their respective interventions. For both volumes, crises and disasters conceal and reveal certain “dark truths”, as Arcadio Díaz-Quñones suggests in the preface to *Aftershocks* (p.xii). Hurricane María and the debt crisis revealed the fantasy (and falseness) of US citizenship, the enduring pains of colonialism, and the structural inequalities that condition life and death in the colony. The books under review are two of the best representations of the emergent post-María genre which relies upon the concealment/revelation metaphor to narrate contemporary Puerto Rico.

How do crises reveal/conceal truths? Who labors to make that magical transformation of “reality”? In other words, who gets to tell the story of Puerto Rico? In both volumes the labors of journalists, artists, community organizers, activists, and certainly scholars are central to the revelation of post-crisis truths. Describing and explaining the labor of revelation is the strength of these two books. In addition, both volumes provide invaluable details about the structures of concealment that for so long have hidden Puerto Rico’s colonial status to North American residents and the world. Why were the roots of Puerto Rico’s present crises and disasters concealed? Who did the concealment and why? I want to suggest that the vast field of Puerto Rican Studies – a contested intellectual terrain given the tensions between the diaspora and Puerto Rico-based scholars – is experiencing a post-traumatic intellectual impulse that is pushing

us to return to the past in order to understand the messy present. I am living that moment, just like the authors, editors, and contributors to both volumes. Given the drive by many of us to search the archives to understand the present, I don't expect to know any time soon what the full implications of this Manichean moment will be, but certainly some more truths about the ugly repercussions of empire will be revealed. What we know, though, is that a larger number of people in the archipelago and abroad are asking those and other questions and seeking answers in their communities, the archives, and within themselves. One key question that has emerged in Puerto Rico in recent years is: "am I a colonial subject?"

For Ed Morales, Puerto Rico lived a fantasy based on the promise of US citizenship, development, and unlimited access to consumer markets. The twin disasters of Hurricane María and the debt crisis, however, "revealed" what Puerto Rico "always was: a colonial satellite, a dumping ground for US manufactured goods, and a tax shelter/investment casino in a land of temptation for tourists" (p.2-3). The dominant fantasy that has usurped our imagination, Morales contends, is the "illusion of US citizenship" (p.3). Granted in 1917, Puerto Ricans have enjoyed *some* of the benefits afforded to citizens of the United States: a panoply of liberal rights that purport freedoms to individuals. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century legal technicians in the US determined that the constitution does not necessarily follow the flag. Although the US flag has waved freely across the archipelago since 1898, the US constitution is unevenly applied. The infamous Insular Cases decided that Puerto Ricans were "alien in culture" and that the newly acquired archipelago was an "unincorporated territory" – an exceptional condition that permanently blocked the path toward statehood. Instead, according to the last of these cases in 1901, *Downs v. Bidwell*, Puerto Rico "belonged to but was not part of the United States" (p.25). Thus, a colonial subject in Puerto Rico is one who since 1917 lives the fantasy of "liberal colonialism" (Bernabe 1996: 28) – a citizen that can find limited protections in the US constitution yet is largely ruled by

exceptions to it. Voting in US presidential elections, for instance, is a right denied to Puerto Ricans living in the archipelago.

A new political formation took hold of the colonial government in the 1940s. The Popular Democratic Party (PDP), an amalgam of liberal populists intent on reforming the colonial relationship, successfully expanded the fantasy (falsity) of US citizenship when in 1952 it enacted the Puerto Rican Commonwealth, or ELA (*Estado Libre Asociado*, or Free Associated State). The new status – an extension of the “unincorporated territory” clause – came with a Puerto Rican constitution, new powers to the colonial government, and new national myths. The change of status allowed the US to take Puerto Rico out of the United Nations list of colonial possessions. Puerto Rico, in the eyes of the global community, was no longer a colony. Yet, nothing had really changed. “This fantasy”, Morales reminds us, “was essential to help Puerto Ricans avoid the cognitive dissonance between their view of their cultural and national identity and their legal status as colonial subjects with second-class citizenship” (p.43).

The reformed Puerto Rico/US relationship created new economic opportunities. The relative political stability and pro-business attitude that prevailed in postwar Puerto Rico attracted many US manufacturers searching favorable tax economies to expand their wealth accumulation. Industrial investments spilled over to the local economy, even though most profits were repatriated back to the US, thus generating the fantasy of economic growth. Puerto Ricans happily compared their economic success with neighboring Caribbean islands mired in poverty, decolonial struggles, and, worse, communist experiments. “By this logic Puerto Ricans, through their ability to integrate themselves into the American project, could fuse with American exceptionalism, become part of that self-delusion, and chase the final unification ... that represent the full citizenship” of the US (p.299). The phantasmagoria of US citizenship occluded the traps setup by Prospero (Fernández Retamar 2005).

But Hurricane María revealed the secrets of the US citizenship's century-long magic trick. Christopher Gregory's chapter in *Aftershocks* underscores the role of images circulated in the media in the aftermath of María in "lifting the veil" that covered the ugly realities of Puerto Rico. In the "disastrous tropics" (Hilda Lloréns in *Aftershocks*; p.127), trees perennially shelter the landscape, hiding under the arboreal canopy structural inequalities that otherwise would lay bare. The hurricane uprooted thousands of trees and blew away the leaves from the remaining vegetation. During the leafless months after María, Puerto Ricans and photographers had an unusually clear view of the landscape, revealing not just the poverty that for decades marked the lives of millions, but also "the other side of the gaze: an 'affluent' metropolis unwilling to accept the reality of failed industrialization" (Gregory in *Aftershocks*; p.152).

The uneven response from the federal government also revealed the limits of Puerto Rico. Florida and Houston, TX faced similar disasters in the fall of 2017, yet the federal response to these two fully incorporated states paled in comparison to the Federal Emergency and Management Agency's (FEMA) response to Puerto Rico's disaster, as Sarah Molinari's excellent chapter (in *Aftershocks*) on bureaucratic red tape demonstrates. The unincorporated territory received substantially less aid, faced greater bureaucratic obstacles, and was unnecessarily and publicly shamed by Donald Trump and members of his cabinet. US liberals, animated by their anti-Trump sentiments, pleaded in favor of Puerto Rico by arguing that we deserved equal federal aid because Puerto Ricans were "our fellow Americans".

Nevertheless, as Frances Negrón-Muntaner's chapter brilliantly sketches out, the "our fellow Americans" narrative was a successful media strategy precisely because it "veiled" that "Puerto Rico is a colonial possession and its citizens colonial subjects" (p.118). In that sense, María may have revealed much to the public, but it equally concealed US imperialism to a liberal audience unwilling to accept its complicity in colonial dispossession. It was after all Obama's liberal administration that imposed the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic

Stability Act (PROMESA) and the undemocratic Fiscal Control Board that since 2016 authoritatively governs Puerto Rico to supposedly manage the debt crisis. Coupled with two US Supreme Court cases in 2016 that clarified Puerto Rico's ambivalent status, PROMESA "reasserted the United States' plenary, or complete, power over the island and reinscribed the face of US colonialism in Puerto Rico" (Mónica Jiménez in *Aftershocks*; p.263). That the media obviated these decisions in its portrayal of Puerto Ricans as "our fellow Americans", further demonstrates the essential role of concealment in the perpetuation of US colonial power.

Throughout both volumes, readers get a sense that Hurricane María constituted a break or rupture from US hegemony over the "dark truths" of colonialism. In the afterword to *Aftershocks of Disaster*, Nelson Maldonado-Torres draws an important distinction between crisis, disaster, and catastrophe. Crisis refers to a "state of affairs that requires a decision because it is no longer stable" (p.333). In a crisis, action is required not just to solve the instability, but also to rescue part of the past. When we speak of the debt crisis, for example, action is required to solve it – PROMESA and the Fiscal Control Board are direct results of that need – yet the aim is to return to past relationships whereby Puerto Rico had access to capital markets, freely borrowed, and bond issuers and holders enjoyed a certain stability that no longer exist. In a disaster, on the other hand, a "sense of devastation and hopelessness" takes over because not one single decision will reverse course (p.334). It is as if in a disaster, "a decision has already been taken and the outcome revealed", thus the disorienting feeling of hopelessness that has reigned over the entire process of debt restructuring led by the Fiscal Control Board. It was not a debt crisis that hit us in 2015, when former governor, Alejandro García Padilla famously announced that Puerto Rico's debt was "unpayable" (*Fantasy Island*; p.7). It was a financial disaster which, as Ed Morales neatly documents, was carefully designed by financial investors in Wall Street, local administrators, and both public and private interests that sought to exploit Puerto Rico's fragile colonial condition (see Chapters 3-6 of *Fantasy Island* for details). Many of us had a sense that

by the time PROMESA was announced in 2016, a decision about the archipelago's financial disaster had already been made many years before.

Hurricane María was neither a crisis nor a disaster. It was a catastrophe. This latter term refers to a “dramatic turn of events” (Maldonado-Torres in *Aftershocks*; p.335); unlike a disaster or crisis, processes bound to a decision in the past or future, a catastrophe brings about the “unknown” and therefore requires “thinking” (p.336). Hurricane María, writes Maldonado-Torres, was a “catastrophic event that, among other things, exposed the vulgarity of Puerto Rico's colonial relationship with the United States” (p.337). Certainly, Hurricane María was not the only catastrophe, the unpayable debt was another catastrophe because it constituted an “unexpected downturn of events”. Similarly, 1898 – the year US troops landed on Puerto Rico to take possession of the archipelago – and 1493, the year it was “discovered” by Europeans, constitute foundational catastrophic events in Puerto Rico. Yet, “what appears as catastrophic in modern colonialism is not only the direct colonial relations that have existed” since the age of discovery, insists Maldonado-Torres, but “also the naturalization of the relationship between colonizer and colonized, and the reproduction of this naturalization” (p.338). In turn, Maldonado-Torres prescribes a “countercatastrophic thought” that reveals “the various layers of catastrophe” (p.340). In that sense, an adequate response to this post-traumatic intellectual impulse that currently envelopes the diverse community of Puerto Rican Studies is a “shift in the geography of reason” that significantly engages with “Caribbean decolonial thought and decolonial thinking at large” (p.340). As the entire volume of *Aftershocks of Disaster* and Ed Morales' *Fantasy Island* demonstrate, these countertopographies are already taking place in theory and praxis (Katz 2001).

Morales' book, in particular, is a great source that contextualizes the catastrophes of the unpayable debt (Chapters 3-6) and Hurricane María (Chapters 7-9) in media and policy circles. Anyone wanting to know more about Puerto Rico's concurrent catastrophes should read this

book. Morales, raised in New York City, and part of the postwar mass exodus that saw thousands of families move to major US cities along the northeast coast, is extremely well versed in US politics, a skill that allows him to document Puerto Rico's plight in connection with transformations in the US Congress. In addition, Morales mixes in personal, journalistic, and ethnographic narratives that provide a solid factual analysis that brings to light the complex problematics of colonial capitalism in this Caribbean archipelago. The book pairs extremely well with Bonilla and LeBrón's anthology, which brings many voices to the fold in order to provide a fuller, but by no means exhaustive, experience of the archipelago's struggles with coloniality and the "unknowns" that Hurricane María's aftershocks brought to the fore. The anthology has gained new purchase after the archipelago experienced a 6.4 earthquake and, literally, hundreds of aftershocks in January 2020. As a result, many are reliving the traumas of María, aid is similarly slow to come, and liberals are redeploying their "our fellow Americans" discourse in a timid effort in solidarity. Bonilla and LeBrón were right to mobilize the concept of aftershocks, for it succinctly captures the extent "Puerto Ricans have found themselves relentlessly jolted" (p.2) by storms, earthquakes, and imperial catastrophes.

As geographers are beginning to take interest in Puerto Rico in both their teaching and research, I highly recommend engagement with both texts. Yet I would not stop there. I recommend reading *Fantasy Island* and *Aftershocks of Disaster*, especially the latter, alongside Fanon's extensive diagnosis of colonialism and the many traumas it produces. One will find that despite the specificities of colonialism across varying spatial and temporal contexts, as a peculiar structure of oppression, colonialism produces traumas that left untreated weaken the capacity for (re)humanization. In *Aftershocks*, readers will encounter the colonial traumas of subjects relegated to what Christina Sharpe (2016) calls "the hold" and Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013) call "the undercommons". Contributors to the anthology seek no sympathy from a liberal audience nor solidarity from the Left. They simply "annotate" and "redact" their own story

(Sharpe 2016: 113), documenting for them/me/us the moment we began to become human on our own terms. We are finally getting to tell our stories.

## References

- Bernabe R (1996) *Respuestas al Colonialismo en la Política Puertorriqueña, 1899-1929*. Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán
- Fernández Retamar R (2005) *Todo Calibán*. Bogotá: Instituto Latinoamericano de Servicios Legales Alternativos
- Harney S and Moten F (2013) *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. New York: Minor Compositions
- Katz C (2001) Vagabond capitalism and the necessity of social reproduction. *Antipode* 33(4):709-728
- Sharpe C (2016) *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke University Press

Joaquín Villanueva  
Geography and Peace Studies  
Gustavus Adolphus College  
jvillanu@gustavus.edu

January 2020