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Postdisaster Futures: Hopeful Pessimism, Imperial Ruination, and *La futura cuir*

Yarimar Bonilla

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *disaster* as both “an event or fact that has unfortunate consequences” and “a person or thing that is a complete failure.”¹ Perhaps this double meaning explains why in the wake of two back-to-back hurricanes, Puerto Rican residents responded with graffiti stating, “El desastre es la colonia” (“The disaster is the colony”; see fig. 1). This slogan suggests that the most deeply felt catastrophe in contemporary Puerto Rico is not the arrival of hurricanes, earthquakes, or even the looming threats of climate change but the slowly accruing effects of raciocolonial governance.

Since Hurricane Maria in September 2017, I have been trying to think and write about how Puerto Rico’s recent disasters have ripped the veil off this US territory’s colonial status—both for those observing from afar, who have perhaps never stopped to contemplate what Puerto Rico’s relationship to the United States entails, and for local residents, who were forced into an affective reckoning with the kinds of structural violence they have been enduring for decades.

The fact is, in contemporary Puerto Rico much of what looks like the product of a devastating hurricane is actually the result of a failed postcolonial experiment. Long before Maria, the Puerto Rican landscape was already dominated by signs of ruin: bankruptcy, default, foreclosure, displacement, dispossession, exile, decay, and neglect. This is why at present you will find more signs, slogans, and hashtags denouncing colonialism and the debt than

¹ *Lexico*, US Dictionary, s.v. “disaster,” www.lexico.com/en/definition/disaster (accessed 26 March 2020).

the inefficiencies of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. It is also why you will find signs placed on crumbling infrastructure clarifying that the damage was not caused by Maria (see fig. 2).



Figure 1. Graffiti reading, “El desastre es la colonia” (“The disaster is the colony”), on a light meter six months after Hurricane Maria, 9 March 2018. Photograph by Lorie Shaul. Published with Creative Commons License CC BY-SA 2.0, www.flickr.com/photos/number7cloud/25836790197/in/album-72157687505819412/.

Disasters are commonly said to unmask social structures.² In that sense both Hurricane Maria and the larger economic and political crisis that surrounds it have created moments of reckoning with the larger failures of Puerto Rico’s postcolonial project.³ Like most of the nonindependent Caribbean, Puerto Rico has often been imagined—including by its own residents—as a political exception for not following the path of independence. In other writings I

2 See Anthony Oliver-Smith and Susanna M. Hoffman, *Catastrophe and Culture: An Anthropology of Disaster* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Advanced Seminar Series, 2002), 3–22, esp. 9.

3 As Joaquín Villanueva writes in his review of recent books in the “post-Maria” genre, there is an emerging “post-traumatic intellectual impulse” coursing through Puerto Rican studies at present that is leading many of us to explore “the dark truths” that Hurricane Maria has revealed. This in turn is part of the larger “insurgent intellectual networks” that, as Mimi Sheller observes, have become active in the wake of the current climate crisis in the Caribbean. Joaquín Villanueva, “On Yarimar Bonilla and Marisol LeBrón’s *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm* and Ed Morales’ *Fantasy Island: Colonialism, Exploitation, and the Betrayal of Puerto Rico*,” *Antipode* (January 2020), antipodeonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Book-review_Villanueva-on-Bonilla-and-LeBr%C3%B3n-and-Morales.pdf, 1; Mimi Sheller, “Caribbean Reconstruction and Climate Justice: Transnational Insurgent Intellectual Networks and Post-hurricane Transformation,” *Journal of Extreme Events* 5, no. 4 (2018), doi.org/10.1142/S2345737618400018. Villanueva quotes “dark truths” from Arcadio Díaz-Quiñones, forward to Yarimar Bonilla and Marisol LeBrón, eds., *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2019), xii.

have questioned the discourse of exceptionality that tends to surround the nonindependent Caribbean by stressing that *most* Caribbean societies are not nation-states but rather protectorates, departments, special municipalities, and other political forms that bring into question the norm of the independent nation-state.⁴ Moreover, even the nominally independent nations of the Caribbean suffer from forms of constrained or limited nonsovereignty.⁵ Sovereignty in the Caribbean is thus best understood as a contested claim and an imposed ideal rather than an actually existing condition.⁶



Figure 2. Sign reading, “#MaríaNoFue” (“#ThisWasNotMaría”), on debris in Guaynabo, Puerto Rico, 29 April 2019. Photograph by Patricia Noboa.

In this essay I extend this argument further by discussing how Puerto Rico is currently undergoing an affective crisis that echoes the political disenchantment discernible within and outside the region. Throughout the Caribbean and beyond, the twentieth-century project of postwar decolonization has resulted in debt economies, displaced diasporas, deep social cleavages, and shattered hopes for the future. I am interested in thinking about the kinds of political life that can emerge in the wake of this postcolonial disaster. And, again, by *disaster*

4 See Yarimar Bonilla, “Ordinary Sovereignty,” *Small Axe*, no. 42 (November 2013): 152–65; and Yarimar Bonilla and Max Hantel, “Visualizing Sovereignty: Cartographic Queries for the Digital Age,” *archipelagos*, no. 1 (June 2016), archipelagosjournal.org/issue01/bonilla-visualizing.html.

5 See Yarimar Bonilla, *Non-Sovereign Futures: French Caribbean Politics in the Wake of Disenchantment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); and “Freedom, Sovereignty, and Other Entanglements,” *Small Axe*, no. 53 (July 2017): 201–8.

6 See Yarimar Bonilla, “Unsettling Sovereignty,” *Cultural Anthropology* 32, no. 3 (2017): 330–39.

I mean not just “an event of unfortunate consequences” but also a failure—specifically, the failure of the modernist project of decolonization.

Thus I want to examine how contemporary Puerto Ricans are navigating not only the material ruins of a hurricane-ravaged society but also what Ann Stoler terms the “imperial debris” of a failed colonial and postcolonial experiment. As Stoler suggests, imperial ruins include both physical structures (abandoned sugar mills, closed schools, collapsed buildings, and failed development projects) as well as *dispositions*, which she describes as the microecologies of both matter and mind. She employs the notion of *ruin* as “a violent verb that unites apparently disparate moments, places, and objects.” It is in that sense that the current landscape of ruin in Puerto Rico unites the remnants of hurricanes, earthquakes, failed development schemes, debt economies, displacement, dispossession, and a broader disenchantment with a previous era of postcolonial promises. Following Stoler, I am interested in the “‘tangible’ effects” of living among ruins, how ruination produces a series of political dispositions and imaginaries, and how populations build new futures out of the debris of futures past.⁷

In other words, I am concerned with how Puerto Ricans navigate the problem-space of postcolonial disaster: a political context of material and affective ruin that is no longer guided by the promise of a better postcolonial future or the palliative anticipation of a sovereignty to come. As David Scott has written, a certain feeling of “afterness” prevails in the contemporary Caribbean; there is a feeling of “living on in the wake of past political time, amid the ruins, specifically, of postsocialist and postcolonial futures past.”⁸

This becomes all the more acute as the winds of climate change combine political ruins with environmental ones leading to rising sea levels, eroded coasts, increased hurricane winds, and collapsed infrastructure. What visions of the future can emerge from this context of catastrophic sedimentation? What can postdisaster politics look like when no longer guided by the promise of modernist development, faith in the promises of a native state, or the anticipation of postcolonial sovereignty? Who will be the political subject of the postdisaster future?

The Promise of Decolonization

Let me take a step back and first make a case for thinking about Puerto Rico as the site of a failed postcolonial experiment. Since its acquisition by the United States in 1898, Puerto Rico has served as a site of experimentation, broadly speaking. Everything from birth control and sterilization procedures to deadly pesticides and military weaponry have been tested and

7 Ann Laura Stoler, “The Rot Remains”: From Ruins to Ruination,” in Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 7, 5, 7.

8 David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 6, 2.

refined on Puerto Rican soil.⁹ Experiments have been conducted on its land and its people but also on its forms of governance.¹⁰

From the moment of its nonincorporation into the federation of states as a territory that “belongs to” but is not “a part of” the United States, Puerto Rico has served as a site from which to test the limits of stratified inclusion, structural violence, racial governance, and constrained decolonization. US founding fathers, such as Thomas Jefferson, declared that the United States, having only recently thrown off its own colonial yoke, should not acquire colonies in the traditional sense. Territorial expansion within the continent was thus carried out with the aim of democratic incorporation into the nascent federation of states. However, this meant that there was great concern about the racial composition of the newly acquired territories. Texas, California, New Mexico, and Oklahoma were not admitted as states until they had been sufficiently transformed by white settlers. Meanwhile, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, Alaska, and the Philippines caused concern because it was unclear whether these sites could *ever* be sufficiently settled and racially transformed. In order to solve this quagmire, 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 *unincorporated* and thus not destined for annexation. The latter were said to *belong to* but not be a *part of* the United States. They were described as *foreign*, “in a domestic sense,” and placed in a legal category of their own—unfit for either citizenship or sovereignty.¹¹

In 1952 the island’s current political 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 term that simultaneously evoked formulas of statehood, independence, and dominion. Estado Libre Asociado similarly evoked a multiplicity of forms by suggesting that Puerto Rico would now be free, associated, and a state, when in fact it was none of these. The slippery semantics of the ELA were a purposeful attempt at appeasing the various claims from local residents for independence, which was supported by a large constituency at the time, while also appealing to those who favored statehood, a formula that had growing local support even as Congress remained firmly opposed to its prospect.

9 See Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and US Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Alexa S. Dietrich, *The Drug Company Next Door: Pollution, Jobs, and Community Health in Puerto Rico* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); and Katherine T. McCaffrey, *Military Power and Popular Protests: The US Navy in Vieques, Puerto Rico* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

10 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 (2018): 65.

11 See Christina Duffy Burnett et al., eds., *Foreign in a Domestic Sense: Puerto Rico, American Expansion, and the Constitution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); and Juan R. Torruella, “The *Insular* Cases: The Establishment of a Regime of Political Apartheid,” *University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Law* 29, no. 2 (2007): 283–347.

At the moment of its founding, the ELA was described as an agreement “in the nature of a compact”—a legal euphemism that masked the fact that it was *not* an agreement between two equal parties or even a binding piece of legislation.¹² The language of 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.” Fliess continued: “In this relationship the respective powers of the United States and Puerto Rico are complemented, harmonized, and combined, which seems a peculiar euphemism for a relationship of supra- and subordination.”¹³

The main proponent of the commonwealth, Puerto Rico’s first freely elected governor Luis Muñoz Marín, assured Puerto Ricans that this new status would put a definitive end to “every trace of colonialism,” granting 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 and Muñoz Marín himself testified in a Senate committee hearing that “if the people of Puerto Rico should go crazy, *Congress [could] always . . . legislate again.*”¹⁴

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 United States from submitting routine reports on its political conditions. The symbolism of the date chosen for the ELA’s signing, 25 July—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.¹⁵ Around the same time as the establishment of the ELA, both the Dutch and the French Antilles were engaging in similar forms of nonsovereign incorporation to their metropolises, while in the British Caribbean the West Indies Federation and later the commonwealth of nations were taking shape.¹⁶ Meanwhile, in what would become independent nations, forms of decolonization were being forged that allowed for “flag independence” while severely limiting economic and other forms of sovereignty.¹⁷

12 Public Law 600, Puerto Rico Federal Relations Act of 1950, 30 July 1950, www.loc.gov/law/help/statutes-at-large/81st-congress/session-2/c81s2ch446.pdf, 1.

13 Peter J. Fliess, “Puerto Rico’s Political Status under Its New Constitution,” *Western Political Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (1952): 642 (italics in original), 651.

14 Luis Muñoz Marín, quoted in Torruella, “Why Puerto Rico,” 81, 79 (italics in original).

15 See, for example, Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

16 See Bonilla and Hantel, “Visualizing Sovereignty”; Angel Israel Rivera Ortiz and Aarón Gamaliel Ramos, *Islands at the Crossroads: Politics in the Non-independent Caribbean* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2001); and Lammert de Jong and Dirk Kruijt, eds., *Extended Statehood in the Caribbean: Paradoxes of Quasi Colonialism, Local Autonomy, and Extended Statehood in the USA, French, Dutch, and British Caribbean* (Amsterdam: Rozenberg, 2005).

17 Linden Lewis, ed., *Caribbean Sovereignty, Development, and Democracy in an Age of Globalization* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013).

During the mid-twentieth century residents of *both* the independent nations and the many commonwealths, departments, and other postcolonial experiments in the Caribbean were offered the promise of a bright postcolonial future by local political elites and former imperial powers. Throughout the region modernism, development, and economic growth appeared to beckon on the postcolonial horizon.¹⁸ In the first decades following the formation of the ELA, Puerto Rico did experience rapid industrialization and economic progress, owing 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 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,” representing it as a site of rapid development and unstoppable growth.¹⁹ However, the main beneficiaries of these policies were not Puerto Rican residents but American companies that reaped profits, tax breaks, and a captive market for their products.²⁰

As in other parts of the Caribbean, the promises of decolonization in Puerto Rico soon began to fade. In the early 1970s—as the global economy experienced significant shocks because of rising oil prices—it was already becoming clear that development via foreign investment was not leading to sustainable growth. By the 1990s, when the Bill 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 and mask a deflated economic base.²¹

By 2015 Puerto Rico’s governor declared that the territory was at risk of descending into what economists describe as a “financial death spiral.”²² 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 an 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.²³

18 See Harvey Neptune, “The Twilight Years’: Caribbean Social Movements, 1940–1960,” *Africana Age* essays, New York Public Library, exhibitions.nypl.org/africanaage/essay-caribbean-40.html.

19 See “1970s Puerto Rico USA Promotional Film *Progress Island USA*, San Juan 83994,” YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdTQGNZMYPI.

20 See Harry Grubet and Joel Slemrod, “The Effect of Taxes on Investments and Income Shifting to Puerto Rico,” *Review of Economics and Statistics* 80, no. 3 (1998): 365–73.

21 See Bonilla and LeBrón, editors’ introduction to *Aftershocks of Disaster*, 1–17.

22 Mary Williams Walsh, “Puerto Rico’s Governor Warns of Fiscal ‘Death Spiral,’” *New York Times*, 14 October 2016.

23 See Pedro Cabán, “PROMESA, Puerto Rico, and the American Empire,” *Latino Studies* 16, no. 2 (2018): 161–84.

The Death of the Promises

The contemporary debt crisis made clear what many had long known: the commonwealth status created in 1952 had been a mere facade for an enduring colonial condition. In 2016 the approval of the PROMESA law, along with the deliberations and results of two landmark Supreme Court cases in which the nature of Puerto Rico's sovereignty was discussed, effectively removed the cloak from Puerto Rico's status.²⁴ For the first time, the assertion that Puerto Rico was a colony was no longer a claim issued exclusively by advocates of independence; it was an accepted reality. For example, in May 2016 a special television segment aired on Univision with the title "In the Face of the Death of the ELA, What Alternatives Does Puerto Rico Have?" The segment featured interviews with political experts matter-of-factly exploring possibilities for a post-ELA Puerto Rico.²⁵

During this period many began to talk openly about "la muerte del ELA" (the death of the commonwealth). This was accompanied by staged funeral processions, the display of Puerto Rican flags recast in black and white, a satirical obituary for the ELA in the local newspaper, and performative mortuary rites. At one event in front of the capitol building, hundreds gathered for a performative funeral and a "Dinner en Noir"—a satirical take on the haute culture of the elegant *Dîner en Blanc* global event in which some Puerto Rican elites had recently participated.²⁶ Organizers described the event as a funeral for *lo inexistente* (that which never existed). During the activities, performance artist Mickey Negrón addressed attendees by saying, "This will not be an abundant meal. This will be a precarious dinner because the ELA, which doesn't exist and in any case never existed—strange things happen in the colony—left us this way: in precarity."²⁷

Indeed, the "political death" of the ELA was followed by the severe economic measures imposed by both the fiscal board and the local government in what has increasingly come to be understood as a political experiment in new forms of austerity governance.²⁸ Puerto Rico thus effectively shifted from being a laboratory of modernist development to an experimental site of neoliberal management.

This austerity regime has led to an even greater landscape of ruin: shuttered elementary schools, a gutted public university, a defunded health system, crumbling infrastructure, and

24 For more on the Supreme Court cases, see Mark Joseph Stern, "The Supreme Court Deals a Blow to Puerto Rican Sovereignty," *Slate*, 9 June 2016; Vann R. Newkirk II, "Puerto Rico's Dream, Denied," *Atlantic*, 14 June 2016; and Monica A. Jimenez, "'Esta "democracia" no la entendemos': On Exercising Democracy in the World's Oldest Colony," *Society and Space*, 25 February 2020.

25 "Ante la muerte del ELA, ¿Qué alternativas tiene Puerto Rico?," *Univision*, 5 May 2016. All translations are mine.

26 See Juan R. Costa, "Celebran la muerte del ELA frente al Capitolio (galería y video)," *Noticel*, 30 June 2016.

27 "Esta no será una cena abundante. Será una cena precaria. Porque el ELA, que no existe y como quiera existió—cosas extrañas pasan en la colonia—nos dejó así, en la precariedad"; Emmanuel Estrada López, "ELA, o la muerte de lo inexistente," *Diálogo UPR*, 3 July 2016.

28 See Andrew Rice, "The McKinsey Way to Save an Island," *New York Magazine*, 17 April 2019.

a migratory crisis that has generated the increasing feeling of an emptying island, with more Puerto Ricans currently residing in the fifty states than in Puerto Rico.²⁹

In response to the emerging landscape of desolation and abandonment, a slick marketing campaign was developed that implored residents to keep their chins up and to not quit (#YoNoMeQuito).³⁰ The campaign sought to promote “toughing it out,” not quitting and instead *enduring*—facing head-on the mechanisms of slow violence that austerity implies. Many interpreted this slogan as a jab at those who had migrated, but the fact is that those who had left have also had much to endure as they confront the naked racism of the United States under the Donald Trump regime, in which they are suddenly questioned on their citizenship, asked to show their passports, berated for displaying a Puerto Rican flag or for speaking Spanish in public—all while navigating the new affective terrain of exile.

And then, Hurricane Maria hit. Amid what was already a landscape of ruin, this category-five storm led to the deadliest disaster in modern US history, producing more casualties than 9/11. These deaths, however, were not caused by hurricane winds and rain but by the crisis of infrastructure that followed: a neglected power grid meant nearly a year without electricity for many residents, a gutted public works budget resulted in collapsed bridges and unrepaired roads and streetlights, and a dismantled public health system led to bacterial outbreaks and a collapsed hospital system. These infrastructural “aftershocks” were the result not of a sudden hurricane but of a failed political and economic system.³¹

With the declaration of the debt crisis, the limits of Puerto Rico’s colonial condition had already become undeniable; the inadequate response to the hurricane only exasperated this feeling. Puerto Ricans already had to contend with a future that heralded greater austerity and social decay. The university was under threat of losing its accreditation as the result of drastic budget cuts, the governor threatened to reduce funding for the hospital system, the Department of Education began shutting down schools and pushing toward a charter system modeled on post-Katrina New Orleans, and now hurricane recovery plans were feared to be leading to even greater displacement as communities faced the threat of being forcibly relocated from newly declared zones of environmental vulnerability. Following Maria 98 percent of the territory has been declared an “opportunity zone” for foreign investment.³² Privatization, profiteering, and dispossession dominate the horizon.

29 See D’vera Cohn, Eileen Patten, and Mark Hugo Lopez, *Puerto Rican Population Declines on Island, Grows on US Mainland* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center’s Hispanic Trends, 2014).

30 For more on the debates surrounding this campaign, see “#YoNoMeQuito: To Stay or to Go?,” *Puerto Rico Syllabus*, www.puertoricosyllabus.com/huyendo-fleeing-crisis/yonomequito-to-stay-or-to-go/ (accessed 1 March 2020).

31 See Bonilla and LeBrón, *Aftershocks of Disaster*.

32 See “Puerto Rico Publishes List of Qualified Commercial Activities for Opportunity Zones,” *Caribbean Business*, 21 August 2019; and Antonio R. Gómez, “Aseguran hay mayor interés de inversionistas en ‘zonas de oportunidad’ de Puerto Rico,” *El Nuevo Día*, 7 November 2019.

Hopeful Pessimism

Political life in Puerto Rico must therefore now contend with a contemporary landscape marked by the ruins of a previous colonial experiment and a future horizon that heralds further decay. Part of what I am interested in thinking about is how this requires a new political orientation that breaks with modernist assumptions of a better future.

Italian philosopher Franco Berardi refers to this process as the “slow cancellation of the future,” which he describes as the increasing lack of faith in the modernist mythology of linear development and increasing prosperity.³³ He argues that the modernist dream of unending development has shattered in the face of economic recession and precarity. Mark Fisher describes this as a feeling of “belatedness,” of having arrived “after the gold rush.”³⁴

However, in the case of Puerto Rico, and the Caribbean more generally, the current prevailing affect is not one of a future superseded but, more precisely, of a future foreclosed. As one current political slogan in Puerto Rico suggests, “Se acabaron las promesas” (“The promises are over”), which is to say that what Puerto Ricans face is the end not of economic prosperity but rather of its *promise*. That is, Puerto Ricans must contend with the idea of losing something they never really obtained. As the performers at the ELA funeral proclaimed, they must mark the death of that which never existed. They find themselves mourning a fiction.

I am interested in how this current moment requires a political stance that is centered not on what Lauren Berlant describes as a “cruel optimism” that lulls one into a continued faith in liberal democratic promises of what is to come but rather on a particular form of pessimism: a belief that things are awful and not necessarily going to be repaired.³⁵ For Berlant the rise of neoliberalism has led to the fraying of a particular set of fantasies: upward mobility, job security, and an open horizon of endless possibilities. These fantasies were never shared by the entire society—only a limited few within the global North ever experienced the fantasy of the postwar economic boom. However, with the consolidation of neoliberal policies, these assurances have become even more fantastical.

In the context of Puerto Rico, as with other postcolonial societies, modernist disappointments mingle with fraying postcolonial assurances of a superseded colonial relationship. In the era of climate change, these forms of disenchantment combine with a reduced faith in the supremacy of technological mastery over the environment. This is nowhere more evident than in the context of postearthquake Puerto Rico, where the concrete homes that were once the symbol of economic development, postcolonial prosperity, and technical mastery over the tropical environment now lay in ruins.³⁶

33 Franco Bifo Berardi, *After the Future* (California: AK, 2011), 18.

34 Mark Fisher, *Ghost of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology, and Lost Futures* (Aldershot, UK: John Hunt, 2014), 8.

35 See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

36 Beginning in late December 2019 Puerto Rico has been experiencing a sequence of quakes and seismic events, many of which have been magnitude five or greater; the largest and most damaging to date was a 6.4-magnitude quake on 7 January. On Puerto Rico’s concrete homes, see Geoff Burrows, *Concrete and Countryside: The Urban and the Rural in 1950s Puerto Rican Culture* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018).

While Berlant is concerned with what happens when individuals refuse to let go of their attachments to “good life fantasies,” I am more concerned with what happens when those fantasies are lost.³⁷ How can we live and act politically in the absence of faith in a better future? How can we develop not a cruel optimism that blinds us to what is to come but rather a kind of hopeful pessimism that can serve to build politically in the face of ruin and the promise of further decay?

The Puerto Rican historian and activist Rafael Bernabe has argued that hope can actually be nurtured by pessimism. Following Terry Eagleton, Bernabe calls for “hope without optimism,” that is, a faith in political action, even in the midst of great uncertainty regarding where that action might ultimately lead.³⁸ As Puerto Rican philosopher Rocío Zambrana argues, to organize pessimism is “to bet on what is possible from the actual.”³⁹ For Zambrana pessimism does away with fantasies of the good life and naive expectations of a better future. Unlike a cruel optimism that blind us to the threats of the present, a hopeful pessimism opens our eyes to the hard tasks required to transform the here and now.

I believe this kind of hopeful pessimism might be what is needed to move beyond what David Scott has described as our “arrested” postcolonial present or what I have previously described as the “wake of disenchantment,” an era in which the political models of the past have lost their purchase but new political forms, vocabularies, and imaginaries are yet to emerge.⁴⁰ In other words, perhaps a hopeful pessimism is what is needed to move beyond nostalgic immobility.

Postdisaster Futures

I would like to end by gesturing to how forms of hopeful pessimism are discernable among contemporary activists in Puerto Rico who are seeking to reimagine what politics might look like outside the modernist telos of nationalist progress and postcolonial sovereignty. I am particularly concerned with the political forms and communities that have emerged in the wake of the debt crisis and the protests that led to the governor’s resignation in the summer of 2019, particularly those protagonized by queer subjects.

The 2019 summer protests (at times described as “the Puerto Rican Summer,” in a nod to the Arab Spring) were catalyzed by the release of an 889-page group chat between then governor Ricardo Rosselló and eleven members of his administration, in which sexist, homophobic, and racist comments were combined with what appeared to be evidence of corruption, mismanagement, and a callousness (if not outright mockery) toward the suffering

37 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 2.

38 “La esperanza sin optimismo”; Rafael Bernabe, “Manifiesto de la esperanza sin optimismo en Puerto Rico,” *80 Grados*, 24 November 2017, www.80grados.net/manifiesto-de-la-esperanza-sin-optimismo-en-puerto-rico/.

39 Rocío Zambrana, *Colonial Debts: The Case of Puerto Rico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

40 Scott, *Omens of Adversity*, 6; Bonilla, *Non-Sovereign Futures*.

and loss of life that resulted after Hurricane Maria.⁴¹ Mass demonstrations quickly arose and crystalized around the slogan #RickyRenuncia, which was used to call for the governor's immediate resignation.⁴² Within a period of fifteen days the sustained protests resulted in the governor's resignation, which he delivered via Facebook Live just a few minutes before the clock struck 12:00 a.m. on the morning of 25 July 2019—the sixty-seventh anniversary of the signing of the ELA.⁴³

These protests were in great part led by a new political generation that the trap singer Bad Bunny has dubbed *la generación del Yo no me dejo* (i.e., “the nonsubmissive generation”). The phrase “Yo no me dejo” is a direct response to the slick slogan of #YoNoMeQuito; it rejects the call to endure and instead suggests that this generation will not quit or migrate, but it also will not allow itself to be screwed over or duped.

As activist Aliana Bigio explained in a recent podcast interview, the current generation of activists in Puerto Rico were born into crisis: “I don't remember, ever since I was a kid, living in a period not characterized by crisis.”⁴⁴ In a recently penned reflection titled “I'm a Daughter of the Crisis and I Have Nothing to Lose,” she writes,

We resent the country left to us by previous generations and the scarce or nonexistent opportunities for progress that we have. We work for miserable wages that are not enough to live on. We go to a university that is less accessible every day. We prepare to enter a violent work environment that does not reward the preparation we have. To become professionals, we have to borrow heavily and be slaves to absurd loans. The health system has failed us and keeps many in constant uncertainty. . . .

We are a generation that does not know the luxuries of having a good economy, we did not live the years of prosperity and, for this and so many other reasons, we have nothing to lose.

(Resentimos el país que nos dejaron las generaciones anteriores y las escasas o inexistentes oportunidades de progreso que tenemos. Trabajamos por salarios miserables que no dan para vivir. Vamos a una universidad que cada día es menos accesible. Nos preparamos para entrar en un ambiente laboral violento que no recompensa la preparación que tenemos. Para hacernos profesionales, tenemos que endeudarnos masivamente y ser esclavos de préstamos absurdos. El sistema de salud nos ha fallado y mantiene a muchos en una incertidumbre constante. . . .

41 See Yarimar Bonilla, “The Leaked Texts at the Heart of Puerto Rico's Massive Protests,” *The Nation*, 22 July 2019.

42 For an analysis of the hashtag campaign, see Danilo T. Perez-Rivera, Christopher Torres-Lugo, and Alexis R. Santos Lozada, “Engaging for Puerto Rico: #RickyRenuncia (and #RickySeQueda) during El verano del 19 and Digital Identities,” SocArXiv, 13 August 2019, osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/wdk9u/.

43 For more detailed analysis of these events, see the collections “The Decolonial Geographies of Puerto Rico's 2019 Summer Protests: A Forum,” *Society and Space*, www.societyandspace.org/forums/the-decolonial-geographies-of-puerto-ricos-2019-summer-protests-a-forum (accessed 1 March 2020); and “Verano Boricua / #RickyRenuncia,” *Puerto Rico Syllabus*, www.puertoricosyllabus.com/verano-boricua-rickyrenuncia/ (accessed 1 March 2020). For a detailed chronology, see Benjamin Torres Gotay, “Los quince días que tumbaron Rosselló,” *El Nuevo Día*, 25 July 2019.

44 “Yo no me recuerdo en ningún momento, desde chiquita, vivir en un periodo sin crisis”; Laura Rexach and Carla López de Azua, “¡Estamos de vuelta!—Hablamos con Aliana Bigio sobre #RickyRenuncia y #MujeresEnResistencia,” *Alzando la voz* (podcast), 1 March 2020, player.fm/series/alzando-la-voz/estamos-de-vuelta-hablamos-con-aliana-bigio-sobre-rickyrenuncia-y-mujeresenresistencia.

Somos una generación que no conoce los lujos de tener una buena economía, no vivimos los años de prosperidad y, por esta y tantas razones más, no tenemos nada que perder.⁴⁵

It is telling that for Aliana “having nothing to lose,” and the willingness to risk it all, does not involve taking a leap into exile, but rather daring to stay and daring to reject the displacement and dispossession that both disaster capitalism and austerity governance foment. Aliana concludes: “We have been warned that if we want a better future, we will have to get it ‘on the outside,’ but we don’t want to leave, we want to create a better future here.”⁴⁶

Aliana and others of her generation want to redefine what it means to stay home and engage in political action for a better future. They do not want to *quitarse* by migrating, but they also don’t want to *dejarse*, which would mean allowing the government to sink them into further precarity. They argue that the political projects of previous generations—which centered around a search for decolonization through either statehood or independence—held their parents hostage by the promises of a future to come. They argue that their parents’ and grandparents’ *fanatismo* (blind faith in party politics) led them to tolerate corruption, misogyny, homophobia, and discrimination in anticipation of an ever-receding horizon of postcolonial prosperity where those issues could finally be addressed.

One of the key characteristics of the summer protests of 2019 was the diversity of participants and particularly the foregrounded presence of feminist and queer groups.⁴⁷ The public faces of the protests were not the usual protagonists of Puerto Rican nationalism, long dominated by patriarchal figures and traditional male leadership.⁴⁸ Throughout the protests women of all ages were front and center, and feminists—particularly black feminists—were key to the movement, as were drag queens and other members of the *cuir* (queer) community who proudly asserted their *patería combativa* (or combative queerness).⁴⁹ This was a noted departure from the traditional “scripts” of Puerto Rican nationalism that have long excluded black and queer political subjects.⁵⁰

One of the most iconic images from the protests was that of openly gay pop star Ricky Martin waving an enormous rainbow flag alongside the traditional Puerto Rican one. Yet the *most* viral moment without a doubt was the *perreo combativo* that took place in front of the cathedral in Old San Juan right before the governor’s resignation.⁵¹ *Perreo*, a kind of dancehall or twerk, is an overtly sexualized, raced, and classed form of bodily expression. Its deployment by scantily clad queer bodies in front of the cathedral caused one of the few moments of

45 Aliana Margarita Bigio Alcoba, “Soy hija de la crisis y no tengo nada que perder,” *Todas PR*, 26 July 2019, www.todaspr.com/soy-hija-de-la-crisis-y-no-tengo-nada-que-perder/.

46 “Todxs nosotrxs hemos sido advertidos que, si queremos un mejor futuro, lo vamos a tener que conseguir ‘allá afuera,’ pero nosotrxs no queremos irnos, queremos crear un mejor futuro aquí adentro”; *ibid*.

47 See Ed Morales, “Feminist and LGBTQ Activists Are Leading the Insurrection in Puerto Rico,” *The Nation*, 2 August 2019.

48 See Juan G. Gelpí, *Literatura y paternalismo en Puerto Rico* (San Juan: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1993).

49 See Bárbara I. Abadía-Rexach, “Summer 2019: The Great Racialized Puerto Rican Family Protesting in the Street Fearlessly,” *Society and Space*, 25 February 2020.

50 See Isar P. Godreau, *Scripts of Blackness: Race, Cultural Nationalism, and US Colonialism in Puerto Rico* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

51 See Karla Claudio Betancourt, “Perreo combativo,” Vimeo, 25 July 2019, vimeo.com/350139441.

discord among the protesters, some of whom felt it had crossed a line. But for others that line-crossing was a necessary transgression for the production of a new postdisaster queer future.

La futura

For the current generation of activists, a postdisaster future is one that shuns the postcolonial project of middle-class respectability, heteronormativity, economic nationalism, and proper postcolonial governance. In many ways, these practices evoke what Deborah Thomas describes as “modern blackness”—a political project that questions the respectability politics of a middle-class nationalist elite.⁵² In many ways the postdisaster future is thus a cuir future.

Others have noted that while Puerto Rico was becoming a space of ruin, it was at the same time becoming a site of rising queer and trans visibility. “[Hurricane María] allowed people to explore things that they couldn’t do,” performance artist Macha Colón explains, “and now they realize that they can do it, and who the heck is going to tell them no?” She continues: “Being in that time of not having electricity and not kind of having rules and laws . . . it allowed for [the queer scene] to thrive because . . . it was sort of like we could do things without having to ask permission.”⁵³ In other words, the absence of the state during hurricane recovery that lifted the veil off Puerto Rico’s colonial status and ushered in new forms of self-reliance also lifted (in part) the veil of constraint on queer communities.⁵⁴ In the context of blackouts, scarcity, and social uncertainty, the logics of shame and homophobia fell more and more to the wayside.

“As the apocalypse continues, why wouldn’t people be queerer?,” asks trans feminist artist María José. “There’s no potential future,” she explains. “That sounds really nihilistic—but as professionalism, and capitalism, and the way that we know the world keeps crumbling, there’s going to be more space to be queer.” María José asserts that because heteronormativity is one of the foundations of capitalism and normalcy, once those screws come undone, it’s a different story: “You can do whatever the fuck you want.”⁵⁵

While within queer studies authors such as Lee Edelman have argued that queerness is inherently antifuturist, this is only in relation to a reproductive futurity staked on optimistic visions of the future.⁵⁶ This is quite distinct from the kind of *pessimistic futurity* that permeates disaster contexts in which there is little desire to preserve or defend what currently exists (i.e., a crisis-ridden present).

52 See Deborah A. Thomas, *Modern Blackness: Nationalism, Globalization, and the Politics of Culture in Jamaica* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

53 Macha Colón, quoted in Justin Agrelo, “We Could Do Things without Having to Ask Permission,” *Slate*, 17 April 2019, slate.com/human-interest/2019/04/puerto-rico-queer-life-hurricane-maria-macha-colon.html.

54 See Hilda Lloréns, “Ruin Nation: In Puerto Rico, Hurricane María Laid Bare the Results of a Long-Term Crisis Created by Dispossession, Migration, and Economic Predation,” *NACLA Report on the Americas* 50, no. 2 (2018): 154–59; and Adriana Garriga-López, “Puerto Rico: The Future in Question,” *Shima* 13, no. 2 (2019): 174–92.

55 María José, quoted in Justin Agrelo, “We Could Do Things.”

56 See Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

In the context of political, economic, and environmental failure, it would make sense that queer politics would become particularly salient after all, since “failure is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well.”⁵⁷ It is thus unsurprising that queer communities have been able to seize postcolonial failure as a moment of potentiality and to channel negative affect (like pessimism and mourning) into an engine for worldmaking. As José Muñoz argues, “Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality for another world.”⁵⁸ The future, Muñoz asserts, “is queerness’s domain.” He describes *queerness* as “a mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present.”⁵⁹

The queer poet Raquel Salas-Rivera asserts that the reason cuir and trans bodies are on the frontlines of the postdisaster future is because they are the ones that have been most forced to confront the precarity of the present. “That capacity to create something from the space of nothing, positioned us to best understand the devastation of disaster and apocalypse,” he explained. “Even if not all *Boricuas* are *cuir*, precarity has united us and the queer community has taken the lead because they’re the ones that have been living the longest with precarity—that devastating precarity, the one that resembles death so much, that sometimes it *is* death.”⁶⁰



Figure 3. Image from María José’s performance of *La futura*. Screen shot by Karla Claudio Betancourt.

In *La futura*, a performance carried out during the 2019 Puerto Rican Summer, María José evoked her own vision of the *futura cuir* (a queered version of the future), proclaiming that the future is already here (see fig. 3):

57 Judith [Jack] Halbertsam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

58 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), xiii.

59 *Ibid.*, 1.

60 “Esa capacidad para crear algo dentro y desde la nada, nos posicionó mejor para entender el momento devastador y apocalíptico del desastre. Y aunque no todos los boricuas son cuir, la precariedad nos pone juntxs y las personas cuir tiran alante porque llevan más tiempo conviviendo con esa precariedad. La devastadora. La que se parece tanto a la muerte que a veces es muerte”; Raquel Salas-Rivera, personal communication with the author, 1 March 2020.

La futura has arrived.
La futura is trans.
It's nonbinary.
It's black.
It's feminine.
It's fat.
It rolls in a wheelchair.
It's deaf.
It's mute.
It's immigrant.
It's empathetic.
And it's *justa* [just/fair].
And if you're not ready for that future,
you can either lock yourself in your room
and drown in your own poison
or you can join our movement
of love and justice.
For *todes* [a nonbinary "all"].⁶¹

María José's vision of *la futura*—along with the other visions of the future asserted by activists during the summer 2019 movement—does not hinge on modernist visions of progress, settler notions of environmental dominance, or nationalist raced and gendered scripts of proper citizen subjects. Although it offers a kind of hope, it is one that recognizes that, as Zambrana argues, “hope equals work.”⁶² Unlike the cruel optimisms that blind us to the threats of the present, this kind of hopeful pessimism forces us to recognize the hard tasks that must be taken on in order to transform the here and now in order to hopefully make our world anew.

61 María José, “*La futura*,” filmed by Karla Claudio Betancourt, Vimeo, 25 July 2019, vimeo.com/350183727.

62 Zambrana, *Colonial Debts*, 15.