Erasure and resistance: the state of public education in Puerto Rico

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Erasure and resistance: the state of public education in Puerto Rico

Rima Brusi

Department of Anthropology, Lehman College, City University of New York, Bronx, NY, USA

ABSTRACT
In April 2018, somebody painted over a mural in the Julia de Burgos public school’s cafeteria, turning the wall into a blank, off-white slate. The mural’s erasure symbolically encapsulates a combination of forces that are behind the radical transformation of public schools and colleges in Puerto Rico: the colonial relationship the island has with the United States after the latter took possession of it in 1898; Puerto Rico’s unpayable debt, partly triggered and exacerbated precisely by its colonial condition; and the takeover of the island by disaster capitalism in the wake of the debt default and hurricanes Irma and Maria.

Sometime in early April 2018, somebody painted over a mural in the Julia de Burgos public school’s cafeteria, turning the wall, some 23 feet by eight in size, into a blank, off-white slate.

The original painting was both colorful and muted. A crimson sky and a lush landscape in tones of currant, brick and forest green fills the background and seeps a little into the foreground, dominated by a silvery-white river representing the largest one in Puerto Rico, the Rio Grande de Loiza. There’s a dark-skinned, half-naked woman on the far corner, bathing in the river, easy to miss unless you look at the mural closely. On the opposite corner, large and clearly visible, a kneeling androgynous figure with cupped hands seems to be about to drink from the river. Next to this figure, three lines¹ of a poem:

Rio Grande de Loiza
Rio grande, llanto grande
El mas grande de todos nuestros llantos isleños…

Controversy ensued. A representative from a minority leftist party filed a resolution in the House to investigate what he called ‘the destruction of the mural.’ The family of the deceased artist who had painted the mural, and his former curator, threatened to sue. One of the three teachers’ unions in Puerto Rico denounced the ‘destruction’ of the mural on their Facebook page. The Institute of Puerto Rican Culture (ICPR), the government entity in charge of ‘research, conservation and promotion’ of Puerto Rican culture ‘in all its complexity and diversity’ sent two employees to investigate, but the building’s staff refused them access on the grounds that the manager was not present. The ICPR then sent a letter to the school demanding the situation be assessed by professional curators. After making headlines for several weeks and a vague promise

CONTACT Rima Brusi rbrusi@gmail.com Department of Anthropology, Lehman College, City University of New York, Bronx, NY, USA

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The Puerto Rico educational system: affects of local colonial relationships in the United States.

The Puerto Rico educational system has remained insular and is primarily connected to the United States and the federal government. The island, like many other places in the United States, is a territory of the United States, but it operates under the control of the federal government. The system includes both public and private schools, and the island's educational system is modeled after that of the mainland United States.

Since 1954, Puerto Rico has been a territory of the United States, and the island has been governed by a governor appointed by the President of the United States. The island has been subjected to various forms of colonialism, including economic, social, and political control.

The island's education system has been influenced by the United States, with the mainland's educational policies being imposed on the island. The island's educational system is not self-governed, and the island's educational leaders have been appointed by the United States government.

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State University (CSU) and the City University of New York (CUNY.) Both systems have, however, distinctly Puerto Rican institutional cultures, and the UPR in particular has been often described as the island’s most important and successful cultural project.

In 2015, Puerto Rico made headlines and the front page in The New York Times when then-Governor Alejandro Garcia Padilla publicly declared the island’s $72 billion bond debt ‘unpayable.’ As a function of its colonial condition, Puerto Rico and its municipalities lack access to any existing form of bankruptcy and debt restructuring, such as those available to cities and utilities in the 50 states. The island retains some autonomy in terms of local decision-making, but its status and affairs are ultimately under the control of the U.S. Congress. In 2016, Congress responded to the debt crisis by passing Public Law 114–187, or the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA). PROMESA translates into ‘promise’ in Spanish (ironically, given its negative impact on the island). PROMESA established a Fiscal Oversight and Management Board, a non-elected body of seven members, appointed by Congress that most Puerto Ricans refer to as La Junta. In addition to leading all aspects of the debt restructuring process, La Junta holds nearly absolute powers over Puerto Rico’s finances as well as the authority to overturn local laws, plans and policy decisions that may interfere with the implementation of fiscal austerity measures. Many of their decisions and plans drew from the input of the international consulting firms, such as McKinsey and Company, which has a heavy presence in the Junta’s decision-making process on the island and an important role in ‘rightsizing’ decisions such as doubling tuition at the public UPR. Contractors and consultants – including McKinsey, which billed $72 million for their advice in January 2019 alone – as well as La Junta itself, are not paid by Congress or the bondholders: They are paid by the people of Puerto Rico. Both public K–12 schools and the UPR system were immediately targeted: La Junta demanded the university make cuts equivalent to about a third of its total budget, and with their blessing, then-Governor Ricardo Rossello appointed Pennsylvania native Julia Keleher as Secretary of Education and formally announced that the school closures already started under previous administrations were going to intensify dramatically, with almost half of the island’s public schools now targeted for closing.

In the fall of 2017, Hurricanes Irma and (especially) Maria dealt a devastating blow to Puerto Rico and its public education infrastructure (Brusi & Godreau, 2019). Rather than slowing down, however, the dismantling of public schools and higher education accelerated. Following the hurricanes, the island’s public educational systems received less aid from the federal government, relative to their size and the extent of the damage, than areas in the fifty states impacted by similar or even less destructive disasters, such as Texas, Florida or even post-Katrina New Orleans. In a textbook example of disaster capitalism and disaster colonialism, federal and local authorities took advantage of the post-Maria chaos to (1) close more schools and refuse to fix and open the ones damaged by the hurricanes, (2) pass a ‘School Reform’ bill that was designed in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Education under Secretary Betsy DeVos and (3) install a new president for the entire UPR system with little input from faculty and staff. In a meaningful parallel, and breaking with previous practice and tradition, both the UPR’s system president and K–12 Secretary of Education Julia Keleher were recruited stateside – not on the island – and received double the salary of their predecessors. All these events occurred in the context of a humanitarian crisis – at a time when Puerto Rico still had thousands of refugees and displaced people, funeral homes and the Department of Forensic Sciences were overwhelmed with dead bodies (Hurricane Maria alone is estimated to have caused over 4500 deaths) , and hedge funds and other creditors kept demanding the payment of the debt.

Puerto Rico remains in the midst of a human rights crisis. Between 2017 and 2019, experts, policymakers and national and international organizations denounced human and civil rights violations taking place in Puerto Rico. For example, UN Special Rapporteur Philip Alston visited the island in 2017 and subsequently documented the environmental violations, lack of sufficient access to basic resources and rights such a safe roof or even safe drinkable water, and an
extreme wealth inequality that is ‘shockingly at odds’ with the United States’ ‘immense wealth and founding commitment to human rights’ and notably absent from La Junta’s analysis and plans for the island (Allston, 2017). Amnesty International regularly reports on Puerto Rico’s human rights violations, which include violations of freedom of expression and association, excessive use of force (LeBron, 2019; Brusi, 2019) and lack of access to housing. Former special counsel for UNESCO and board member for the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) Marcia Rivera (2017) has argued that Puerto Rico will not be able to stop these human rights violations unless it transforms its colonial status and overhauls its ineffective political system.

Furthermore, high rates of poverty and a severe wealth gap continue to plague Puerto Rico. With a median annual household income of $20,166 in 2018, Puerto Rico is poorer than any of the fifty states (Mississippi’s median household income for the same year was more than double that, $43,567). In addition, a majority of Puerto Rican K–12 students are low income. As of 2018, over 80% of Puerto Rican K–12 students met the U.S. Department of Education eligibility requirements for free lunch, and over 60% of the students at the UPR were eligible for Pell grants. Over half of Puerto Rican children live under the poverty level, and the child food insecurity level is 56%.

The debt crisis and ‘natural’ disasters paved the way for the erosion and erasure of public education in Puerto Rico – and, importantly, the subsequent grassroots mobilizations that erupted in response. The period between 2018 and 2019 was characterized by slow recovery, school closures, a school reform law that paves the way for charter schools and school vouchers, the announcement of changes to K–12 teachers’ and UPR’s faculty retirement systems, teacher transfers to different schools, threats to close (Godreau et al., 2019) the smaller campuses of the UPR and continued tuition increases—tuition increases that economist Joseph Stiglitz described in a 2017 opinion column in the New York Times, as the most dramatic he has seen. It was also the setting for numerous forms of resistance, from community takeovers, formal and informal, of some abandoned school buildings, to intense activity on the part of the K–12 unions and from formal and informal faculty organizations and traditional shared governance bodies (such as academic senates) at the UPR, to the sustained presence of the student movement (many of whom were arrested and some of whom are still awaiting trial), and the development of new forms of organizing (e.g. people’s assemblies in various towns) that made public education one of their main issues. The year 2019 was also the year in which Secretary of Education Julia Keleher resigned under growing public pressure surrounding her role in a corruption scandal and her indictment on 32 criminal charges. The year 2019 also witnessed continuous, non-partisan protests, some of them numbering in the hundreds of thousands that forced the unprecedented resignation of Governor Ricardo Rossello in July 2019.

The island was still roiling from the turmoil of recent years when, at the end of 2019, an earthquake swarm shook Puerto Rico, displacing large numbers of people, many of whom had been practically homeless since the 2017 hurricanes. The earthquakes and their aftershocks further destroyed or damaged school buildings, and forced a rushed, messy and inadequate transition to online schooling, both at the K–12 and college levels, in an island where over half the children live under the poverty level, 40% of K–12 students need special education accommodations, and many students at all levels of education have little or no access to the resources necessary to engage in online education from home. The aftershocks of this earthquake swarm continue to this day – an aftershock of magnitude 4.5, for example, was reported on 28 June 2020. The present-day COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates all the issues described above and adds a layer of complexity, both to the island’s problems in general and also to the structure and effectiveness of its educational system. Displaced families – many of whom have already been living as refugees in camps and ‘tent cities’ since the onslaught of hurricanes and earthquakes in recent years, unable to return home because of warnings not to stay in homes and structures
that are not built up to code or remain damaged by the earthquakes – are now instructed to ‘stay home’ to stay safe.

By the way—the last verses of that poem by Julia de Burgos on the school mural that was painted over?

_Rio Grande de Loiza!… Great river. Great flood of tears._

_The greatest of all our island’s tears_

_Save those greater, that come from the eyes_

_Of my soul, for my enslaved people._

Like the new owners of the Julia de Burgos school did with the mural, capitalism and colonialism seem bent on erasing Puerto Rico’s identity and ability to rebuild itself. But Puerto Ricans are not passive in the face of this onslaught: as difficult as it is to resist capitalism’s attack on public K–12 and higher education, and as hard as it is to ‘develop a social praxis of decolonisation within a political context of ongoing colonialism’ (Garriga-Lopez, 2020, p. 185), many Puerto Ricans, including stakeholders from public schools and college campuses, are doing exactly that. UPR students were denouncing the coloniality of the debt as early as 2016 and engaged in a system-wide strike in 2017 in response to tuition increases and austerity measures. Many of them were arrested and at least five are still awaiting trial at the moment of this writing. Teacher unions and their allies are pushing back against issues like pension cuts and the premature opening of schools. Teachers and community members have taken over unused school buildings in good shape and used them for educational projects that range from adult education to community kitchens to tutoring to Montessori-based classes, and many of them have put together formal proposals to the Puerto Rican government to resist the sale of buildings and keep them public. At the university, faculty are resisting austerity measures and for three years have joined forces with student representatives and community members to produce a comprehensive project of reform for the public university. This project of _Reforma Universitaria_ (University Reform), which seeks to establish a new law for the UPR, has recently become a bill, PS 172, supported by at least 15 senators and currently under the consideration of the Puerto Rican senate.

Initiatives, such as the Y-PAR project that produced the articles you will read in this issue simultaneously discuss resistance to the combined effects of colonialism and capitalism, and are also an example of this resistance. They are proof of the ongoing ability of Puerto Rico’s public university, and its students, to keep producing knowledge against tremendous odds and formidable enemies.

**Notes**

1. “_Rio Grande de Loiza!… Great river. Great flood of tears._

_The greatest of all our island’s tears…_” reads this portion of the poem, as translated by Jack Agüeros.

2. We discuss this series of events, and their impact on the public educational system, in Brusi and Godreau (2019).

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**Notes on contributor**

*Rima Brusi* is an anthropologist, essayist, advocate and educator. Formerly a faculty member at the University of Puerto Rico and an applied anthropologist at The Education Trust, she is currently a Distinguished Lecturer in
Anthropology and a Scholar-In-Residence at the Center for Human Rights and Peace Studies at CUNY-Lehman College.

ORCID

Rima Brusi http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0484-7885

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