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

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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.

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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

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from the school to try to rescue the mural, the situation remained unresolved and the wall stayed blank.

Why such outrage? After all, some said, schools were in need of repairs after Hurricane Maria hit the island in September 2017.

For starters: the mural had been there for over fifty years, and was painted by Jose Antonio Torres Martino, an important figure in the history of Puerto Rican plastic arts. In fact, it was the only remaining work of its kind, a series of murals commissioned by government agencies to adorn the walls of then newly built public buildings in the sixties, and had been assiduously cared for by students and staff. The verses on the mural are from the poem *Río Grande de Loiza*, the most famous poem by Puerto Rico's national poet, Julia de Burgos, from whom the school took its original name and who died in 1953.

And that's not all.

The school was no longer public, nor was it called *Julia de Burgos* anymore. Closed and abandoned by Puerto Rico's Department of Education (DEPR) in 2017, the building that housed it had been rented out to Otoniel Font, pastor of the popular Evangelical Christian church *Fuente de Agua Viva*. The school was now private and baptized, in English, with the rather awkward name of 'Fountain Christian Bilingual School.'

There's more.

'Rented' is not even the most adequate verb choice. More like *cedida* ('given away'), like one of the newspaper headlines read. The DEPR gave away the school to Otoniel Font, heard pastor of *Fuente de Agua Viva*, for one dollar. The contract to finalize the transaction was signed in April of 2018, just before the erasure of the mural, but the church had been already operating the school, without a contract, since January of that year.

And, there's more still: the secretary of education who led the massive way of school closures that included the closing of the Julia de Burgos school, and who had approved its 'sale' was Julia Keleher, who had come to the island from Philadelphia and was the first non-Puerto Rican to lead the DEPR in almost a hundred years. During her tenure, between the years of 2016 and 2019, her administration closed over 400 (out of 1292) public schools (Rubiano Yedidia et al., 2020) many of them in good physical shape and academically high-performing (Brusi, 2020), in the name of savings. These savings were later proved to have never materialized (EFE, 2020).

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 (Morales, 2019); and the takeover of the island, in the wake of the debt default and hurricanes Irma and Maria, by the version of neoliberal ideology and practice now commonly called, after the seminal book by Naomi Klein, disaster capitalism (Bonilla and Lebron, 2019; Klein, 2018). Labor laws have been weakened, the public electric utility has been sold, and already low public pensions have been reduced: PROMESA and private capital seek to turn Puerto Rico, and its public institutions, into a fantasy black slate (Bonilla, 2018).

The Puerto Rican educational system² reflects its long colonial relationship to the United States. Since 1898, Puerto Rico has been a territory of the United States, legally defined – in ways that reinforce both its status of 'other' and of 'property' – as 'foreign in a domestic sense' and 'belonging to, but not part of, the United States.' (Rivera Ramos, 2001; Morales, 2019; Venator-Santiago, 2015). The island's central government and public agencies are modeled after those of the United States. Its K–12 public education system is locally divided in several districts but for federal purposes, it is actually a single district similar in size to Miami Dade County Public Schools or Chicago Public Schools, and the role of its Secretary of Education is similar in kind and scope to that of a district superintendent. Puerto Rico's eleven-campus public university system, the University of Puerto Rico (UPR), is similar in structure and subject to the same accreditation process as public multi-campus systems on the mainland, such as the California

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 as 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 Rico K–16 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 an 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).

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