

Cover image: Slum settlement in Cluj-Napoca, Romania (photo by Iosif Adam)

Editorial

## **Revolt, chronic disaster and hope**

*“This too is a war about stories.” (Solnit, 2017)*

*“...my aspirations lie where we ignite our desire to begin from and give birth to so many human and nonhuman lives, bound together by the most abject disinterest for power. Never am I more Caribbean, Antillean, Latin American, wherever we may be, than today. I live and die with wounds that will never finish closing. And I will always stand in the lines we make to care for us and, hopefully, to heal us.” (Llenín Figueroa 2019)*

*“Note 11: The longer I’m over here, abroad, the more intrigued I am by the contrasts between my native land and the great metropolis. I don’t mean the obvious, like the monumental buildings, the immense population, and the ruckus on the street. Nor, of course, the cold that bites more and more each day. I mean the little things, like the promptness of the bus, the water pressure, and the absolute confidence one has in the fact that things work. What now? What do we do?” (Orraca-Brandenberger 2019)*

**In early July 2019, a line of tolerability was irrevocably crossed when an 800+ page group chat that took place in the messaging application ‘Telegram’ was leaked, revealing damning exchanges between the sitting governor of Puerto Rico, Ricardo Rosselló, and his group of closest confidants. The insulting messages (now variously known as #telegramgate, Chatgate or RickyLeaks) shook this Caribbean ‘postcolonial colony’ (Ayala and Bernabe 2007; Flores 1993; Negrón-Muntaner and Grosfoguel 1997), surfacing at a time when multiple crises were converging in real time: a long-standing public debt and an undemocratically appointed financial authority board (‘La Junta’) continued to rule the island’s finances to the detriment of the masses; decades of neoliberal austerity policies were causing mass out-migration and poverty; and the havoc caused by Hurricane Maria was still unraveling. The intersection of these devastating trajectories was also giving way to alternative practices of hope and resistance (Klein 2018).**

**Released in two parts over the course of three days, the vast range of disdainful sexist, racist and homophobic diatribes against fellow islanders left few – whether friend or foe – unscathed. The language of contempt used by the chat’s authors was steeped in the white *Criollo* (Spanish descending) male privilege typical of an elite social and political class whose quest for power vis à vis the metropolitan centre has been historically greater than any pursuit for social, political or economic justice (see Briggs 2002; Santiago Valles 1994). The casual, misogynistic use of the word ‘whore’ (puta) in the thread was not a great departure from the local government’s long-standing public policy stance that refused to include gender as part of the public education curriculum; that entertained the Catholic church’s implication in legislative moves against abortion; that appointed a Women’s Rapporteur with no previous experience in gender or women’s issues; that facilitated a crushing austerity programme that made poor women’s lives more insecure; and that refused to**

## **acknowledge calls from feminist organisations to declare a state of emergency in response to the increasing deadly violence women face.**

As the texts emerged, the activist group 'Feministas en Construcción' immediately staged demonstrations that took their bodies to the governor's mansion and the international airport to make their disapproval and disgust visible and disruptive. Their politics of intentional discomfort, also a subject of mockery in the telegram chat, soon spread more widely to the streets, dominoing into a range of diverse, creative, mobile, artistic and musical manifestations. As the protests spread, Rosselló (and his cronies) retreated from the media limelight, refusing to speak publicly, joining the ranks of other autocratic leaders like those of the Arab Spring (Abu-Lughod 2012; Bayat 2017; Hafez 2012; Hamdy 2012). Hiding away, they followed the footsteps of global perpetrators of violence against women who became visible through the #MeToo movement (for critical discussions on this movement's collective dimensions, see: Gill and Orgad 2018; Mendes et al. 2018; Raiva and Sariola 2018; Zarkov and Davis 2018).

After the Rosselló chat was leaked, thousands descended into the old capital city, blocked its main highways, gathered by foot and cavalcade on the streets of other suburban and island-wide *pueblos* and took to the ocean in jetskis, paddle boards and scuba-gear, to demand his resignation. A mass motorbike demonstration led by 'El Rey Charlie' brought neighbours from marginalised urban communities *en masse* to a public manifestation for the first time in the island's protest history. Two weeks into the eclectic demonstrations, as an organised LGBTQ+ group staged a kiss-a-thon and reggaetón ('perreo combativo') party on the steps of the city's oldest Roman Catholic cathedral, Rosselló resigned through a pre-recorded facebook live video. A day later, in a final act of public misogyny, the rainbow arch in the entrance to Old San Juan, which had been unveiled by the ousted first lady to recognise LGBTQ+ rights, was surreptitiously, under the cover of dawn, painted over in white by her former personal escorts.

In addition to their explicit sexism, the skewed sense of superior virtue and irreproachability evident in Rosselló and Co's chat reached a nadir in the messages that mocked those who had died during Hurricane María in 2017. One of the members went as far as saying that he could see that the future of the island was beautiful because there would be no Puerto Ricans in it. This comment highlights the racialised arrogance of a local political elite all too willing to exist within the confines of a 'double coloniality of power' (Quijano 2000). Akin to W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of African American's 'double consciousness' (1903) and Franz Fanon's psychological accounts of the colonised mind (1967), this notion helps explain, from a Latin American postcolonial perspective, how the island's elites could voluntarily subject themselves to being ruled by the U.S. empire, while also ruling over their 'native others' along a hierarchical matrix of raced, gendered and classed oppression. In Puerto Rico, these internalised ideologies of difference and prejudice have materialised over time, in space, through an urban biopolitics of '(b)ordering' (Fusté 2010; Oliver-Didier 2016) and policing (Lebrón 2019) that has consistently excluded and stigmatised the lives of those deemed dispensable, ruinous and undesirable to the body of the nation (Dinzey Flores 2005). It is no coincidence that these derided 'others' are often public housing residents (Fernández Arrigoitia 2014).

The chats provided a present-day glimpse into the mindset that enables those in power today to enact the everyday 'work of death' (Mbembé and Meintjes 2003): to decide which lives can be woefully neglected and mismanaged, and which are deemed liveable. Voices from just after the storm, however, had already imagined a different future where the dead would play a different political role:

'...among those, the elderly who left this life because neither the gringos nor the miserable government we have did a single thing to prevent it. There is no better motive for a revolution than the soul and face of its dead. If something must rise, let it be them- the ones who died for lack of medicine, from hunger, and from thirst.'  
(Ramos Perea, 2019: 79)

In the wake of Hurricane María, official necro-politics (Mbembé 2019) were not delivered by individuals alone. A vastly obscure colonial infrastructure of disaster recovery, which included institutions like the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), got tasked with assisting in the provision of loans, funds or access to temporary shelter. This help was distributed in differential and highly racialised ways (Molinari 2019), often to the detriment of those displaced and left homeless, leading to what anthropologist Vincanne Adams called 'chronic disaster syndrome' (2013) in the post-Katrina context. Like Fullilove's concept of 'root shock' (2004), Adams's language of disease and ailment delivers an embodied framework through which to understand the pain of post-disaster recovery, and to situate the deep and profound psychic and mental health dimensions of home-loss caused by larger structural problems and inequalities. In the case of Puerto Rico, it illuminates the everyday trauma of a 'coloniality of disaster' (Bonilla and LeBrón 2019) that predated the storm; a colonial machinery of exploitation and tactical disinvestment, entangled with severe austerity measures and an unjust debt crisis (Morales 2019). The inequalities and vulnerabilities produced by this pre-hurricane context has a direct impact on an uneven post-hurricane social scenario that has exacerbated the widespread migration, dislocation and homelessness of thousands who were already living in insecure, threatened housing in impoverished communities.

In uncovering the extent of the formerly hidden reality of housing precarity and poverty in the island, Hurricane María led to a wave of spontaneous local and diaspora solidarity brigades. This hugely successful mobilisation was organised locally and in a decentralised fashion. Its reach was such that it is now regarded as one of direct precursors to the leaderless, island-wide post-chat 'peaceful revolution', also dubbed 'Verano Boricua'. The slogan that emerged in the latter — 'Somos Más, y No Tenemos Miedo' (We are more, and we are not afraid) — was a declaration that after living through such a traumatic storm and its devastating aftermath, which included months without homes, electricity, water, food or fuel, politicians could no longer scare people into individualised silence or submission. For a colonial territory that, beyond some notable events (such as the civic protest that ended the US Marine occupation and bombardment of the island of Vieques), was known for its lack of political uprisings compared to many of its Caribbean or Latin American counterparts, this attitude of unified and embodied complaint was wholly transformative.

In some ways, the fury that followed 'telegramgate' can be compared to the anger and mobilisation sparked by the injustices and neglect exhibited towards lives lost in the Grenfell Tower disaster (McLeod 2018; Hodgkinson 2019). In both, the deep wounds these events laid bare can only be partially explained by austerity and the loss of the welfare state. Instead, as

Ida Danewid (2019) has compellingly argued, the forms of displacement, dispossession and police violence that generate urban borderlands like Grenfell (and, I would add, colonial peripheries like Puerto Rico) need to be understood in relation to the historic work of racial capitalism. A similar sentiment is therefore expressed by Nelson Maldonado-Torres when he says that ‘The catastrophe of Hurricane Maria cannot be separated from the catastrophe of US colonialism...Likewise, the catastrophe of colonialism in Puerto Rico cannot be disentangled from the catastrophic effects of European colonization in the Caribbean and the US presence in the region...’ (2019: 340). These analytic lenses render present modes of urban governance in global cities and their constitutive colonial peripheries as quotidian enactments and legacies of empire. If we extend this brief comparison we can begin to see how, in both, forms of imperial and racial violence underlied a crass mode of cynicism that, fueled by long standing colonial stigma, was figuratively weaponised against (some) bodies, with fatal effects. The aftermaths of each of these disasters also demonstrate a shift in popular political priorities and allegiances. In Grenfell, as one of its residents put it:

“In all this peril, in all this heartache, look at our community, look how we are tight knit, black, white, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, we’re all here. We are untouchable if we use love and unity. We are untouchable. Let’s all stand together, in love and respect.” (quoted in Humphry 2017)

And in Puerto Rico, a member of a solidarity brigade in the west of the island recounts:

“Altos de Arena was beyond the mudslides, the landslides, and the fallen bridges...I still remember the look of the first woman who saw us...The woman hugged me tightly, and I took deep breaths to hold in the tears I had no right to shed. Hugs like this one were repeated many times in the more than fifteen brigades we organized from October 2017 to June 2018. All of us received hugs, and they changed us. They allowed us to listen. We understood that the things we carried were no more important than the conversations we had.” (Rosa-Rodríguez 2019: 63-64)

Evident in these expressions of material and emotional solidarity is the way in which an affective language of love and relationality is used to resist a (post)colonial logic that would otherwise classify, contain and disperse people according to divisive hierarchies of being. And, in the island, there are other clear glimmers of hope: in the squatted schools in the mountains, in the public kitchens (‘comedores sociales’) of cities and rural areas, in the alternative ‘energy insurrection’ (Massol Deyá 2019a,b) and its decolonial spirit, in the return to independent organic agriculture, in the popular decentralised town assemblies, in the irreverent politically charged art on the streets; as well as in the unwavering, forceful clamours of the ‘Feministas en Construcción’ and their many allies who continue to demand and act for a declaration of a state of emergency around Violence Against Women (for a comprehensive account of experiences, see Bonilla and LeBrón 2019).

There is also a broader spectre of hope arising, uprising, elsewhere: from Hawaii, Hong Kong and Barcelona, to Ecuador, Haiti, Lebanon and Chile, the public revolts of 2019 offer a powerful global statement through which to think about the historical reach of empire, the colonial logics of exploitation and dispossession, and the limits of neoliberalism and austerity. These tell stories of contemporary solidarity and resistance across country differences, with movements facing similar forms of state and police repression sharing

successful strategies of urban disruption and exhaustion. Like the structural (collectivised) rage of #MeToo (Banet-Weiser 2018), will this convergence of voices of dissent lead to a transformational politics? It remains to be seen whether, despite the visibility being given to colonial greed and exploitation and the gendered and racialised logics that underpin them, Puerto Rico's 'peaceful revolution' and all the other resistances being waged in succession across the globe in times of 'chronic disaster' will lead to a lasting urban politics of change, where corruption and its attendant colonial logics can be dismantled and inverted.

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