

# *YA NO SE DEJA: THE EVOLUTION OF PUERTO RICAN SOCIOPOLITICAL SOLIDARITY*

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## **Research Statement**

*Ya no se deja* represents the culmination of Puerto Rico's 500 year colonial history. I utilize historiographical texts and ethnographic works to chronicle the development of insular solidarity. This narrative project focuses on proletarian lives spanning from the early days of Spanish Empire up to the COVID-19 pandemic. In spite of a government deemed "genocidal" in its apathy (Bonilla, 2020 (3), 2), a new generation of Puerto Rican proletariat rose up in the summer of 2019 and declared "*ya no se deja*" (no more). This meant the rejection of the government's elitist rhetoric exposed in the *Rickyleaks* scandal, of the increasing privatization of education on the island, the continued relegation of the island to a colonial state, and a unilateral declaration that, in the words of poet Raquel Salas Rivera, "[Puerto Ricans] owe no one shame [nor] smallness".

I created this research-based narrative as a part of my honors thesis, which focuses on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Puerto Rico's tourism industry. The creative research done here helped me to understand the infrastructural, social, and economic damage done unto Puerto Rico. In the last forty years, increasing neoliberal policy and privatization has led to an already extant apathy increase in toxicity. In the aftermath of Hurricane María, many Puerto Rican communities in the interior of the island were left stranded by the government. Today, the COVID-19 pandemic has taken its own effects, with the continued pro-business government mindset focused on the provision of opportunity zones to foreign investors. Through this project, I demonstrate how the populous has historically reacted to that mindset, with a particular focus on the protests seen in the summer of 2019. I also speculate on how Puerto Ricans could rise up once more. Continued governmental incompetence could very well reactualize an indigenous, autonomous, and revolutionary spirit akin to that of their *jibaro* ancestors.

**Introduction: A War About Stories**

“This too is a war about stories”, writes Solnit (*in* Fernandez Arrigoitia, 2017, 405). In-deed, a war on stories has been occurring in which the oppressed have been neglected since Puerto Rico de San Juan Bautista was founded 500 years ago. As I write this from the diaspora, I think of the stories of those on the island which are often replaced by the daydreams of an island with gold-en beaches, clear skies, and evergreen trees that bring us calm. In our minds – that is, those of Puerto Ricans who are no longer in Puerto Rico – the island remains a treasure trove of drunken reminiscences which make us wonder: when will we go back?

The reality of the situation is markedly different. The tourism ads featuring Ricky Martin dancing over rich emerald landscapes and bright turquoise waters have lied. The stories they tell are those which propagate the idea of *la Isla del encanto*, as it is often popularly referred to. They es-pouse those same golden beaches which the diaspora tells their American neighbors they must vis-it. But visiting is not understanding. To pass through the main city of San Juan and take photos at its crimson gates just north of *la Fortaleza* is not to acknowledge an outrageous public debt. Nei-ther is it paying respects to the four thousand people were left to die in the aftermath of Hurricane María, nor is it giving voice to the myriad pleas from the island to shut its borders during the COVID-19 pandemic, which were turned down by the federal government (Puerto Rican Tourism Company, 2020).

These are stories which must be shared. They are those of a people who experience daily life under a colonial regime. They have made attempts to speak out for themselves sporadically throughout history. In 1868, the island’s first revolution against the Spanish Crown came to frui-tion in the form of *el Grito de Lares* (Picó, 2017, 186). Instigated by failed governmental respons-es to a hurricane and financial crisis in the same year, a collective front of slaves, day laborers, farmers and intellectuals assembled. Together, they attempted to seize several towns and establish the Republic of Puerto Rico, only to be defeated by the extensive reach of the Crown and its deep-seated paranoia of creole aspirations (Mintz, 2010, 139). In the American age of empire, peaceful protestors marching in Ponce on March 21, 1937 were shot down by police after their permit to protest had been revoked (*Washington Post*, 1999, A03). This type of repression of solidarity is present throughout island’s history, placing the fear of being directly targeted by the colonial state into the Puerto Rican proletariat. Such difficulties are best understood in the words of Mari Mari Narvaéz, a journalist and political advocate, who noted that “[in] some instances, advocating for human rights becomes a privilege” (*in* Bonilla and

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Lebrón, 2019, 7). Because of the fear of this repression, only those who the state will not specifically target have the privilege of speaking out.

The summer of 2019 thus presents a quagmire for those studying the island's sociopolitical history. The protests which successfully ousted Governor Ricardo Rosselló were instigated by the leak of a private group chat imbued with vile epithets and slurs against both political opponents and the general populous. However, Puerto Ricans had been long simmering with resentment for the political status quo. Recently, the implementation of neoliberal economic tenets by presidential administrations from Regan to Obama have proven exceedingly effective when it comes to rendering Puerto Ricans disenfranchised. As a politico-economic system, neoliberalism has single-handedly managed to devastate the island's infrastructure and economy. The public has been forced to assume an outrageous \$120 billion debt (Perez Semanaz, 2020). This prompted the federally appointed Financial Oversight and Management Board to cut government spending in healthcare, education, and social security (among many other areas) to pay off the debtors. Particularly affected has been the generation of the new millennium, baptized by Puerto Rican reggaeton artist Bad Bunny as the *generación "yo no me dejo,"*. Because of the failures of neoliberal policies, the *generación* ended up fulfilling a now prophetic anecdote from Helen I. Safa's ethnography *The Urban Poor of Puerto Rico*:

If, after meeting the requirements of the system, the young are still denied an opportunity, or if the system keeps raising requirements in order to continue excluding the poor from their just share of material prosperity, then conditions may become ripe for a growing political and class consciousness among the poor that demands an end to this continued inequality in Puerto Rican society. (1974, 96)

What follows in writing is a chronicle of their story. It is that which has been long fomenting, cooked in a cauldron left simmering for five centuries. It is a dish served with various accoutrements such as genocide, slavery, natural disaster, fiscal mismanagement, corruption, and more general *welbicheria* (a non-exhaustive list). This is the story of how a million Puerto Ricans manifested in a class act of solidarity in the summer 2019 protests. In shouts above the trembling tambourines, they denounced the perpetual state of "progress" under which they have lived, demanding now for themselves that there will be no more promises of development (Bonilla, 2020 (1), 156). They are now acting for themselves against those who would have thought they could never do it.

### **Chronicle: *Ya no se deja***

The *jibaros* originated from the mountains of Puerto Rico. They were figures

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which lived under the scalding sun of the Caribbean, working subsistence farms founded on the rising ever-green slopes crowing into the clouds (Mintz, 2010, 143). Far to the north of the island, the city built and administered by the Spanish from 1512 often left these rural agrarians to fend for them-selves. Too focused on funneling the myriad tonnes of plundered Aztec gold back to Iberia (Mintz, 2010, 137), the indifference displayed by the port of San Juan itself towards the rest of the island cultivated a culture of autonomy among the *jibaros*. This allowed them to live isolated, independent, and away from attention (Scarano *in* Mintz, 2010, 143).

It was not until the turn of the nineteenth century when the Spanish Crown began to see its Caribbean possessions as ideal for the capital exploitation. Partly fueled by the loss of their main-land colonies to revolution, Spanish officials saw fit to change the economy of their remaining ter-ritories. The former “colonial backwater” of Puerto Rico was thus transformed into a sugar econo-my modeled after the French and English sugar colonies (Mintz, 2010, 145). With this change in economy came the inevitable augmentation of the island’s slave population, rising by 400% be-tween 1765 to 1821 (Picó, 2017, 154). However, the profit promised by sugar cultivation never came to full fruition for the Hispanic Caribbean. By the middle of the 19th century, Puerto Rico maxed out in production as the French and the English had entertained such an economic domina-tion among themselves (Mintz, 2010, 141).

This new sugar cultivation, so inherently bound to the tradition of chattel slavery, naturally created an upset within the Puerto Rican populous. By the end of the American Civil War in 1865, Puerto Rico’s latent mobilization of a sugar economy caused the island to be one of three remaining slave states in the Atlantic world (Picó, 2017, 182). The persistence of slavery in Puerto Rico gave way to several abolitionist initiatives. One was a joint Cuban-Puerto Rican *junta* sent to Spain in a failed attempt to parlay for more autonomy, another was the more explosive *Grito de Lares* revolu-tion in September of 1868 (Picó, 2017, 184). This uprising would see the collective action of slaves, day laborers, farmers, and intellectuals arrest Spanish officials and proclaiming a free re-public in several towns, including, successfully, in Lares. Though the uprising failed as a result of disorganization and the extensive reach of the Spanish Crown, the revolution “[represented] the first major concentrated effort by Puerto Ricans to alter their common situation” (Picó, 2017, 186). It was a foundational event for Puerto Rican solidarity.

Institutionalized attempts to thwart this solidarity would continue from the Spanish era of empire to the American era. The annexation of Puerto Rico into the increasing list US overseas “protectorates” presented new opportunities

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to wealthy Americans (Mintz, 2010, 150). New sugar corporations known as *colonias* differed from the Spanish *haciendas* in their widespread consumption of land and the destruction of natural forests. The land would then be reorganized to plant commodified crops cultivated for the sole purpose of corporate capital gain (Picó, 2017, 243). Though the *colonias* incentivized workers by promising economic security from threats of natural disaster, the environmental vulnerability of the island was given up for non-sustainable enterprises which deeply affected living security.

The introduction of the American politico-economic system to the island was accompanied by a paranoia of political solidarity for plantation workers in the south. One of Mintz's subjects, Don Taso, recalls the fear of being discovered participating in Socialist Party politics (1974, 150). "They used to have this system so that when the voters would come from their *colonias* to vote, they were confronted with the *mayordomos* sitting there," recalls Taso. This would in turn force the workers into place a where they would have to vote against their own interests so that they could keep their jobs.

When the pro-business Popular Democratic Party came into power in the 1948, American industries began flooding the island's northern metropolis to take advantage of new lucrative tax exemptions (Picó 2017, 271). These exemptions proved so effective that by 1970, manufacturing overcame agriculture as the leading labor force on the island (Picó, 2017, 272). To grow the number of urban proletariat available for work in these industrial jobs, the government began increasing expenditures on education, housing, and welfare (Safa, 1974, 1-5). Subsequently, a large influx of migrants forced many onto fringe communities set up on marginal public land. There, chronic dependency upon the greater metropolis for public works and transportation worked to make these migrants politically docile (Safa, 1974, 12). Regardless, many of these communities experienced an internal solidarity that is often seen by underfunded and impoverished peoples. "Poor as we are, but we always had something for someone in need," noted Safa's subject Raquel (1974, 61). These systems of aid are best understood as non-activist, local forms of solidarity that permit the mutual mobilizations of individuals based on their social network (Stack, 1974, 43).

The growing influence of capitalist industrialization on the island can also be seen in the increasing privatization of life by the urban proletariat. To achieve the promise of capital gain, the poor tended to "quietly go about their business of making a living" (Banerjee, 1982, 176). Many working-class Puerto Ricans experienced a median household income sub-par to that of mainland United States that was coupled with an increasing social inequality (Rivera-Batiz &

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Santiago, 1996, 67; Quintero Rivera, 1976, 167). Rather than unionizing in political solidarity, an individual notion of thrift and initiative was promoted as the best way to ascend the economic ladder (Safa, 1974, 33). Education played a significant role in the economic enfranchisement of future generations. Parents stressed to their children that a high school degree would bring them a significantly broader array of opportunities (Safa 1974, 56). However, the growth of educational institutions remained a façade for the working class. The promotion of these schools as individual means of socioeconom-ic ascension made education “the opium of the working people” (Quintero Rivera, 1976,166). Many Puerto Ricans were not fully aware of the repercussions of an occupational sector growing at a slower rate than the educational sector (Safa, 1974, 58). As such, there remains little space to succeed in spite of a wide variety of tools to do so. These developments began to lay the ground-work for what Safa argues would become the ripening conditions for “a growing political and class consciousness among the poor” (1974, 96). Despite meeting the systematic requirements for suc-cess, younger generations found themselves walking a thin tightrope between the middle class and outright poverty.

The façade soon faded with the expansion of neoliberal economics on the island. When the Clinton administration eliminated tax incentives in 1993, the manufacturers which had previously dominated the insular economy left in search of cheaper manufacturing deals (Bonilla, 2020 (2), 6). Looking to balance Puerto Rico’s budget, local banks piggybacking off the Federal Reserve began to draw increasingly irresponsible loans from vulture funds and Wall Street banks (Morales, 2015). Over the course of the next two decades, the debt augmented to a spectacular \$72 billion sum that was declared unplayable in 2015 (Morales *in* Bonilla and Lebrón, 2019, 1). However, US territories were prohibited from filing for bankruptcy by a 1984 legislative ruling. This prompted the US Congress to pass PROMESA in 2016, a law which which allowed President Obama to appoint a Financial Oversight and Management Board (known colloquially and henceforth as the *junta*). The junta was then granted permission to take federal control over the island’s debt pay-ment, and by consequence, its budget and economy.

The junta’s initial directive was to minimize government spending so that more capital could be allocated to settling the debt. This meant the widespread privatization of many previously public platforms, foremost among them education. Many K-12 schools were shut down and reo-pened with private American sponsors, as was the case with the former Escuela Julia de Burgos, now titled Fountain Christian Bilingual School (Brusi and Godreau *in* Bonilla and Lebrón, 2019, 3). Specifically targeted by the junta was the prominent

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higher-level University of Puerto Rico. The University was both one of the strongest contributors towards upward mobility on the island. More importantly, it was most prominent platforms speaking out against the threat of the Junta, and by extent, of American empire (Brusi and Godreau *in* Bonilla and Lebrón, 2019, 6-7). As such, defunding the institution was no problem for the federally-operated junta.

Here we see the foundations for what Safa argued would be the catalyst for the growing class consciousness lacking in Puerto Rican society (1974, 96). The privatization of schools left many students and members of the younger generation out on the block, jobless, and now too without the previously sanctified promise of social mobility through education.

The establishment of this new austerity state for Puerto Rico was the product of its development under United States imperialism. This is to say, when a population lacks a politically-endowed self-determination, they are unable to produce and sustain an economy which benefits themselves over others. They subsequently become economically disabled and disproportionately dependent on a “helping hand” in times of crisis. But what happens when that “helping hand” doesn’t come? When, after 24 hours of wall-battering winds and rain, insular infrastructure becomes devastated? When phone lines are down and the blackout is universal, who is there to turn to?

Such was the case in the aftermath of Hurricane María. With the residue of a toxic sociopolitical system scattered across the island, the head of the island’s emergency management admitted that the government “had virtually ceased to function” (Bonilla, 2020 (2), 5). Puerto Ricans were left stranded. State aid eventually came in the form of insulting sausage-and-Skittle meal boxes and tossed paper towels (Klein *in* Bonilla and Lebrón, 2019, 12), but recovery of Puerto Rico was left predominantly in the hands of private contractors given millions of federal dollars. Companies like Whitefish Energies, in charge of repairing the electrical grid, were more inclined to capitalize on the crisis than support the communities which they had been charged to restore (Fernández Campbell and Irfan 2017). This was made even more explicit when 98% of the island’s territory was declared an “opportunity zone” for foreign investors (Bonilla, 2020 (1), 155). The colony was once again open for business.

As such, the Puerto Rican people were left with a case of “[missing] the thing by waiting for it” (Kafka *in* Krasznahorkai, 1985). In the perpetual wait for state aid that would never sufficiently come, Puerto Ricans were forced to resolve many of the problems left by María on their own accord. Several autonomous initiatives were taken by towns to cope with the loss. One such initiative was the Adjuntas community organization of Casa Pueblo which implemented renewable

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energy measures able to withstand the attack of the hurricane (Massol-Deyá *in* Bonilla and Lebrón, 2019, 7). In using a communally-based form of power, the private contractors as well as the state government subsequently became disenfranchised when the people began to cultivate their own electrical (and thus political) power. Another method by which Puerto Ricans coped with the hurricane was the establishment of socialized foodways. Initiatives such as the *comedores sociales* (social diners) rejected the aforementioned meager and inadequate meals by flexibly exchanging quality food for money, donations, or volunteer labor (Roberto *in* Bonilla and Lebrón, 2019, 3). This ensured communities that none of their members would starve.

It seems then that much of the *autogestión* developed by the Puerto Rican people was a direct rejection of the increasing privatization of affairs by the government. Communities managed to protest generations of official neglect by focusing on “taking care of themselves” as opposed to waiting for government aid (Bonilla *with* Klein *in* Bonilla and Lebrón, 2019, 11). In many ways, the devastation of María forced a return to the sustainable and autonomous methods of care displayed by the Puerto Rican *jibaro*. One could then argue that the *espíritu jibaro* (*jibaro* spirit) was romantically reincarnated once more in the communal care-taking seen after María. One thing is certain – that it was neither the government, nor Donald Trump, nor the private companies, nor the American people who saved the island from capitulation. Rather, it was the Puerto Rican people who refused to miss their recovery by waiting for it to happen.

Rejecting political dependency proved in Puerto Ricans’s favor. In the immediate aftermath of the hurricane, communities became so focused on recovery that they could not focus on explicit political action and protest (Bonilla *with* Klein *in* Bonilla and Lebrón, 2019, 11). That was no longer the case come two years later. In July of 2019, the *Rickyleaks* scandal broke news, in which governor Ricardo Rosselló and his board of secretaries had their group chat leaked to the public. Around 800 pages of misogynistic, homophobic, fatphobic, and elitist were shared across news outlets across the island. Particularly explicit among the group chat was a message which declared the need of a body from one of María’s victims to “feed the vultures” (Tormos-Aponte, 2019), which subsequently invoked the memory of the 4,000 dead in the aftermath. The gubernatorial neglect could no longer be hidden.

The only response for Puerto Ricans was to take the anger simmering for five hundred years and overwhelm the capital city of San Juan. On the busiest day, over a million protestors called specifically for the resignation of governor Rosselló, and more generally for top-down systematic change (Bonilla, 2020

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(3), 1). This protest saw its participants physically manifest in that communal bond characterizing the class consciousness that Safa claimed had been lacking in the general populous (1974, 96). On display at the protests were myriad colors. Banners ranging from Pride flags to the black-and-white revolutionary flag were seen waving over the heads of participants. Clamoring drums beat along to the sound of shouts denouncing the government's "genocidal tendency" (Bonilla, 2020 (3), 2).

The protests were not just proletarian in nature, as sincere displays of solidarity were made by prominent Puerto Rican artists. Ricky Marin, Bad Bunny, Residente, and iLé were present and participant, and the latter three released a song inspired by the protests aptly titled "*Afilando los cu-chillos*" ("Sharpening the Knives") (Vélez Santiago, 2019). In it, they refer to the generation of activists leading the movement as the generación "yo no me dejo" (*generation "I won't be fooled"*). Because the generación had seen the consequences of colonialism amplified in their lifetime, they became a generation which "[prioritized] civic action" (*El Nuevo Dia*, 2019 [translated manually]) over any other form of pass-time.

Ultimately, the protests succeeded in achieving their specific goal of getting governor Rosselló to resign (Robles and Mazzei 2019). Yet the activism which characterized the *revolución del verano '19* has by no means ended. In January of 2020, Rosselló's successor Governor Wanda Vázquez was the target of another wave of protests. The primary grievances were the failed government response to still-consistent earthquakes in the south of the island and the discovery of a caché of unused supplies from the post-María era (*The Guardian*, 2020). Though these protests were smaller in number and shorter in nature, it is doubtful that Puerto Ricans are feeling a fatigue from advocacy. The very fact that in this turn they sought to arm themselves with a symbol as revolutionary as the guillotine proves that they are not afraid to stand up to a government which they have deemed an "Assassin State" (Bonilla, 2020 (3), 2).

Protests have continued into the COVID-19 pandemic as well. On April 15th, 2020, private citizens and members of Puerto Rico's emergency medical teams were out in the streets of San Juan. They caravanned before the governor's mansion in San Juan to protest the inefficient governmental strategies regarding public health (*Latino USA*, 2020). Among the grievances cited was the purchase of a \$38 million dollar testing kit package. The seller company had no previous experience in the assembly of medical equipment but had ties to Vázquez' New Progressive Party. Because the government mishandled one of the first initiatives meant to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, the people responded by fighting back. Just as seen in the summer of 2019, Puerto Ricans will continue

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pushing back against political incompetence should they be incited to do so. For now, as seen, the *walebicheria* only continues.

### **Conclusion & Reflections: We Owe No One Shame**

In many ways, the effort to chronologize the development of solidarity on the island into a less-than 5,000-word paper written for an undergraduate journal may seem farce. Ten words per every year of Puerto Rico's existence under colonial rule seems nearly insufficient to properly tell the story of the popular response to colonial abuse. There is not enough space to properly portray the nuance which it has exhibited.

Thus, we come back to the opening quote by Solnit: "This too is a war about stories" (*in* Fernandez Arrigoitia, 2017, 405). Though not writing specifically about Puerto Rico, her words can be applied to the very process of just *telling* a story. The storyteller must run through a series of justifications for what is going to be said and who is going to be involved. They often question themselves if there is greater significance in someone that remains voiceless or something that re-mains unsaid.

These are ideas which consistently plague storytellers, and, in the specific case of this pa-per, the ethnographer. It goes without saying that when an ethnographer is conducting an intro-spective study on their own culture, they will find it impossible to separate themselves from it. As I write this now, I think back to the news articles flooding my feed which chronicled the develop-ment of Puerto Rico's summer 2019 protests. I think about the myriad voices which were all shouting for Governor Rosselló's resignation. I think about the myriad tones, tongues, and teeth which produced these shouts. In regards to myself, I think about how I was filled less with scien-tific curiosity and more of a desire to be a part of the change I want to see.

Certainly then, any work which I produce on Puerto Rico will inherently try to tie itself to the narratives of the people of the island. My perspective becomes inherently islander because I hear those myriad voices. Though they are by no means monolithic, I understand them all. Even as a son of the diaspora, I have felt their grievances. I have understood their pride, their embarrass-ment, their mourning, their love all as my own. And thus, I can at least hope that what I have writ-ten properly reflects what Puerto Ricans have seen and felt throughout the existence of the Puerto Rican nation.

Yet the story does not stop here. So long as the "commonwealth" status quo remains, so long as insular politics remain divided as to the island's political status in relation to the US, so long as the island derives its economy from a deeply seated colonial relationship, the story will continue. The war for those

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stories will continue. And so long as it does, I am not only reminded of but inspired by the following words written by Raquel Salas Rivera:

No le debemos a nadie la vergüenza

No le debemos a nadie la pequeñez

We owe no one shame

We owe no one smallness

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