

INTERROGATING THE FUTURE OF PUERTO RICAN STUDIES

A horizontal strip of bright yellow paper with a torn, ragged edge is placed over the word 'PUERTO'. The paper appears to be a separate layer, partially obscuring the text and the background gradient.

AURORA SANTIAGO ORTIZ & JORELL A. MELÉNDEZ-BADILLO, *editors*

**Interrogating
the Future of
Puerto Rican
Studies**



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Interrogating the Future of Puerto Rican Studies

EDITED BY

Aurora Santiago Ortiz and Jorell A. Meléndez-Badillo

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Puerto Rican Studies in the Wake

Yarimar Bonilla

In 2017 a profound transformation was unleashed, affecting not just the physical landscape of Puerto Rico but also the collective psyche of its people. Hurricane María was more than a climatic upheaval; it was a historical fissure dividing time into a “before” and an “after.” When I speak here of María, I am not just referring to the violent winds and rains that battered the archipelago for over thirty hours, nor to the tangible devastation that compelled 90 percent of Puerto Rican households to seek federal aid in the wake of the storm.¹ I am alluding also to its afterlife, to *los tiempos de María*, as an extended period of neglect and abandonment but also a time of awakening.

These times catalyzed an affective reckoning, akin to what Christina Sharpe describes as life in the wake.² Sharpe conceptualizes “wakefulness” as a state of heightened consciousness, a keen recognition of how the legacies of slavery, colonialism, and systemic discrimination pervade everyday life. The wake is not merely a state of consciousness; it is a pathway for resistance and transformation, a continuous process of mourning, collective care, and the forging of new lifeworlds that challenge and undermine the status quo.

This is not to say that Puerto Ricans pre-María were oblivious to the impacts of colonialism and slavery on their society. However, the thin façade of the Estado Libre Asociado (Commonwealth of Puerto Rico) long offered a semblance of plausible denial. Many once harbored the belief that the indignities of colonial status were somehow mitigated by the promise of aid in times of crisis. *Los tiempos de María* brutally dispelled this illusion.

María was a warped time space of both rapid change and deliberate stagnation.³ As with the global pandemic that followed, there was a period of suspended time in which aid stalled and time seemingly stood still, followed by a sudden declaration that normality had returned. Yet, the reality is that there is no going back. This is true of the personal lives irrevocably altered by displacement and loss as well as by the political landscape that was transformed through massive uprisings. It is true of the academic terrain as well—as this book demonstrates.

Before María, many scholars, especially those in the US academy, set their priorities based on the need of tenure files, CV lines, and strategic plans. In the wake of María, more and more are instead embracing their own goals and metrics of success. They are no longer simply checking off boxes or following the playbook of yet-to-be decolonized academic fields. Instead, they are holding themselves accountable to a different kind of peer review.

Moving beyond the conventional role of the private academic, many have adopted the stance of the critically engaged public intellectual guided less by academic trends and more by a commitment to human rights, the questioning of established beliefs, and the production of politically engaged and socially responsive research.⁴

This evolution mirrors trajectories in postcolonial and ethnic studies, where scholars have long prioritized the needs and challenges of their communities above the passing fads of academe. It plays out in parallel with transformations across the world in the wake of Black Lives Matter, the #MeToo movement, and the global Palestinian solidarity movement. This emerging global tide of solidarity-based scholarship stands in stark contrast to the provincial approaches of an un-decolonized academy that routinely tries to pass off Eurocentrism as objectivity.⁵

Politically, the post-María era is characterized by both potential and peril, in ways reminiscent of what Antonio Gramsci described as the “interregnum”: a period of uncertainty and instability marked by crumbling social, political, and economic structures and the gestation of new possibilities.⁶ The most notable event was the series of mass protests held in 2019 that led to Governor Ricardo Rosselló’s resignation. While these protests were primarily sparked by the government’s response to the disaster, they also tapped into a deeper well of frustration with corrupt governance, heteropatriarchy, and Puerto Rico’s unique form of white supremacy, epitomized by the *blanquitos*—the long lineage of elite white males ruling the island for the benefit of the few at the expense of many.

On the electoral front, the Movimiento Victoria Ciudadana (MVC), established in 2019, quickly gained prominence for its anti-corruption stance and social justice platform, offering an alternative to the entrenched two-party system. But at the same time, the political party Proyecto Dignidad also emerged in 2019, attracting those disillusioned with current politics but aligned with religious orthodoxy. As Antonio Gramsci theorized, in times of uncertainty and dissatisfaction, right-wing movements can swiftly gain traction through populist rhetoric and exclusionary nationalism. (As has been the case within the continental United States as well.) Thus, while new left, queer, and unapologetically Black movements have found fertile terrain after María, across Puerto Rico and the United States, there has also been a noticeable rise in right-wing influence and increased repression against communities advocating for change.

Post María has also become a time and space of unbridled speculative capitalism, violent displacement, and grotesque inequality. Puerto Rico has a higher rate of income inequality than any other US jurisdiction, with a 2021 Gini index rate of .545 as compared to the national average of .482.⁷ While in the United States only 10 percent of households earn over \$200,000 annually, in Puerto Rico, a mere 1.4 percent of households reach this threshold.⁸ This means that wealth is *extremely* concentrated and that poverty is widely pervasive. As a result, Puerto Rico has become a place of stark contrasts where some struggle with daily power outages and suffer from food and housing insecurity while others live in air-conditioned, solar-powered luxury.

As I pen this foreword in early 2024, on the brink of a new electoral season, many hope that the seeds planted during *los tiempos de María* and the “Ricky Renuncia” protests will continue to erode the enduring appeal of the two-party system. But regardless of what might happen in the electoral realm, there is no question that a radical transformation has taken place in the academic terrain. A new generation of scholars is now coming into its own amid a new sense of stakes, a new sense of urgency, a new ethos, and ultimately a new epistemology.

This book is an archival artifact of this moment of transformation. It is poised to sit alongside such other foundational works as *The People of Puerto Rico* (1956), *Historical Perspectives on Puerto Rican Survival in the U.S.* (1996), *Colonial Dilemma* (1993), and *Puerto Rican Jam* (1997), to name but a few.⁹ Each of these volumes represents not just a scholarly cohort but also what David Scott defines as a “problem space”: a historically and culturally contingent set of analytical frameworks and interrogations.¹⁰

For instance, *The People of Puerto Rico* reflected the US academy's interest in understanding how accelerated economic transformations under US rule would reshape Puerto Rican culture and life. While *Historical Perspectives on Puerto Rican Survival* focused on how those expelled and deemed disposable by these very economic transformations were gestating new cultural worlds in the corners of the empire, *Colonial Dilemma* showed an interest in framing Puerto Rico's problems through the lens of decolonization, and *Puerto Rican Jam* sought to question the methodological nationalism that plagued the field.¹¹ Similarly, this volume speaks to the desire to forge a new chapter of Puerto Rican studies that can meet the challenges of a present marked by disaster and ruin.¹²

However, we must ask ourselves: How can we continue to grow Puerto Rican studies without letting the weight of Puerto Rico's multiple crises constrain us into the straitjacket of disaster studies? How can we harness the potentiality of this moment to interrogate, imagine, and document emergent new modes of life, beliefs, practices, solidarities, and ways of inhabiting a world under persistent and deeply inequitable threats that transcend political borders? In other words, how can we productively channel the "wake work" being done by contemporary scholars into the envisioning of a post-disaster future?

Our current moment demands more than a mere documentation of a post-disaster Puerto Rico; it calls for the envisioning of a post-disaster world. It beckons a holistic, interconnected approach to Puerto Rican scholarship that transcends national boundaries and spans empires. Inspired by this volume, I envision a future for Puerto Rican studies as a decentralized web of relationships connecting our heterogeneous diasporic communities with our equally diverse archipelago. Breaking with the insularism, metro-centrism, and methodological nationalism that has long characterized the field, I envision a confederate and relational model of Puerto Rican studies in dialogue and solidarity with US-based ethnic studies and Caribbean and Latin American studies as well as multiple imperial, colonial and nonsovereign political formations across the globe.

In short, this volume serves not just as a scholarly reflection but also as a critical reevaluation of the role of academic inquiry in times of crisis. It challenges scholars to reconsider their responsibilities in the wake of disaster, pushing for an academia that not only understands and documents but also actively participates in the work of reconstruction and repair. This book, therefore, is a call to action for academics and intellectuals, urging them to step out of the ivory tower and into the field, to engage

with communities, and to use their research as a tool for social transformation. Ultimately, it aims to redefine the purpose and practice of Puerto Rican studies in the wake, advocating for a scholarship that is not just *about* Puerto Rico, but is *for* and *with* Puerto Rico in its ongoing journey through and beyond the political and intellectual rubble.

Notes

- 1 Jordan R. Fischbach, Linnea Warren May, Katie Whipkey, Shoshana R. Shelton, Christine Anne Vaughan, Devin Tierney, Kristin J. Leuschner, Lisa S. Meredith, and Hilary J. Peterson, "After Hurricane Maria: Predisaster Conditions, Hurricane Damage, and Recovery Needs in Puerto Rico," RAND Corporation research report, September 30, 2020, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2595.html.
- 2 Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
- 3 Yarimar Bonilla, "The Coloniality of Disaster: Race, Empire, and the Temporal Logics of Emergency in Puerto Rico, USA," *Political Geography* 78 (April 2020): 102181; Yarimar Bonilla and Marisol LeBrón, eds., *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019).
- 4 I am drawing here on Edward Said's notions of the duties of the postcolonial intellectual; for more, see Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1996).
- 5 See, for example: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution* (New York: Grove Press, 1964); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999); Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).
- 6 Antonio Gramsci and Joseph A. Buttigieg, *Prison Notebooks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
- 7 Jennifer Hinojosa, Yarimar Bonilla, Carlos Vargas-Ramos, Laura Colón Meléndez, Jorge R. Soldevila Irizarry, and Damayra I. Figueroa-Lazu, "Pervasive Poverty in Puerto Rico: A Closer Look," Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College (CENTRO) report, September 22, 2023, <https://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/reports/pervasive-poverty-in-puerto-rico>; Héctor Cordero-Guzmán, "Poverty in Puerto Rico in Historical and Contemporary Perspective," in *Poverty in Puerto Rico: A Socio-Economic and Demographic Analysis with Data from the Puerto Rico Community Survey*, edited by Carmen Nazario (San Juan: InterAmerican University of Puerto Rico, 2016).

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- 8 Hinojosa et al., "Pervasive Poverty in Puerto Rico"; Cordero-Guzmán, "Poverty in Puerto Rico."
- 9 Julian Haynes Steward, *The People of Puerto Rico: A Study In Social Anthropology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956); Clara E. Rodriguez and Virginia Sánchez Korrol, *Historical Perspectives on Puerto Rican Survival in the U.S.* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 1996); Edwin Meléndez and Edgardo Meléndez, *Colonial Dilemma: Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Puerto Rico* (Boston: South End, 1993); Frances Negrón-Muntaner and Ramón Grosfoguel, *Puerto Rican Jam: Rethinking Colonialism and Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
- 10 David Scott uses the framework of the problem space to highlight the historical and contextual specificity of intellectual and political problems. Scott uses this notion to critique traditional historical narratives, especially in the context of colonialism and postcolonialism, urging a reevaluation of these narratives based on the changing problem spaces from which they emerge. For more, see David Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism After Postcoloniality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).
- 11 For more on methodological nationalism see Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, "Methodological Nationalism and Beyond: Nation-State Building, Migration and the Social Sciences," *Global Networks* 2, no. 4 (2002): 301–34.
- 12 Yarimar Bonilla, "Postdisaster Futures: Hopeful Pessimism, Imperial Ruination, and La futura cuir," *Small Axe* 24, no. 2 (2020): 147–62.

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Interrogating the Future of Puerto Rican Studies

Aurora Santiago Ortiz and Jorell A. Meléndez-Badillo

The impetus for this volume stemmed from the confluence of several key moments within the field of Puerto Rican studies while also coinciding with one of the most dire conjunctures in Puerto Rico's recent history. This book was imagined as concurrent environmental, fiscal, political, and social crises were already underway or soon approaching, not only in the archipelago, but for the world's most vulnerable populations. We have witnessed catastrophic events, both natural and human made, that continue to reverberate in the present and will continue to do so for years to come. Because of its history of activism and struggle, scholars in the field of Puerto Rican studies have responded to these events in ways that seek to parse through, analyze, and transform the oppressive conditions that enabled these compounded crises to occur in the first place. Reckoning with the afterlives and present of imperialism, racial capitalism, colonialism, and coloniality are enduring concerns for scholars in this field.

During the 2019 meeting of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), the recently created LASA Puerto Rico Section (2018) sponsored a panel titled "Rethinking Puerto Rican Studies? Nuevas perspectivas e interpretaciones." The conversations that took place during the panel and because of it reflected a multiplicity of perspectives, geographical locations, and arrivals to Puerto Rican studies. Scholars and activists from both the archipelago and the diaspora were in attendance—from those that helped build Puerto Rican studies from its origins in New York City to emerging scholars in the field.¹ Many of those in attendance were deeply invested in an inclusive vision of Puerto Rican studies that equally values knowledge production about Puerto Rico, Puerto Ricans, and the Puerto Rican experience in both the archipelago and the United States.

The LASA Puerto Rico panel incorporated several thematic axes. For instance, historiographic debates were revisited. There were also conversations about how we define and position the diaspora within Puerto Rican studies. There were heated moments when discussing the androcentrism of the field as well as the exclusion of the diaspora by scholars in the archipelago. For those in attendance in that packed, standing room-only conference space in Boston, it was clear that a shift was already brewing in how Puerto Rico, Puerto Ricans, and *la puertorriqueñidad* are understood and conceptualized.

Two months after that pivotal LASA Puerto Rico panel, thousands of activists, along with multiple and diverse sectors of Puerto Rican society, massively protested and subsequently succeeded in removing former governor Ricardo Rosselló from office. A year later, in the wake of the George Floyd uprisings that became multiscalar and transnational in their reach, Black and brown, working-class, trans, and queer young people spilled into the streets of Old San Juan to collectively mourn and affirm that *las vidas negras importan*. As Santiago Ortiz argues in this volume, many of these groups that united in protest have been part of Puerto Rico's infrastructures of resistance, or, "the political cultures and imaginaries that laid the groundwork for these vibrant cultures of protest."

These events gave way to generative tensions and institutional ruptures within the field, some of which were not new. They also signaled, however, a necessary moment of reckoning with the ways the field of Puerto Rican studies is conceptualized and defined. This epistemic shift poses generative challenges that we address in this volume. We sit with these constructive tensions to look back at the emergence of Puerto Rican studies as a field to build bridges and solidarities with those that came before us. Maintaining a sense of collective memory is crucial so that we can build on previous scholarship while creating an archive that continues to expand the field. By taking a critical look at the past, we can understand the motivations that led to the emergence of Puerto Rican studies, many of which continue to be relevant in the present.

Radical Beginnings, Continued Reimaginings

Puerto Rican studies as a field of interdisciplinary research and teaching began in New York City in the late 1960s and 1970s, spurred by student and community demands for an academic space that contested dominant

narratives and scripts about Puerto Ricans in the United States. Since its inception, the field has been linked to the “racial, social, and political struggle[s]” of Puerto Ricans in the United States by focusing “on multiple aspects of the history and socioeconomic, political, and cultural experiences of Puerto Ricans as a colonized and racialized diasporic population.”² Looking back on the first fifty years of Puerto Rican studies, and as the authors in part I of this volume document, the exclusion and marginalization Puerto Ricans encountered during the emergence of the field of Puerto Rican studies remains relevant, albeit with shifting circumstances.³

Fifty years ago, Puerto Rican students, faculty, and community members demanded representation, participation, and a voice in academic spaces. This was happening at the height of movements and mobilizations rooted in civil rights, Third World solidarity, and a global wave of protests against the Vietnam War. This was also a moment when the Young Lords Organization, the Partido Socialista Puertorriqueño (Puerto Rican Socialist Party), and a handful of clandestine armed groups created new forms of political participation and protest repertoires for Puerto Ricans in the diaspora and the archipelago.⁴

As the product of those mobilizations that demanded greater representation in the curriculum and faculty, the field was consolidated through the creation of several academic programs and courses that were dedicated to the study of our people, our cultures, and our histories. Perhaps the most important one became the Center for Puerto Rican Studies (CENTRO), established in 1973 at Hunter College. It quickly became a hub for research, archiving, and scholarship dedicated to everything related to the Puerto Rican experience in the archipelago and the diaspora. Given its interdisciplinary nature and community ethos, CENTRO became, and still is, a national referent of Puerto Rican studies.

Around that time, the field was energized by a host of publications that dealt with migration, colonialism, and Puerto Rican identity. The works of Frank Bonilla, Virginia Sánchez Koroll, Ricardo Campos, Juan Flores, and Edna Acosta Belén, just to mention a few examples, provided new avenues of studies.⁵ These new interpretations, anchored in approaches to social history and cultural studies, also began an intense dialogue with scholarship produced in the archipelago by a generation of scholars who sought to interrogate “the Puerto Rican reality” from below.⁶ Today, only a handful of those programs that emerged out of that initial period are still active. Yet, there are Puerto Rican studies scholars across the archipelago, the United States, and beyond.⁷ Meanwhile, Puerto Ricans are facing unprecedented challenges.

For almost two decades, fiscal, social, and political crises embattle the archipelago, forcing Puerto Ricans to migrate in numbers that pale in comparison to what scholars called “the Great Migration,” when more than 835,000 people left Puerto Rico. This exile, often involuntary, is exacerbated by the slow violence and necrocolonial politics of the Puerto Rican government, local elites, and federal administrators. One of the main entities responsible for plunging the archipelago into deeper precarity is the federally appointed Fiscal Oversight Management Board (FOMB) comprised of academics, lawyers, and key players in the private financial sectors that had a hand in creating the disaster. The FOMB wields more power than the Puerto Rican executive and legislative branches. They are the *de facto* governing body of the archipelago.⁸

In the United States, Puerto Ricans, particularly those that are racialized and come from working-class backgrounds, have and continue to navigate structural oppression as well as social, political, and economic subordination. If most migrants chose urban enclaves as their destinations when migrating in the past, Puerto Ricans are now also moving to rural areas and towns, as well as suburban areas, throughout the country. While the northeast, Florida, and Chicago have been Puerto Rican community mainstays, other areas of the South and Midwest have recently seen an influx of Puerto Ricans, particularly during the past decade.⁹ Puerto Ricans are reshaping local communities and former networks of care and solidarity. This is happening as the United States grapples with a rise of fascism and overt racism in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement as well as during and after the presidencies of Donald Trump.

Since its origins, Puerto Rican studies has not been detached from the Puerto Rican reality. In fact, the field is shaped by those experiences. That is why we are documenting the current moment in the field. We do so as the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) is being dismantled by colonial governance and willful bureaucratic inaction. Although the UPR was originally part of the US colonial project of Americanization in Puerto Rico, by the second half of the twentieth century it had become a central node in fostering radical imaginaries that questioned the country’s colonial reality and the status quo. We are also living in a moment in US academia where our histories and our ways of doing, understanding, and *living* history are under attack from donors, right-wing organizers, and state legislatures.

All these challenges have infused the field with a renewed sense of urgency and have incited tremendous change, both epistemically and

organizationally. In the case of CENTRO at Hunter College, innovative programs that seek to continue the legacy and spirit of the Puerto Rican studies community center and its combative ethos have been implemented throughout its existence. For example, since its inception, one of CENTRO's research components was the creation of task forces that were "initially imagined as a meeting ground for Puerto Rican studies faculty, community members, and CENTRO staff interested in investigating the theoretical and empirical nuances of Puerto Rican themes and issues."¹⁰ Inspired by these task forces, former CENTRO Director Yarimar Bonilla created Bridging the Divides, an initiative that convened scholars, journalists, and artists to "overcome long-standing divisions that have served as roadblocks to the development of Puerto Rican Studies."¹¹ With current CENTRO Director Yomaira Figueroa's leadership, CENTRO continues to expand its mission. In 2024, CENTRO unveiled "Rooted + Relational," a five-year plan that seeks to expand Puerto Rican studies through annual themes through programming, research, the arts, and community engagement.¹²

The renewal of Puerto Rican studies has not come without its challenges, of course. When the board of the Puerto Rican Studies Association, created in 1992, met during the summer of 2020 to draft a statement in support of the Black Lives Matter movement and those protesting state and police violence in the wake of the assassination of George Floyd, fissures came to the fore. When the executive board failed to approve a vote to sign a statement that included Black transgender people, and after belittling and violent comments from one of its male members went unchecked, five of the seven women in the executive committee resigned.¹³ After their public resignation, senior faculty drafted a letter that received more than three-hundred signatures in support of the women. The letter of support noted, "These early career scholars demanding change are now following the footsteps of previous generations of scholar-activists who fought hard for the recognition of Puerto Rican studies as a field. Let there be no doubt that the transformations demanded by these scholars represent what the undersigned, as part of the broader constituency of PRSA, would like to see in our organization."¹⁴

As a result, the Puerto Rican Studies Association went through dramatic changes, including the dissolution of the executive board and the election of an entirely new one.¹⁵ These changes also rippled into other long-standing organizations within the field, including CENTRO and the *CENTRO Journal*. The confluence of the aforementioned events served as

a catalyst and backdrop for the conversations we seek to document in this volume.

While scholars have previously addressed some of the themes included in this book, the volume places formerly absent topics at the fore. Class, for example, became one of the most important analytical lenses during the early days of Puerto Rican studies. Structural analyses that rely on class continue to be incredibly important to understand the development of colonial and capitalist relations in Puerto Rico.¹⁶ However, as some of the authors in this volume suggest, there are also other frameworks to understand the plurality of Puerto Rican experiences.

While Puerto Rican studies scholars have previously written about Blackness and queerness in the past, the field has had to reckon with its general omission of race, gender, and sexuality.¹⁷ In fact, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes—one of the foundational figures in Puerto Rican queer studies—argues that we always need to remember “the profound homophobia and frequent misogyny of early, so-called ‘foundational’ Puerto Rican studies scholarship.”¹⁸ These conversations should be—and are—central to the field, as some of the chapters in this book demonstrate. However, we do not claim that we are breaking away from previously published scholarship that laid the groundwork for our field, but we do recognize that there is a renewed urgency in the way we produce and think about Puerto Rican studies.

This volume seeks to serve as an archive of the current conversations and debates in Puerto Rican studies, particularly after the political and epistemic shifts that took place in 2020. That is, it seeks to document the turning point in the field without being prescriptive or ascribing a particular mode of understanding the complex realities in Puerto Rico. We build on those who sought to understand *la realidad puertorriqueña* (the Puerto Rican reality) as we seek to interrogate Puerto Rico’s multiple realities.

Interrogating the Future

In recent years, particularly in the aftermath of Hurricane María in 2017, Puerto Rico has been featured prominently in the US media. The storm and ensuing human-caused disaster left behind more than four thousand deaths in its wake while millions lacked access to potable water, electricity, food, and medical supplies for months on end. Media outlets argued that the issue was a humanitarian one, utilizing the argument that the US federal

government needed to intervene and assist Puerto Ricans in their recovery because they were US citizens. While this is an accurate statement, Puerto Rico's relationship to the United States is not that simple. Such arguments overlook the second-class nature of Puerto Ricans' citizenship while also portraying them as in need of saving—reiterating colonial logics of what scholar Hilda Lloréns calls, “the disastrous tropics.”¹⁹

Whereas the archipelago's recovery is incomplete, and more than half of its residents live in poverty, the government focused its attention on attracting US investments and creating a visitor economy.²⁰ The ensuing wave of neocolonists and settlers in the form of tax evaders and crypto entrepreneurs presents new forms of exploitation rooted in displacement, land dispossession, and colonial debts, as José Atilés and Joaquín Villanueva document in their chapter.²¹ And as Mónica Jiménez notes in this volume, Puerto Rico has become “hyper visible to wealthy US Americans interested in keeping their money out of the hands of the Internal Revenue Service. And it is also hyper visible to real estate developers and speculators who seek to make a buck by displacing locals and super charging the already occurring gentrification of the archipelago's most beautiful places.” Adding to this influx of colonizers are cryptoinvestors seeking a “Puertopia” via the dispossession of Puerto Ricans and racialized migrants living in the archipelago.²²

While media and some historical narratives have rendered the agency of Puerto Ricans in the archipelago and the diaspora invisible, the field of Puerto Rican studies has exponentially grown in the past five years and has continued the field's tradition of challenging these colonial logics of erasure. This recent effervescence is the product of new epistemological interrogations, interpretations, and methodological interventions about the meanings of Puerto Rico, Puerto Ricans, and Puerto Ricanness. As we look to the origins of the field, its critical contributions and interventions, this volume is in dialogue with that past while also thinking about and asking what the future(s) of Puerto Rican studies might look like. What are some of the most pressing concerns Puerto Rican studies scholars are examining? How can we envision the future of Puerto Rican studies as an expansive field of study that holds space for scholars both in the diaspora and the archipelago? And last but not least, what kinds of bridges and solidarities are being built to that end?

By interrogating the future of Puerto Rican studies, the work of the scholars that appear in this volume do not claim an objective approach to the field. Breaking with the illusion of positivism and its nineteenth-century

inheritances, we seek to interrogate in order to potentiate more just and solidary futures. That is, we seek to interrogate as a tool to imagine Puerto Rico's future otherwise. Doing so entails crafting our own narratives. Out of the twenty-three contributors to this volume, all but one identifies as Puerto Rican. And while we seek to create bridges between the knowledge produced about Puerto Rico in the archipelago and the US diaspora, we also need to acknowledge our positionalities as most of those voices included in the volume are writing from US academia. For some, this is a consequence of forced exile, or *destierro*, as Yomaira Figueroa Vásquez has noted.²³

For the Palestinian philosopher Edward Said, “our age—with its modern warfare, imperialism, and the quasi-technological ambitions of totalitarian rulers—is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass migration.”²⁴ As Puerto Ricans continue to join the hundreds of thousands that leave the archipelago—the largest migration in its history—this book is also a testament to the diasporic nature of Puerto Ricanness. The volume aims to collapse the boundaries between the knowledge produced *aquí o allá* while still articulating our ideas from that place of *vaivén*—a place that eludes geography as it is located within a cartography of hope in creating new futures for us and by us. Situated in a place of longing to create a sense of home between that *aquí y allá*, the scholars in this book are committed to challenging the imperialist logics and concrete actions that force many to migrate or to struggle to survive in an archipelago with failing and collapsing infrastructures.

This volume also seeks to create a modest archive of recent conversations taking place within the field of Puerto Rican studies by gathering a group of scholars and activists who are not only redefining Puerto Rican studies but also blurring its disciplinary and epistemic boundaries by fostering its points of contact with ethnic studies, Black studies, American studies, and Latin American studies, among others. What we have been able to collect in this book, however, is but a sample of the work that diverse scholars of Puerto Rico, Puerto Rican, and Puerto Ricanness are producing both in the archipelago and the diaspora. Space constraints forced us to include only twenty-one other contributors with whom we have been in conversation and dialogue for the past years. We hope that this volume sparks greater interest in the field, allowing people to engage with the work of so many others who are also thinking about how to build futures otherwise for Puerto Rico. There is something to note, also, about the ways that most of the contributors of this volume are thinking about Puerto Rico from the lens of the humanities and social sciences. In each

of the chapters that follows we find a sense of urgency of understanding our multiple Puerto Rican realities at a moment when higher education is under attack not only in the United States but also in Puerto Rico.

We do not claim to be reinventing the wheel with this volume. Instead, we build on the work of so many groundbreaking scholars, activists, and community members who formed the field through their love, commitment, solidarity, and struggle. It is for that reason that we see this volume as a love letter to those who came before, to those students who occupied university administrative offices in New York City in the 1960s and 1970s. It is a love letter to those who dare to imagine sovereign futures amid the collapse provoked by centuries of colonialism. It is a love letter to those who left the archipelago and never came back; to those who returned; and to those who never left.

Lastly, we seek to subvert the necrocolonial logics of the colonists and the local administrators. Instead of mocking our dead—as the former Governor Ricardo Rosselló and his inner circle did in their 2019 Telegram Chat that was leaked, leading to massive protests—we mourn them.²⁵ And while they dreamt of a future without Puerto Ricans, we subvert their logic and claim that we see the future we are working toward, and it is beautiful. It is a Puerto Rico—including the archipelago and the diaspora—full of joyful Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Haitians, and other Caribbean, Central, and Latin American brethren as well as those from the African diaspora.

We do not know how that future will look, but that does not stop us from challenging and resisting the structures that seek to rob us of those possibilities. We hope, alongside Angélica Negrón, “for a sonic future in which the soundtrack of the ever-present airplane hum is less a product of necessity than of personal choice. A future in which the *coquí* at night is not drowned by the sound of diesel generators after yet another power outage.”²⁶ This volume attempts to interrogate the future so we can create one that is full of joy and where we can enjoy the beauty of our land, our people, our culture.

Organization of the Volume

This volume is divided into six broad thematic parts, each containing three chapters. These themes seek to encapsulate some of the conversations that are redefining the field of Puerto Rican studies. The book begins with a foreword by Yarimar Bonilla wherein she stresses the importance

of documenting the epistemological changes in the field of Puerto Rican studies and the urgency of this edited volume.

Since Puerto Rico can be imagined from different theoretical lenses and academic fields, the first part explores the ways in which Puerto Rican studies has been situated within broader fields of knowledge. Jorell Meléndez-Badillo begins by critically examining how Puerto Rican studies can be understood as diasporic knowledges. Further expanding this critical interrogation of the field, Marisol LeBrón explores the uneasy relationship between Puerto Rico and the field of American studies. Lastly, Marisel Moreno's intervention closes the section by reflecting Puerto Rican studies' situatedness within Latinx studies, particularly in literary criticism.

The second part, titled "Queering Puerto Rican Studies," engages with cultural, academic, and activist mobilization of queer studies and what it can offer to Puerto Rican studies. Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes's chapter begins the section by exploring the work of Puerto Rican performance artist Awilda Rodríguez Lora. Daniela Crespo-Miró's chapter is a journey into the sonic worlds produced by the indie alternative rock group Alegría Rampante. The section ends with a reflection by Beatriz Llenín Figueroa on the most important event for queer studies in the archipelago, the colloquium *¿Del otro lado?* Llenín Figueroa was one of the colloquium's long-time organizers.

In part III, "Centering Blackness," Yomaira Figueroa-Vásquez, Bárbara Abadía-Rexach, and Pedro Lebrón Ortiz delve into current scholarship that is pushing against the erasure of Blackness in the field of Puerto Rican studies. Figueroa-Vásquez's chapter explores the ways that Afro-Puerto Rican women created community in the wake of Hurricane María. Abadía-Rexach reflects on the ways that anti-Black racism permeates Puerto Rican society and Puerto Rican studies. The section ends with Lebrón Ortiz, who, following the work of philosophers Sylvia Wynter and Furio Jesi, critically examines the protests of the Verano del '19 to locate both their limits and possibilities.

Part IV, "Disaster Studies and Environmental Studies," traces the ways scholars are paying attention to environmental challenges in present-day Puerto Rico. Sarah Molinari offers critical insights into the political dimensions of emergency governance while also demonstrating the ways that community-based practices offer alternatives in the face of disaster capitalism. The section then moves to an examination of Puerto Rico's long-standing and women-led environmental justice movement in the

archipelago by Gustavo García López. This is followed by Marie Cruz Soto's exploration into the ways that land ontologies are negotiated in the island-municipality of Vieques.

The authors in "Prefigurative Politics and Social Movements" (part V), illustrate the ways that current social movements in Puerto Rico are creating what scholar Aurora Santiago Ortiz has coined as "circuits of self-determination," or the interconnected networks of activists and grass-roots organizations enacting and embodying a decolonial Puerto Rico in the present. Santiago Ortiz begins the section by connecting the Puerto Rican student movement to the archipelago's anti-colonial infrastructures of resistance. This discussion is immediately followed by Roberto Vélez-Vélez and Jacqueline Villarrubia-Mendoza's analysis of the mutual aid networks that emerged in the wake of Hurricane María and how they offered a lifeline to many people in Puerto Rico. Daniel Nevárez Araújo and Daniel Vázquez Sanabria then close the section by inviting us to think with them about what "debility" has to offer the field of Puerto Rican studies and the ways we imagine Puerto Rico writ large.

The volume's sixth and concluding part grapples with the legal and political disruptions that have shaped and continue to shape Puerto Rico's social and political landscapes. To do so, the first two chapters pay attention to the legal dimensions of Puerto Rico's colonial reality. Mónica Jiménez's chapter grapples with the ways that Puerto Rico is rendered invisible even at a moment of hyper visibility in media narratives. This is followed by José Atilés and Joaquín Villanueva's exploration of Puerto Rico's ambiguous colonial status and how it is leveraged by different social actors to fiscally exploit and dispossess Puerto Ricans. In the last chapter, Karrieann Soto Vega offers a broader geographical lens through which to explore the ways that Puerto Rican anti-colonial struggles are connected to similar processes across oceanic borderspaces within the United States empire. The book ends with an epilogue by Marcela Guerrero looking toward the decolonial futures of Puerto Rican studies and how they are already being imagined and enacted from the world of art.

As this volume shows, as well as the ample breadth of Puerto Rican studies scholarship, art, and creative work beyond this book, the Puerto Rican experience defies homogenization. Nonetheless, the question of Puerto Rican identity continues to motivate scholars focusing on the Puerto Rican experience, both in the diaspora and in the archipelago. The contributors to this volume are committed to thinking about the ways

that Puerto Rico, *puertorriqueñidad*, and Puerto Rican studies are continually and necessarily imagined and reimagined.

Notes

- 1 LASA Section Roundtable, “¿Rethinking Puerto Rican Studies? Nuevas Perspectivas e Interpretaciones,” organized by Jorell Meléndez-Badillo, chaired by Rachell Sánchez, discussion by Mayra Vélez Serrano, and presented by Harry Franqui-Rivera, Isar Godreau, and Aura S. Jirau Arroyo, Latin American Studies Association Annual Conference, Boston, May 26, 2019.
- 2 Edna Acosta-Belén, “Puerto Rican Studies: A Legacy of Activism, Scholarship, and Collective Empowerment,” 41; and Pedro Cabán, “Remaking Puerto Rican Studies at 50 Years,” 17, both in *Puerto Rican Studies in the City University of New York: The First Fifty Years*, edited by María E. Pérez y González and Virginia Sánchez Korrol (New York: CENTRO Press, 2021).
- 3 For the origins of Puerto Rican studies and its foundational literature, see Maribel Ortiz Márquez, “Beginnings: Puerto Rican Studies Revisited,” *CENTRO Journal* 21, no. 2 (2009): 177–97. For more about the emergence of Puerto Rican studies, see Meléndez-Badillo’s chapter in this volume.
- 4 For some context, see Rachel A. May, Alejandro Schneider, and Roberto González Arana, *Caribbean Revolutions: Cold War Armed Movements* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); José E. Velázquez, Carmen V. Rivera, and Andrés Torres, eds, *Revolution Around the Corner: Voices from the Puerto Rican Socialist Party in the United States* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2021); and Johanna Fernández, *The Young Lords: A Radical History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).
- 5 Some examples include Virginia Sánchez Koroll, *From Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Rican Communities in New York City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Ricardo Campos y Juan Flores, “Migración y cultura nacional puertorriqueña: Perspectivas proletarias,” in *Puerto Rico: Identidad nacional y clases sociales*, edited by A. G. Quintero Rivera (Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1981); Frank Bonilla, Ricardo Campos, and Juan Flores, “Puerto Rican Studies: Promptings for the Academy and the Left,” in *The Left Academy: Marxist Scholarship on American Campuses*, vol. 3, edited by Bertell Ollman and Edward Vernoff (New York: Praeger, 1986); Edna Acosta-Belén, *The Puerto Rican Woman: Perspectives on Culture, History, and Society* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1986).
- 6 Some of these scholars were organized around the Centro de Estudios de la Realidad Puertorriqueña (CEREP). For more on this organization and the turn to “history from below,” see María del Carmen Baerga, “Historia crítica, historia uatoreflexiva: CEREP y el reto de la teoría,” *Claridad*, November 17–23, 2011; Carlos J. Carrero Morales, “Reflexionando sobre CEREP y la Nueva

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Historia Puertorriqueña: A 28 años del final de un proyecto historiográfico,” paper delivered at the Asociación de Estudiantes Graduados de Historia (CEAPRC), March 20, 2016, <https://aeghcea.files.wordpress.com/2016/03/20-reflexionando-sobre-cerep3.pdf>; Marcía Rivera, Ángel Quintero Rivera, Arcadio Díaz Quiñones, and Lydia Milagros González, “¿Qué fue CEREP, el centro que tanto aportó a Puerto Rico?,” *Voz Alternativa*, Radio Isla 1320, January 23, 2022; María de los Ángeles Castro Arroyo, “De Salvador Brau a la ‘novísima’ historia: Un replanteamiento y una crítica,” *Op. Cit.*, *Boletín del Centro de Investigaciones Históricas*, no. 4 (1988): 9–25; Rodney Lebrón, “Creación, control y disputas: Los debates sobre la significación del concepto de historiografía puertorriqueña,” master’s thesis, University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras, 2018.

- 7 The recent host cities for the Puerto Rican Studies Association Conferences and symposia can provide a snapshot of this geographical diversity: New Brunswick, New Jersey (2018), Austin, Texas (2019), Hartford, Connecticut (2022), Santa Cruz, California (2024), Chicago, Illinois (scheduled, 2026), and San Juan, Puerto Rico (scheduled, 2028).
- 8 For more about the recent history of Puerto Rico, see Jorell Meléndez-Badillo, *Puerto Rico: A National History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024).
- 9 For some examples of migration patterns, both historical and more recent, see Edna Acosta-Belén and Carlos E. Santiago, *Puerto Ricans in the United States: A Contemporary Portrait*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2018); Delia Fernández-Jones, *Making the MexiRican City: Migration, Placemaking, and Activism in Grand Rapids, Michigan* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2023); Ismael García-Colón, *Colonial Migrants at the Heart of Empire: Puerto Rican Workers on U.S. Farms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020); Edgardo Meléndez, *Sponsored Migration: The State and Puerto Rican Postwar Migration to the United States* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017); Patricia Silver, *Sunbelt Diaspora: Race, Class, and Lation Politics in Puerto Rican Orlando* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020); Simone Delemer, *Latino Orlando: Suburban Transformation and Racial Conflict* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2020).
- 10 “About Us,” CENTRO at Hunter College, <https://centopr.hunter.cuny.edu/about> (accessed January 10, 2024).
- 11 Carmen Cruz, “Dr. Yomaira Figueroa Appointed Next Directora of CENTRO,” *CENTRO Newsletter*, June 23, 2023, <https://centopr.hunter.cuny.edu/news/dr-yomaira-figueroa-appointed-next-directora-of-centro>.
- 12 “CENTRO Announces 5 Year Research Initiative and Fellowship Program,” *CENTRO Newsletter*, February 22, 2024, <https://centopr.hunter.cuny.edu/news/centro-announces-5-year-research-initiative-and-research-associate-program>.
- 13 Eric Kelderman, “How a Fight over a Black Lives Matter Statement Transformed an Academic Association,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 28,

- 2020, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-a-fight-over-a-black-lives-matter-statement-transformed-an-academic-association>.
- 14 Joanna Camacho, Lisa Jahn, Marisol LeBrón, Sarah Molinari, and Aurora Santiago Ortiz, "Why We Are Resigning from the Puerto Rican Studies Association Board," *Medium*, August 10, 2020, <https://medium.com/@marisollebrn/why-we-are-resigning-from-the-puerto-rican-studies-association-executive-board-911bf836966>; and "Puerto Rican Studies Obituary: An Open Letter to the PRSA," August 13, 2020, <https://sites.google.com/view/prsaletter>.
 - 15 Kelderman, "How a Fight Over a Black Lives Matter Statement Transformed an Academic Association."
 - 16 For examples of new approaches to class and, particularly, labor studies, see Jesús Delgado Burgos, *Aguja y poder: Educación, cultura del trabajo, clase y género durante el proceso de industrialización en Puerto Rico, 1950–1960* (San Juan: Ediciones Laberinto, 2024); Francisco Moscoso, *Artesanos en la colonización española de Puerto Rico, 1508–1550* (San Juan: Ediciones Laberinto, 2024); Jorell Meléndez-Badillo, *The Lettered Barriada: Workers, Archival Power, and the Politics of Knowledge in Puerto Rico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021); Everoyñ Vélez Rodríguez and Carmelo Campos Cruz, eds., *En pie de lucha: Nuevas investigaciones históricas puertorriqueñas* (Ponce: Mariana Editores, 2019); Carlos Sanabria, *Puerto Rican Labor History, 1898–1934: Revolutionary Ideals and Reformist Politics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018).
 - 17 Some examples of previous work on the subject include Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, *Queer Ricans: Cultures and Sexualities in the Diaspora* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), and *Translocas: The Politics of Puerto Rican Drag and Trans Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021); Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes and Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, eds., "Revisiting Queer Puerto Rican Sexualities: Queer Futures, Reinventions, and Un-Disciplined Archives," *CENTRO Journal* 30, no. 2 (2018): 6–41; Luis Apontes-Parés, Jossianna Arroyo, Elizabeth Crespo-Kebler, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, and Frances Negrón-Muntaner, eds., "Puerto Rican Queer Sexualities," *CENTRO Journal* 19, no. 1 (2007); Isabelo Zenón Cruz, *Narciso descubre su trasero: El negro en la cultura puertorriqueña*, 2 vols. (Humacao: Editorial Furidi, 1975); Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores, *The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Vanessa Valdés, *Diasporic Blackness: The Life and Times of Arturo Alfonso Schomburg* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2017); Ileana Rodríguez Silva, *Silencing Race: Disentangling Blackness, Colonialism, and National Identities in Puerto Rico* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
 - 18 Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, personal communication, December 9, 2024.
 - 19 Frances Negrón-Muntaner, "Our Fellow Americans: Why Calling Puerto Ricans 'Americans' Will Not Save Them"; and Hilda Lloréns, "US Media Depictions of Climate Migrants: The Recent Case of the Puerto Rican 'Exodus,'" both in *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm*, edited by Yarimar Bonilla and Marisol LeBrón (Chicago: Haymarket, 2019), 127–28.

- 20 See Marina Reyes Franco, "The Visitor Economy Regime," *Independent Curators International*, January 2, 2018, <https://curatorsintl.org/journal/15278-the-visitor-economy-regime>; "Tax Benefits and Policy," *Invest Puerto Rico*, https://www.investpr.org/why-puerto-rico/tax-benefits-policy/?gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAiAmsurBhBvEiwA6e-WPItiZKRxdDrUhiCTzyM5fHSNpE56mIIKzHAFZSRq5d7VLIAb6arI2hoC9WYQAvD_BwE.
- 21 See also Rocío Zambrana, *Colonial Debts: The Case of Puerto Rico* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).
- 22 Jose Atilés, "The Paradise Performs: Blockchain, Cryptocurrencies, and the Puerto Rican Tax Haven," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 121, no. 3 (2022): 612–27.
- 23 Yomaira Figueroa Vásquez, "After the Hurricane: Afro-Latina Decolonial Feminism and *Destierro*," *Hypatia* 35, no. 1 (2020): 220–29.
- 24 Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile," in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 174.
- 25 Luis J. Valentín Ortiz and Carla Minet, "The 889 Pages of the Telegram Chat Between Rosselló Nevares and His Closest Aides," Centro de Periodismo Investigativo, July 13, 2019, <https://periodismoinvestigativo.com/2019/07/the-889-pages-of-the-telegram-chat-between-rossello-nevares-and-his-closest-aides>.
- 26 Angélica Negrón, "To Listen in Place," in *no existe un mundo poshuracán: Puerto Rican Art in the Wake of Hurricane Maria*, edited by Marcela Guerrero (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2022).

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