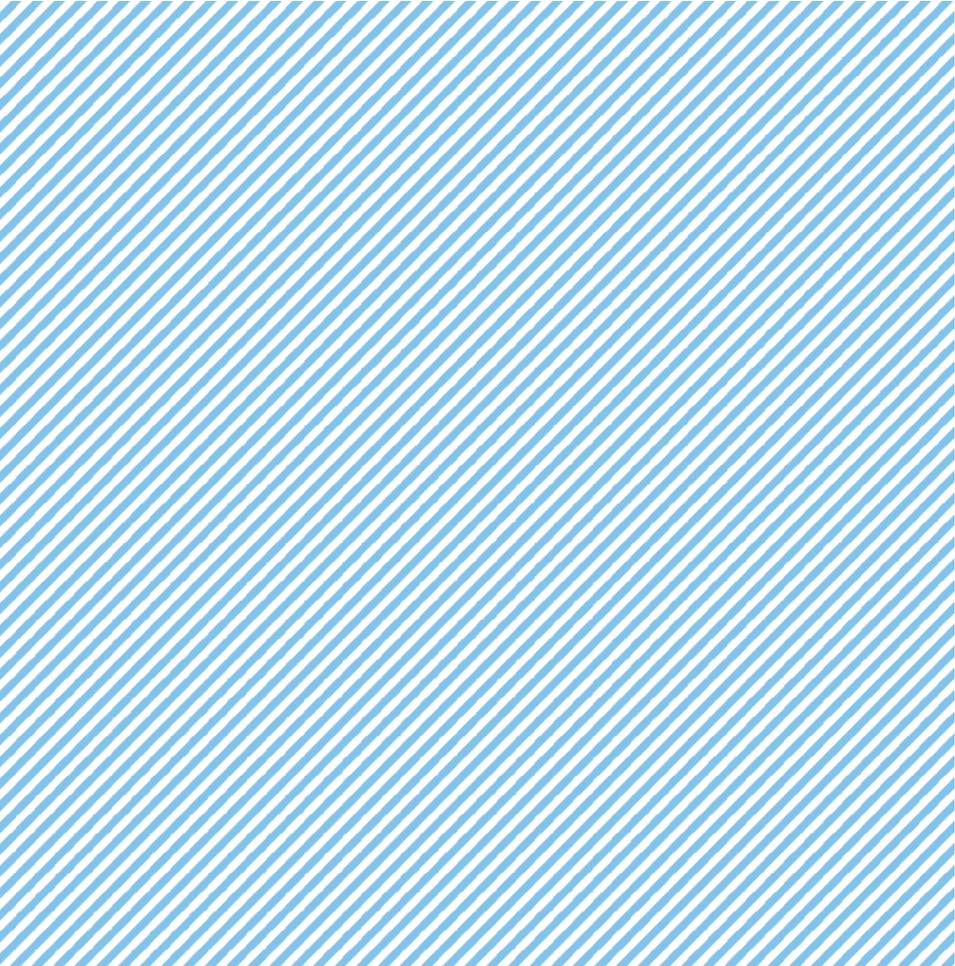


Nonsovereignty: Designing political ecologies in Puerto Rico



Making people

The advent of postcolonial theory in the 1970s and 1980s brought the realization that liberal political philosophy was guilty of masking, even erasing, the social and political histories of many peoples around the world. Since then, it has become apparent not only that political and social histories were displaced, but also that whole environments, entire ecologies were subject to degradation, deflection, exploitation, and ruin. Politics and ecologies are inextricably linked.

What has emerged to confound the dominant Euro–American white male historical imagination that has driven global change? How has environmental erasure and displacement been addressed, and by whom? Puerto Ricans, I suggest, have some ideas about this.

Around the world, the longitudinal event of imperialism entangled more national groups, motives, and interests than the vast international corporation–government complex that takes the brunt of the blame. Smallholders, plantation owners, tutelary indigenous communities, and even conservation groups all entered into power–bargaining, with colonial militias being replaced by board members, scientists, anthropologists, and NGOs. The imperial objective was—and is—to increase economic production through the appropriation of the subject country’s biophysical resource. But other appropriations occurred. The rise of the tribal and aboriginal has been accompanied by localist blends of “blow–ins.” We could even use the word indigenous as a cover–all. People who claim indigeneity, James Clifford observes, “have often come to their present home from elsewhere.”¹

Because they are long, braided histories, the multiple trajectories of human–environment relations in Puerto Rico are not easy to trace. They involve a collectivization of powers that cross and re–cross economic, linguistic, and biophysical terrains in the ongoing construction of what we might call regional subjectivities. Colonization produces not only commodities such as oil and sugar, but also social relations, minds, values, norms, needs, desires, and indeed, bodies. This we have learned. Like the rest of us, Puerto Ricans think, perceive, act, feel, and develop within the continually evolving, interactive milieu of our shared social ecology. It creates us and we create it. There is not even a separable “us” and “it.” This article attempts to show how, in Puerto Rico, life and landscape make each other.

It’s an entanglement shaped by long term patterns of co–evolution, and inflected dramatically by sudden short–term events. In the evolution of biopolitical movements, the colonized subject has agency, the framework of colonialism

is built together, and an event of extreme significance can change the course of becoming. This is the context within which we may consider the case of Puerto Rico. Let us try, first, to reconstruct the co-creation of subjectivity by means of an imagined example.

In the late-nineteenth century, Gabriela Moreno's great grandparents farmed in the western highlands of Puerto Rico, just west of Utuado. Poor, mixed-blood peons, they were subsistence farmers, the now-romanticized *jíbaro*. Rice, corn, plantain, green beans, and sweet potatoes surrounded their shack, and a few coffee trees bore heavily in the shade of the plantains. While most of their neighbors cash-cropped coffee, the plant Gabriela's *bisabuelos* grew for sale was tobacco, known as a poor man's crop. Running through the gardens chickens, two or three goats, and always a brood of pigs returned some fertility to the clay soils and provided protein for a family, the increase of which some nineteenth-century science writers attributed to the natural fertility of Puerto Rican women.

The gardens required no machinery or capital and had low production costs. Working and feeding their family, the couple formed the nucleus of an extended Moreno settlement consisting, like most mountain coffee haciendas, of a few other huts and other families growing the same crops on the same steep slopes lashed by the same seasonal rains. When the season was good, they hired Africans and mestizo day laborers to help. At that time, Spanish rule was less despotic and more liberal.² There was a life to be had. As a little girl, Gabriela's great-grandmother chased chickens for the pot and waited for something to happen.

By the 1890s, the northern and southern lowlands were mostly sugar. Land-hungry, rapidly industrializing corporate plantations established villages of wage-laborers, of whom there were never enough, the sugar work being so labor intensive. Africans were imported first as slaves, then as paid workers after the abolition of slavery in 1873. There were a lot of Africans—eighty thousand by the 1890s. Unable to afford large numbers of laborers, the old landowners, such as the Moreno family, became sharecroppers. But even as tobacco held on, the coffee market was changing. South American countries were providing roasts that the US market preferred over the strong Puerto Rican bean. Working for quantity, the large coffee estates felled forests, replaced subsistence crops, and planted the heavy-cropping *robusta* species in the hills.

When her grandparents came down from the mountains and the US took over control of Puerto Rico from Spain, Gabriela's father, seven years old, was already laboring on a sugar plantation. The global coffee market had fallen so quickly that

his people—*montañés*, too—had been sucked out of the deep, forested valleys to work in San Juan and Arecibo, the sugar capitals of the north coast plains. Like the coffee adventure, the sugar boom declined as the market diversified and the tariffs came on and tax breaks came off. By World War I, the sugar industry in Puerto Rico was pretty much over, and little Gabriela rode to the city on a cart drawn by horses. Her mother brought her thin children to a flimsy shack on the south side of the San Juan finger, in the Puerta de Tierra, where the mangroves flourished in thick, still pulp.

Gabriela was raised in an urban shack. By the middle of her teens, she was working in the old town, ladling her mother's old time *criollo* sauce onto *mofongos* for visitors to La Fortaleza. Gabriela was caught between two futures that were being touted for Puerto Rico. Her hero, the populist politician Luis Muñoz Marín, wanted Puerto Rico to remain with the United States but to develop its own "personality." His adversary, Pedro Albizu Campos, was a firebrand who preached struggle as the only antidote to US capitalism. But Gabriela had a tough upbringing. She liked the money tourists and marines brought to the café. She joined the *populares* ("Bread! Land! Liberty!") and became a subject of the new American Commonwealth. A citizen. When Muñoz Marín submitted to Operation Bootstrap ("a godsend!"), it was to develop industry, to breed dollars in the *arrabal* like pigs and chickens, and to send the hardened, moribund, old-fashioned agricultural sector packing. Gabriela was ashamed of the overcrowded Puerta de Tierra and desired a better house in a better district. She moved to Santurce first, as part of the postwar slum clearance program, and then got relocated to a public housing project in Condado, a *residencial* where she met Francisco, a dealer. Francisco brought money, and together they made children. The 1960s meant less draggy work, a small garden courtyard, guns, lots of men around for cards and *mofongo*, and life in the black market. A Mercedes parked on the street under the ceiba tree. Then Francisco went to jail.

Gabriela got a job at a pharmaceutical company filing records. She was able to send her daughter to the University of Puerto Rico, where she met a red-bearded Irishman in her psychology class. She brought him home. "We're going to buy the house next door," Gabriela was told. "They're really cheap right now." So they bought a little house with a garage and rehabbed it into a bed and breakfast. Gabriela, now in her sixties, ran it with her dog Jerry while visitors trooped through: Americans, Australians, Germans, Canadians, Clarke, Wendy, Rudy, Jacqueline, Rod... It was good money. Then Irma and Maria visited, making their payments with surge tides and gales.

Off the grid?

Since the turn of the twentieth century, the United States in Puerto Rico has, as elsewhere, been creating producers and consumers. The construction of subjectivities is powerful and pervasive. The question has been: is it possible for local identities to be established outside of, and protected from, the global machinations of capital and empire?³ In many small towns in rural areas there is a galvanic history of political resistance within the all-consuming apparatus of Puerto Rico's liberal political economy. Throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, obvious environmental degradation, a deteriorating quality of life, and increasing pollution led to the development of geographic and environmental planning as strategies of opposition. A string of activist successes occurred, from halting the mining of copper deposits in the central and western parts of the island to establishing the 1980s Casa Pueblo organization, which was developed to lead a citizen movement against proposals for strip-mining. Objections to the proposal for a superport on Mona Island, a designated nature reserve, were extraordinarily effective. Resistance to controversial energy-generating projects throughout the following decades grew as the imperialist, extractivist proposals multiplied. The proposal for a Cogentrix cogeneration plant in Mayaguez was stopped in the late 1980s, as was another for an incineration and conversion plant in the agricultural Coloso Valley in Aguada. Since 2015, environmental groups have been fighting a similar development in Arecibo for an incineration and energy plant that would significantly impact soils, water resources, and public health. In the last fifteen years, two major energy transportation projects, the Southern Pipeline and the Northern Pipeline, have faced well-orchestrated opposition.⁴ On the basis of their successful resistance to environmentally unsound and socially unjust projects, many of Puerto Rico's environmental organizations have won prizes and awards. The question at the top of this paragraph has been answered in the affirmative. Or has it?

The much-criticized, large-scale systems of the global food industry are in fact the source of local food security in Puerto Rico. Since eighty percent of the island's edible produce is imported from the United States, it is a fragile security. The increasing abundance of imported food has caused oversupply, an imbalance of benefits, an ineffective and environmentally problematic waste stream, and a host of illegal corporate entanglements that are difficult to unravel, even if the global collective wanted to. More importantly for the issue of citizenship, *Borinqueños* (native Puerto Ricans) have become separated from the lands that sustain their social structure.

By 2017, many Puerto Ricans were asking if it was possible to Live Off the Grid. But things changed rapidly from then. Before the arrival of Hurricane Maria in September 2017, before Hurricane Dorian in August 2019, before the December–January 2020 earthquakes, before COVID–19, I had thought the logic irresistible: that no, if the political economy of global capital encompasses everything then, ipso facto, you cannot live off the grid. In those days I thought that there is nothing external to the decentered and deterritorialized global apparatus that creates identity and place. This seemed to put Puerto Rico in an awkward position:

Puerto Rico We want you to hand the power back to us.

United States We do not have the power. The power is in the hands of the world financial system to which we all contribute and from which we all benefit.

Then came the significant string of events. The crisis that resulted from Hurricane Maria awakened a monster. It became an opportunity to “envision, imagine and rewrite Puerto Rico,” as activist Rosa Clemente describes it.⁵ Now, with COVID–19 shaking established foundations, we can ask what this new, imagined community could be? How do we get there? Is there to be a goal with specific objectives, a strategy? Or are we looking at some other kind of generative reformulation of the conditions of life in Puerto Rico? Will it be like the social protests that have emerged spontaneously in the open–ended space of global activism? Clemente demands more rebellious behavior of her fellow *Borinqueños*, not “scripted protests” or “political theater.” She is assertive and direct. Puerto Ricans in the diaspora, she declares, should come back to Puerto Rico and fight for water. “Water is life.”⁶ Maria “pushed the needle,” Clemente says, and a kind of resubjectivization is rapidly occurring. *Borinqueños* on the ground are reorienting political education and leading in the reconstruction of the collective national narrative. Americans, they say, want a Puerto Rico without Puerto Ricans (in order to conduct business unopposed). Puerto Ricans want a Puerto Rico without...?

“Wow! Yet another big storm heading to Puerto Rico,” President Donald Trump said in a tweet two days before Dorian hit. “Will it ever end?”

Resurgence

Three critical, hyperlinked initiatives are evolving around a new political ecology that existed prior to Maria, but which the hurricane crystallized into a movement with an agenda. Step one: retake the smallholdings and rebuild the agroecological knowledges that drove the pre–American economy of the

highlanders. Shift fresh, organic produce to market. This is agency. Step two: connect the agroecological farms scattered around the islands to each other, to form an island-wide coalition. This is building together, creating the collective. Step three: link the endogenous generation of food security to the struggle for political independence. This is resubjectivization.⁷

Knowing that political independence does not imply or cause economic independence, individuals and organizations already active before hurricane Maria have since been forming a loose network of farms and place-based resistance groups. For instance, *Brigada Solidaria del Oeste*, a community initiative self-managed by comrades of different ages, focuses on the development of creative spaces through social struggle. *Amigas de MAR*, another example, is an environmental organization founded in 1995 with the purpose of protecting Puerto Rico's natural resources through educational awareness and the reporting of environmental crimes.

These groups include horticulturalists, farmers, university researchers, artists, and political activists. They are attracting the scientific and technical support they need to take advantage of the fruitful capacity of the local soils and to build logistics and infrastructure appropriate for the distribution of their products. A new umbrella collective, *JunteGente*, aims to bring diverse organizations together for political action. Its website is a virtual call-to-arms.⁸ Canny, enthusiastic, ecological entrepreneurs are investigating new ways to turn Puerto Rico's abundant natural resource into generators not only of food, but also of energy and clean water. Their goals are to build a healthy, local supply-and-demand economy within the larger context of global markets.

An agriculture-led model of land and labor sovereignty has been advanced for decades by *La Organización Boricúa de Agricultura Ecológica*, which is a member of the Climate Justice Alliance. Jesús Vázquez, an ecologist who works for this agroecological group, says: "We can feed the people with sustainable small-scale practices that do not harm the environment, that promote resilience within the environment and within the community."⁹ Organizations like the *Brigada Solidaria*, *Amigas de MAR*, *Casa Pueblo in Adjuntas*, and the eco-educational *Orocova Farm* are connecting the land they cultivate to the fight for self-determination. They want to free their country from foreign domination by developing food and energy security.

And they are creating an agricultural renaissance. For the first time in thirty years, Puerto Rican consumers are buying

rice, vegetables, plantains, and pineapples produced on the island. Food is being grown and sold locally, keeping the money in Puerto Rico and establishing new networks of plants and skills. Local demand, a renewed focus on farms from local leaders, and increased government incentives are encouraging families to develop their ecological resource base. According to the US Department of Agriculture, more than seventeen hundred new farms have begun operations—lettuces, beans, peppers, herbs, and other vegetables are being raised, and coffee production is at a new high.¹⁰ Aquaculture and hydroponics are being explored. The physical footprint of Agroponicos Cosecha farm, for instance, which is located on a hillside near Caguas, is very small because no land or soil is required to grow product. Instead, the tightly-packed plant roots receive nutrition from a constant flow of water filtered in three large tanks full of tilapia fish.¹¹ All these new production units are supplying to supermarkets, restaurants, and farmers markets—and the number of farmers markets tripled from 2012 to 2016.

Citizenship

A collective vision is slowly coming into focus, but there is still a way to go. As these communities connect with each other, they begin the transition to an interactive exchange *and* market economy that can provide goods and services in a way that the foreign investment-driven capital economy of Puerto Rico cannot.¹² But what is this movement cohering around, if anything? I visited biologist Alvia Menendez-Ackerman in her department at the University of Puerto Rico, Piedras, to see if she could tell me how the government of Puerto Rico is supporting the agrarian renaissance. She leaned forward in her chair. “In terms of a plan for Puerto Rico, most people are in the dark. There is a lack of transparency from the government, except we can see they still put economic growth first, when it’s really about quality of life.”¹³ Menendez-Ackerman insisted that it is the “agrarian collectivities” that are organizing to attain independence for the basics such as food, electricity, and water. At these *sites of power* (my term, but what the United States government would call “critical infrastructure”), the revolution is occurring in Puerto Rico as social and cultural capital is re-made.

Citizenship is not an urban condition. Even the ancient Greeks, with their agoras and townhouses, knew this. The basic geographical unit of Greek life was the *deme*, a territory which focused on the polis but included both the town and the productive countryside that supplied it with food.¹⁴ In

the *Eclogues*, Virgil gave an account of the relationship between the human passions (subjectivity + affect) and the natural world. His *Georgics* show how those passions can channel natural systems into a specific type of production through labor. Combined, the *Eclogues* and the *Georgics* give us the agroecological: labor + landscape. *Borinqueños* have found a program to make themselves into citizens of their own environment. It's not a question of localism. The local is a western idea. The reformulation of Puerto Rico's relationship to the productive ecologies in which it is embedded is an autocatalytic reciprocation-based agriculture that exists inside the democratic model of life. It puts pressure on neoliberal versions of democracy and citizenship that legitimize extractive and unsustainable resource use and ignore alternative models of social organization.¹⁵

Shared projects can create a bond among historically different people if their differences are respected. We move from individual identity through shared projects to multi-centered forms of governance where citizenship is exercised at diverse levels and in a multiplicity of ways. The Puerto Rican experiment is not a return to subsistence living. Rather, it is a re-articulation of the resource base in a new configuration, as a networked, soft infrastructure of goods mapped on to the existing market economy and working within the existing institutional field. By constructing new land use practices and new subjectivities, farmers hope to subvert the existing configurations of power. Through persistence and the development of well-constructed interventions, a common political ecology can be composed based on difference and activism, on interaction and negotiation.

Such a project is in no way guaranteed, though. It is crucial that the growth-driven techniques of capitalist production are not re-inscribed in the social ecology of Puerto Rico as a national strategy for decolonization. The machinery of imperialism can never be deployed for anti-imperialist objectives. Moreover, the outcomes of multi-evolutionary, self-generating operations cannot be predicted. Perhaps a strategy that incorporates bifurcations in its schematic planning can develop a robustness—an eagerness, even—for unpredictable events. Like rainforests and wetlands, these agroecological systems may just thrive on disturbance. And then there is the big question of whether the reformulation of imperial structures of management and control can really be achieved through self-organization. While the lesson of the Arab Spring might seem to be “no,” we need not accept that institutionalization is imperative.

Instead of generalizing from these limited examples, we should allow ourselves to become enchanted by their potential.

Following Chantal Mouffe, we can say that Puerto Ricans are identifying “nodal points of power” and re-arranging them into new assemblages.¹⁶ They are calling on their people to be involved at diverse and multiple nodes of production in order to transform them into new geographies of power. They are re-designing their political ecology from within, overturning the colonial program of respatialization that occurred throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.¹⁷

Nonsovereignty

But any project that sets out to achieve self-determination must come to terms with two paradoxes of sovereignty that undermine this attempt. The Puerto Rican *soberanistas* (the fastest-growing political movement in the country) seek “full sovereignty” within a redefined relationship with the United States. Sovereignty is seen by many as the only possible option for independence and self-realization. In the previous section, I argued that the evolving political ecology in Puerto Rico, based on interaction and negotiation, must avoid the re-institutionalization, indeed the re-westernization, the auto-exploitation, that lurks within all efforts at free association. Now I suggest that, to do this, it has to abandon the concept of sovereignty. Why? First, there is the tragic double-bind, to which I have already alluded: the story of Gabriela Moreno traces the processes of subjectivization that bring individuals to bind themselves to their own identities at the same time as to the all-encompassing structures of external power.¹⁸ Second, modern sovereignty, as exemplified by the US, constructs a “we” that is not inclusive, because it is founded on an exceptionalism that places the sovereign condition outside the order of control within which it seeks to work.

Land is at the heart of my argument. Any project that strives for political autonomy is ultimately about land: who owns it, who its custodians are, who distributes its resources. The situation in Puerto Rico reminds me of the Maori “renaissance” that occurred in Aotearoa/New Zealand in the 1970s and 1980s. In her book *Maori Sovereignty*, Donna Awatere set out the platform for Maori resistance. The movement was populist and leftist. But neither trade unions, nor the political left, nor feminism, nor even the struggle of Pacific island nations could provide useful outcomes for the Maori sovereignty movement in Aotearoa. Why? Because, Awatere argued, they are all products—even as Pacific island populations—of “white cultural imperialism.”¹⁹ All white peoples are captives of their own culture, she asserted, and Maori are engaged in an “epic war” with them that will set them – yes, white people – free. Awatere had a battle plan

that would confront the weapons of white settler society: individualism, history-as-progress, spatialization of time, use-value, private property, Christianity, mechanical materialism, and so on. Wanting sovereignty, Awatere made very clear, is wanting to be like white people. And, deep down, even white people don't want that.

It is not coincidental that President Trump's "A nation without borders is not a nation" was first spoken by Ronald Reagan. It is an expression of the sovereign impulse that Reagan's program for globalization exemplified. Awatere's "white people" had invented sovereignty in early modern Europe, a geopolitical framework that assumed most social categories are eternal and spatially consistent. The idea of sovereignty based the rule of law in the power of a monarch, the sovereign, whose authority came from God. When in 1790 the United States congress transferred this authority to the people, to "citizens," it defined a citizen as a "free, white person" who had resided in the US for two years.²⁰ The burgeoning settler society envisioned property as something owned by white individuals, and native societies as disappearing within an evolving project of land acquisition. Black people were legally regarded not as persons but as property. The idea of sovereignty therefore encompasses at its heart principles and assumptions inimical to the transition from decolonization to self-determination. In the principle of sovereignty, colonialism is perpetuated. And colonialism perpetuates the double-bind.

But there's more: multi-ethnic biopolitical transformations, such as that which the commonwealth of Puerto Rico is undergoing, have to take account of reticulated indigenous histories.²¹ Indigenous historical experience is not monolithic. Great diversity is discoverable in the relations between indigenous peoples and the landscapes they manage.²² Prior to contemporary social infrastructures (physical, linguistic, aesthetic), the histories of landscapes are therefore already multiple, and from the contemporary perspective largely unknowable. For hundreds of years the movement through Puerto Rico of Taino, Carib, African, Spanish, English, and French people has been distorted by the lens of a single narrative: Puerto Ricans are one people. This narrative of Puerto Rican unity is often said to have grown from the three "roots" of its culture and society—Taino, Spanish, African—to flower into a unifying ideal of nationhood. Each group, however, has its own interpretation of geographies and histories. This makes the national discourse fluid and evolutionary, subject to negotiation and reconstruction, depending on who is speaking. That's why some Puerto Ricans are building a multivariate island

discourse comprising the different histories and different voices that were constructed under conditions of colonialism and imperialism.

As a concept that implies singularity rather than multiplicity, sovereignty would instantiate the “we are one people” narrative, even as the people of Puerto Rico reclaim their blended histories, and Afro Latino, Latinx and Nuyorican Taina identities come out of the shadows of globalization. In the US “the people” speak through the medium of representation, where difference is flattened and active transformation criminalized. Puerto Rico is an island of contingencies, ambivalences, specifics, micro-systems, autopoiesis. It should preserve its sensitivity to small events and use this to build resilience in the face of large ones.

Here’s the issue. Puerto Rico’s vulnerability has been explicitly produced by investment banks, sovereign wealth funds, international agribusinesses and forestry corporations. The banks and corporations of sovereign nations have lent the country billions of dollars so that its government can pay the very same banks and corporations billions to build infrastructure to improve the living conditions of its people. It is sovereignty that has produced an economic polity in Puerto Rico, by constructing a collective subjectivity trained to speak a global language of commerce, finding it amenable that the cluster industries are invited to move their addresses to the commonwealth and receive a 4% tax rate and tax-free dividends in return. In 2018 a national discourse developed that thought the crypto-currency “Puertopia” shilled by blockchain millionaires would be good for a fragile, emergent political ecology. But the blockchain millionaires were only there for tax relief and land. Lots of sun-filled tropical land.

If we frame the contemporary problem facing the archipelago as rooted in the relationship between the people and the ecosystems that sustain them, it should be here that we look for a radical reconstitution of the unincorporated territory of Puerto Rico as self-determining and independent. I have suggested that autonomy is possible only on the basis of a reformulation of the relationship between Puerto Ricans and the matrix of environmental systems with which they interact in the most global and the most intimate of ways. The transformation has begun, with the development of dozens of sites of power across the islands. (Sites of power are what I call those places scattered across the archipelago where *Borinqueños* are developing ecoagricultural farms and orchards and moving their produce to local markets.)

Environmental self-determination does not require that land be owned. In fact, shared environmental wealth can

become the very basis of production. Even now, the social and political projects emerging in Puerto Rico defy the rule of private property and promote the rights of the common—open and equal access to resources based on small groups and communities focused on specific issues. This is exactly what that confederation of millennials mentioned earlier is doing: creating *comunidad especiales* or temporary autonomous zones,²³ forming organizations such as Libertad Red, a routing center for resistant organizations, and the Our Power Solidarity Brigade, focused on food, labor and energy independence, or DeMos, a collective of teachers and professors of UPR Cayey that “denounces the nefarious impact of the austerity measures imposed” by “an unelected Fiscal Control Board,” and Guakiá Colectivo Agroecológico, whose mission is to produce food and technology learning experiences accessible to the Puerto Rico community.

Already, then, sites of power are becoming held in common by the people who participate in their development. Not private, not public, but shared by all, and participated in by those who wish to join. The wealth of the ecological common can build novel material, social, affective and cognitive mechanisms through the production of new cultural epistemologies. With the control and management of the land comes the control and management of organic life, which is the biological basis of livelihoods. Maori knew that ownership of their land would be critical to the establishment of autonomy and independence. When they won back their confiscated territories, the “they” in each case was a tribal organization, not individuals. The tribes now own and manage tribal land. Maori knew this. Métis know this, Lakota know this, Rohingya Muslims know this, African Americans know this. (Malcolm X, speaking in 1963: “Revolution is based on land. Land is the basis of all independence. Land is the basis of freedom, justice and equality.”²⁴) Puerto Rican *soberanistas* know this. But how can sovereignty be the goal of revolution if sovereignty itself is based on a land-ownership fealty that is at the heart of injustice, malpractice and foreign control?

Caribbean anthropologist Yarima Bonilla’s research points in the direction of divestment. We should not think of places like Puerto Rico as sites that need to achieve sovereignty through postcolonialism, she says, but as places that can unsettle how we think of sovereignty itself, where alternative political frameworks, moving beyond sovereignty, are both necessary and inevitable.²⁵ Let us, then, reconsider the idea of the commons, of land held in common, of a community that is composed or produced through the development of open and equal access to health, education and livelihood. It is through a consideration of how to formulate a common that we can rescript the project of sovereignty.

Environmental Design

Self-determination, multiracialism, environmental management, land rights, political change ... these concerns contribute to the evolutionary practices of environmental design. Landscape architecture is an example of a politically-motivated design profession. Forged in 2016, the Cultural Landscape Foundation's New Landscape Declaration states that landscape architects "can build a new identity for society as a constructive part of nature."²⁶ No longer independent of nature, but co-constructing planet Earth, socially-engaged design practices are changing away from the idea of human sovereignty itself. New intellectual and cognitive frameworks are being built, and the ecological condition of nonsovereign autonomy requires designers to work *within* the systems they are helping to reformulate, in a kind of critical immersion. The new breed of environmental designers understands that humans are not separate from their environment but are produced in time and space along with it. Political ecologists by training, landscape architects know firsthand that social and political issues are spatial issues. And, conversely, that territorial issues are biopolitical issues. The new emphasis on the social interaction of spatial, temporal and ecological conditions provides a way to think about power concretely and geographically—as embedded in spatial practices. We now know that profit-driven social programs (such as the development of old-school infrastructure and the privatization of shared space) can radically affect the composition and evolution of communities. But social inequities must be addressed through design strategies that are more than spatial, since they involve the influence of non-spatial decisions about the trading of stocks and shares, and the education of peoples.

Still, for environmental design to be an effective agent in the connection of sites of power to political self-determination requires commitment to radical new techniques of design investigation. It requires a critique, even, of design epistemologies. First, the profession needs to re-examine concepts such as community, agency, social capital, participatory design, power, civil society, and ecology (and many landscape architects are doing just this). Second, to assist with the evolution of permanent—not temporary—autonomous zones it must avoid and protest the instrumental delivery of environmental design services that provision communities with quickly naturalized forms of consumption. Third, it must resist the spatial practices of legislators whose profit motives marginalize whole peoples. Fourth, the environmental design disciplines must link with other activists and resisters to achieve genuine sites of power in a collective, sustained engagement with systems, spaces and peoples. It's

not just about small pockets of agroecology production units supplying farm-to-table restaurants and local consumers. As the Puerto Rico Brigades are well aware, they cannot build a 21st century economy on that.

Ultimately, in Puerto Rico as around the globe, it is not so much physical sites of power that need to be designed, as the new agroecocultural economy that these embody and exchange goods and services within. So, how *do* you design a land-based sharing economy within the global context of mass food production, on-call energy supply, mass tourism, climate change, diaspora socialism and increasing nationalism; in markets that don't respect seasonality; in an economy that participates in the global crush, but is driven by the specific needs and practices of a highly-networked local ecoagricultural political ecology? How can architects, landscape architects and urban designers do this? Are there models?

Of course, there are models for Puerto Rico's sites of power all over the world, where environmental cadres are reclaiming the rights of production through land use.²⁷ It's not a question of models, however, for the very idea of a model implies the problem of the copy. The autopoietic process I promote is by definition endogenously-generated—it comes from within. This is why, when considering other people's formulae, we should stick closely to our own provenance, our own, deep, braided sense of becoming. Exactly to what extent Puerto Rican sites of power can unplug from the Great Grid of geopolitical trade and economics is a matter for the Brigades to decide. Landscape architects can bring their extraordinary sensitivity to the design—or we should say, rearrangement—of systems, of multiplicities, to the project. As Panthea Lee of Reboot says, It's not about the design of products or things, but the management of systems:

I think the challenge with a lot of these products is that people say, 'We've gone in and done our research. We understand the local context.' And then they go and design something for that existing context: 'Oh, there's no energy, there's no clean water.' That's a good temporary solution but... why don't people have clean water? *Why* are people hungry? Someone said, 'Let's make this emergency food with nutrients so people can have just one meal a day.' That's not a solution!²⁸

What systems are we talking about? The same ones that Gabriela Moreno's great grandparents lived and farmed within. If the goal of a successful ecoagricultural economy is the production of common wealth from sustainable activities deploying baseline knowledge and expertise, there is no better place to look than the traditional gardens of the *Borinqueños* in the western highlands of 19th century Puerto

Rico. In places like Utuado, where Sandra Farms continues to grow coffee, and Orocovis, where Dalma Cartegna operates an agriculture education program teaching students the practical skills of agroecology. In these fertile territories traditional farming practices actually produced knowledge along with crops. Knowledge of three tier farming—coffee trees bearing heavily in the shade of the plantains; of supplementary production—tobacco growing for sale to villagers; of recycling and nutrition—those pigs and chickens. These gardens required no machinery or capital and had low production costs. This socialized expertise developed within a fabric of shared knowledges and norms of behavior, languages, habits, understanding and trust (Canario, African and mestizo kids chasing chickens for the pot). But it cannot and should not be mimicked. Today's paradigms of capitalist production raise complicated paradoxes of regulation and control that the Puerto Rican *comunidad especiales* must confront if they are to succeed in reformulating the whole island as a productive unit based on the autonomous organization of social cooperation.

The role of environmental design is infrastructural and logistical. The current nexus of private corporations, overseas shareholders, foreign expertise, and distant markets has gradually to be replaced by a language of landscape infrastructure, using landscape both as an aesthetic form of expression, and a medium of social production through the reallocation of natural resources. Logistics is the key to the control of territory, particularly the supply of operational energy.²⁹ Can't we imagine a collaborative formulation of landscape infrastructure that replaces the unholy marriage of urban planning and large-scale engineering that have caused so much destruction in Puerto Rico? This new political ecology will require a diversification of economic hubs and collectors, the decentralization of Puerto Rico's ragged service infrastructure, and the appropriation of administrative operating systems by networked sites of power.

The passing of infrastructural service provision to landscape-based systems involves the re-bundling and redesign of these systems. My study of small-scale land-based production economies in different countries with wildly different circumstances tells me that *if you have these things*: fertile land, an abundant water source, constant energy, skilled labor, three-tier farming, efficient recycling, mobility, and network communications, then in order to create a biopolitical agroecology *you need these things*: market development, transportation, storage systems, diverse means of production to divide work according to seasonal rhythms, affective landscape expression.

Landscape architecture provides the infrastructure design to enable the reorganization of Puerto Rico's brutal colonial industrial legacy into a responsive, localized, and fiscally effective form of life, based on the integrated development of sites of power.

Conclusion

In summary, the land-based political agenda I have outlined for Puerto Rico goes like this. Build agroecological knowledge by creating sites of power. Develop a landscape infrastructure that connects these production units to each other in an island-wide coalition. Materialize the struggle for independence by rescripting the project of sovereignty as the design of a common political ecology based on territorial control.

Land is the engine of citizenship and self-determination.
Land is power.

Review

By Cruz Garcia & Nathalie Frankowski / WAI Architecture Think Tank

Post-Colonial Landscapes at the end of work

Against the perpetual reimagination of dispossessed territories, the following observations work on one side, as a manual about how not to address a colony, and on the other, about how to allow for the generation of subversive imaginaries produced by its subjects, and protagonists.

Divided in three points, this document is simultaneously a critique of ideology and a post-colonial manifesto.

1

Puerto Rico is Post-Colonial, not postcolonial.

Achille Mbembe identifies that the postcolony is “made up of a series of corporate institutions and a political machinery which, once they are in place, constitute a distinctive regime of violence” and is “characterized by a distinctive style of political improvisation, by a tendency to excess and a lack of proportion as well as by distinctive ways in which identities are multiplied, transformed, and put into circulation.”³⁰

Adopting and departing from Mbembe’s definition, we have come to identify the term post-colonial (in its hyphenated version) to describe the potential fabrication of architectural narratives and emancipatory imaginaries under the suppressive apparatus of colonized territories.³¹ In Puerto Rico, the post-colonial as a speculative act of making takes the place of the historical anti-colonial struggle and reimagines global processes of solidarity and subsistence under an oppressive system.

While “the advent of postcolonial theory” may have taken place in the 1970s and 1980s, now is the time for Post-Colonial Imaginaries.³²

2

Colonization is a parasite that designs death and destruction.

When we speak of colonization, we are in reality describing a parasitic condition.³³ Colonization doesn’t produce commodities, nor does it produce “social relations, minds, values, norms, desires, and bodies”. Colonization is never liberal and less despotic. Instead colonization imposes, extracts, manipulates, alters, adulterates, and destroys. Colonization is brutal and violent. Its aftermath is death and destruction.

Like architecture, environmental design is not inherently good. In Puerto Rico, via more than five hundred years of brutal colonial rule, design has disempowered a population that remains without true democratic representation and that every time loses more control over its own land. In that sense, all its ecologies have been in the midst of political struggles for more than half a millennium. Design is found not only in the resilient agricultural initiatives around the archipelago, but also in the austerity measures imposed by an undemocratic Fiscal Control Board, in the unethical laws that privatize natural resources and public programs to turn them into expendable commodities, in the schemes that make it cheaper to import frozen produce from mainland US than to grow it locally, in the legal apparatus that obstructs the archipelago's capacity to trade with solidary neighbors, in the state of surveillance and policing that protects a legacy of private property dating back to the plantation that has transferred today to local landlords, owners of shopping malls and mass media, to the governmental and private investors in the business of Gore Capitalism, and to American and multinational corporate interests.

In the same way that we must decolonize architecture (not in a metaphorical way), emancipatory forms of environmental design can only exist as sharp weapons to cut the tentacles of the Cthulhu that is the hybrid between colonization and capitalism.

3

Lazy landscapes against the colonial gaze

Can we learn something from the world's oldest colony without the racializing colonial gaze? Can a true study of ecologies be executed without recurring to colonial tropes on the construction of race that avoids true emancipating engagement and subversions of ideology? Can the tropics be studied without the fetishistic objectification of its people? If it's true that in the principle of sovereignty, colonialism is perpetuated, the racializing gaze and with it the reading of territories through the lens of hegemonic discourse proves to be an equally problematic issue to overcome. Can other forms of cynical, subversive, utopian narratives acknowledge how the new post-colonial imaginaries would have to operate within a regime of designed scarcity? Would the platforms that legitimize knowledge open up their ivory gates to allow for the construction of uncomfortable narratives? Would new theories of landscape acknowledge that under the rule of necropolitics fertile land, water, energy, labor force, farming, recycling, mobility, network communication technologies are tools that facilitate and accelerate exploitation? Would these theories establish the connections between contemporary regimes of death and the brutal rule that in search of deliciousness and pleasure turned Puerto Rico (as well as the rest of the colonies in the Caribbean) into a plantation of sugar, tobacco, coffee,

Viagra, and Xanax? Because in the kingdom of flavor, productive ecologies are the perfect tool for exploitation, new post-colonial landscapes must strive in their uselessness to the empire, as they disguise behind layers of obsolescence and unproductivity. Instead of political landscapes of resilience, entrepreneurship, and commodifiable suffering, post-colonial subversions should be willing to strive in territories of laziness, escaping the grips of labor, and demolishing the goals of endless growth and capitalism. At the end of the day the architecture of these new narratives would have to outline, collage, recite, and assemble post-colonial landscapes at the end of work.

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- 1 James Clifford, *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 14.
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- 2 In 1897, the Spanish Queen Regent, Maria Christina, signed the Autonomous Charter granting Puerto Rico more self-government than ever before or after. See Jorge Duany, *Puerto Rico: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2017), 40.
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- 3 Hardt and Negri have dedicated a book to this question. See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 32.
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- 4 Harrison Flores Ortiz, *Brief Environmental History of Puerto Rico*: <https://enciclopediapr.org>. Last accessed 3/20/2018.
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- 5 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wc-fdJEI2cE&t=45s>. Last accessed 01/03/2018. See also Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2014).
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- 6 Throughout the 20th century, Puerto Ricans migrated to the continental United States, particularly to Florida and New York. These natives and their children and grandchildren are the “diaspora.”
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- 7 Badiou said that you do not become a subject until you have a project. Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* (London, England: Continuum, 2007).
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- 8 www.juntegente.org
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- 9 Interview at the #ITR Action Camp: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rr2HU-VWq6mc>. Last accessed 07/23/2018.
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- 10 NBC News: www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/puerto-rico-experiences-agricultural-renaissance-n656001. Hurricanes Irma and Maria and COVID-19 have dented this revival somewhat.
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- 11 Alan Yuhas, “Colony, State or Independence: Puerto Rico’s status anxiety adds to debt crisis,” *The Guardian* (July 7, 2015).
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- 12 Dan Lyons calls this “stakeholder capitalism.” See Dan Lyons, *Lab Rats: Why Modern Work Makes People Miserable* (London, England: Atlantic Books, 2019).
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- 13 Personal communication with the author at the College of Natural Science, University of Puerto Rico at Piedras (December 29, 2017).
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- 14 Rod Barnett, *Emergence in Landscape Architecture* (London, England: Routledge, 2013), 136.
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- 15 In Bruno Latour’s terms, *Borinqueños* are redefining the local by divesting it of the reactionary. See Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2018), 38–45.
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- 16 Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London, England, and New York, NY: Verso, 2013).
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- 17 Adam J. Barker, *(Re-)Ordering the New World: Settler colonialism, space and identity*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of Geography, University of Leicester, 2012.
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- 18 The double-bind is Michel Foucault’s formulation. See Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (London, England: Penguin Books, 1984), 22.
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- 19 Donna Awatere, *Maori Sovereignty* (Auckland, New Zealand: Broadsheet, 1984), 9.
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- 20 M. M. Iyenger, “Not Mere Abstractions: Language Policies and Language Ideologies in U.S. Settler Colonialism,” in *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 3: 2 (2014): 34.
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- 21 Pierre Bélanger, *Landscape as Infrastructure* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), n. 8.
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- 22 Colonial classification systems attest to this diversity: African, mulatto, mestizo, creole, white, Black, Indian, slave, free colored, pardo (light-skinned mulattos), moreno (dark-skinned mulattos and Blacks).
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- 23 Based on Hakim Bey’s 1991 book *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone* (Autonomea, 1991; Pacific Publishing Studio, 2011), in which he promotes “the socio-political tactic of creating temporary spaces that elude formal structures of control.”
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- 24 Malcolm X, “Message to the Grass Roots” (1963): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ku2JzolPt50>. Last accessed 11/28/2018.
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- 25 Yarimar Bonilla, *Non-Sovereign Futures: French-Caribbean Politics in the Wake of*

Disenchantment (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

26 <https://lafoundation.org/news-events/2016-summit/new-landscape-declaration/>

27 I think of Knepp Farm in West Sussex, England; the Worsfold farm in Northland, New Zealand; Dunn Ranch in Missouri; the age-old rural economy of Cortona, Italy; the SAFFIES project in the UK and Europe...

28 <https://www.core77.com/posts/20698/a-better-world-by-design-spotlight-on-panthea-lee-of-reboot-20698>

29 Pierre Bélanger and Alexander Arroyo, *Ecologies of Power* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016). This book is a critical contribution to the urgent design of new political ecologies.

30 Achille Mbembe, "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony," *Journal of the International African Institute* 62: 1 (1992): 3–37.

31 While Achille Mbembe describes the condition of the "postcolony," the Post-Colonial as we use it in this text (in its hyphenated version) implies the fabrication of a fictional narrative on the future state of a current colony while alluding to a series of identifiable traits on former (or current) colonial territories.

32 We wrote recently about the contemporary role of a Post-Colonial imaginary in Cruz Garcia and Nathalie Frankowski, "Loudreading in Post-colonial Landscapes (to the beat of Reggaeton)," *AveryReview* 48 (June 2020): <http://averyreview.com/issues/48/architectures-of-a-salmon-empire>.

33 The concept of colonization as a parasitic condition was first introduced to us by John Kalu Osiri, the director of International Business at College of Business at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Biographies

Rod Barnett is a research fellow in the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts at Washington University in St. Louis, where he previously served as professor and chair of the Master of Landscape Architecture program. Barnett earned a Ph.D. from the University of Auckland, New Zealand, where he researched the potential of nonlinear dynamical systems science to inform landscape architectural design and practice. As part of his studies, he developed a self-organizing approach to urban development called Artweb, a multidisciplinary design and planning strategy that focuses on marginalized and underutilized urban terrains to create a network of arts and science projects throughout the city. The themes of his extensive writing and design work have developed from that work, with a core commitment to linking ecological urbanism with environmental justice. In 2012, Barnett was selected as one of the top twenty-five 25 Most Admired Educators in the United States by *DesignIntelligence*. Recent books include *Emergence in Landscape Architecture* (Routledge, 2013); *The Baden Project*, a self-organizing design strategy for an ecological park in North St. Louis (2016); and *The Modern Landscapes of Ted Smyth: Landscape Modernism in the Asia-Pacific* (Routledge, 2017). Email: rodbarnett@wustl.edu.

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