

CRITICAL ENCOUNTERS

On Debt, Blame, and Responsibility: Feminist Resistance in the Colony of Puerto Rico

Introduction

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ABSTRACT The essays translated in this cluster explore the work of debt, blame, and responsibility in the continuation of and resistance to colonial life in contemporary Puerto Rico. In the colony of Puerto Rico, debt represents the continuation of the colonial condition—Puerto Rico’s status as an unincorporated territory of the United States. Ariadna Michelle Godreau-Aubert, Vanesa Contreras Capó, Anayra Santory Jorge, and Eva Prados Rodríguez show furthermore how debt actualizes a racial and gender order that exceeds colonialism as a juridical-political predicament. Their essays track forms of resistance to the work of debt.

KEYWORDS debt, austerity, decolonial feminism, citizen debt audit, risk

Shariana Ferrer-Núñez of the Colectiva Feminista en Construcción often reminds us that the “premature death” of colonial subjects, especially Black women and other women racialized as nonwhite in the colony of Puerto Rico, indexes the “afterlife of slavery.”¹ She is quoting Saidiya Hartman, who, in *Lose Your Mother*, clarifies the persistence of slavery today in the “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” that continue a “racial calculus and political arithmetic . . . entrenched centuries ago.”² In their recent “Antiracist Manifiesto,” the Colectiva notes that such a calculus, such a racial

arithmetic, is used by a racial state that “belong[s] to a concrete political experience called modernity/coloniality,” which “survives decolonization processes.”³

Puerto Rico, an unincorporated territory of the United States, currently holds seventy-four billion dollars of bond debt and forty-nine billion dollars in unfunded pension obligations. Puerto Rico filed for bankruptcy in May 2017 under title III of the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA), a 2016 federal law that instituted a Fiscal Control Board tasked with ensuring fiscal responsibility and regaining access to capital markets. The board, appointed by the US Congress, reinstalls the colonial relation seemingly undone with the creation of the *Estado Libre Asociado* (ELA, Free Associated State) in 1952. The ELA represented a purported “compact” between the United States and Puerto Rico made possible by US Law 600, which allowed Puerto Rico to draft and ratify a constitution modified by Congress. With Puerto Rico’s status as an unincorporated territory intact, the seat of sovereignty remains the US Congress to this day. The Fiscal Control Board, known as *la Junta*, arguably, then, represents a return to pre-ELA colonialism. Puerto Rico’s economic and therefore political affairs are decided by US-appointed officials despite the fact that Puerto Rico has no voting representation in Congress and cannot cast a presidential vote.

In the colony of Puerto Rico, debt represents more than the survival of multiple colonizations.⁴ Under conditions of US colonial rule in twenty-first-century neoliberal financialized capitalism, it updates and thereby actualizes economic capture and political control. Debt is the “continuation of colonial life,” as Ariadna Michelle Godreau-Aubert writes in her essay translated in this cluster. Debt renews economic capture and political control, driving austerity, precarization, and expulsion; heightening privatization and rising utility costs; and intensifying regressive taxation for Puerto Rico’s population and tax exemption for the rich, creditors, and corporations. Debt and debt restructuring deals trade with life itself, not only undermining the most basic material conditions for populations in the territory, but continuing modalities of dispossession and expulsion that renew the work of race, gender, and class in the territory. Debt and debt restructuring eviscerate meager structures of democratic participation in the colony. However, the effectivity of debt lies in its renewing of the work of race, gender, and class central to the colonial relation (territorial status); that is, debt functions as a form of “coloniality.”⁵

When Ferrer-Núñez reminds us that premature death in the colony of Puerto Rico is the continuation of conquest, colonization, and slavery, she is tracking the necropolitical operation of the indebted colonial state. Financial debts index colonial debts evident in a racial order that continues by establishing culpability and shifting responsibility. Ferrer-Núñez cites Hartman’s notion of the afterlife of slavery in *Lose Your Mother*, but it is worth paying attention to Hartman’s chapter on debt in *Scenes of Subjection* as well.⁶ Here Hartman traces the reinstallation of bondage after emancipation through debt, which “fashion[s] obligation” through

economic, legal, and moral culpability, responsibility, and propriety. As she puts it, “responsibility entailed accounting for one’s actions, dutiful suppliancy, contractual obligation, and calculated reciprocity. Fundamentally, to be responsible was to be blameworthy.” Because “culpability gave way to indebtedness,” as she puts it, the “elasticity” of debt traverses legal and moral virtue and vice, legitimating economic and political servitude, sanction, and punishment.⁷ Binding “free” labor—that is, wage labor—whiteness, contractual relationality, and property/propriety, debt makes the free subject responsible for its own fate in a system designed to undermine the emancipated person. With the aim of compelling submission to “free” labor and appeasing anxieties about the refusal to work, laws treat idleness not only as improper but as dangerous and punishable. Proper conduct and good management, as Hartman notes, spanned from the economic to the hygienic.

The essays translated in this cluster explore the work of debt, blame, and responsibility in the continuation of and resistance to colonial life in contemporary Puerto Rico.⁸ Ariadna Michelle Godreau-Aubert’s “We Women Who Don’t Owe Anyone: *Las Propias* in Times of Public Debt and Austerity” maps the work of debt through an account of the effects of austerity, specifically on women, particularly on Black women and other women racialized as nonwhite. She argues that a “pornography of austerity” that “uses” the body of the indebted woman to “anchor uncertainty,” which reinforces the injunction to pay, indexes the lived experience of women rendered invisible by the hypervisibility of the “colonial condition” and “footage of poverty and numbers.” The technocratic state and racial stereotypes bind debt and austerity, anchoring culpability in women’s bodies: *cuerpas*. Godreau-Aubert’s text also explores the inversion of culpability, the reversal of the positions of power that the creditor-debtor relation institutes. “*Las propias*,” in fact, captures the proper/property in acts of individual and collective refusal and resistance. The indebted woman owes nothing to capitalist modernity, with its colonial debts, even while she recognizes transversal debts among those with whom refusal or resistance is exercised.

Vanesa Contreras Capó’s “Debt and Structural Gender Violence” shows how sexist and gender violence in Puerto Rico is systemic. Working against the individualizing discourse that captures accounts of domestic violence, poverty, and crime ubiquitous in the indebted colony, she emphasizes the violence of debt itself through public policy, resource allocation, and, more generally, austerity. Contreras Capó, current militant of Coalición 8M and cofounder of the Colectiva Feminista en Construcción, also discusses the Colectiva’s feminist inversion of debt. Going beyond nonpayment, she underscores the inversion of culpability that the Colectiva’s Black feminist tactics employ to resist the impact of debt and austerity on women, especially Black women and other women racialized as nonwhite, trans people, working-class women, and immigrants.

Anayra Santory Jorge’s “Destroying a Country Is Men’s Business” discusses the uncanny repetition of two moments of colonial capture and the “catastrophe by

attrition” that they disclose: Hurricane San Ciriaco’s devastation one year after the US invasion in 1898 and Hurricane María’s devastation one year after the passing of PROMESA in 2016. San Ciriaco’s and María’s destruction, in 1899 and 2017, respectively, stem from the economic and political conditions of the territory in each moment: in the late nineteenth century, a 30 percent loss in assets due to the devaluation of the Puerto Rican peso when it was subsumed by the US financial system; in the twenty-first century, a 32 percent loss in assets in less than a decade due to a recession and the accrual of an unpayable debt. San Ciriaco and María were events that disclosed the “slow violence” of a colonial political economy, one that defies the logic and representational possibilities of an event. Santory-Jorge explores the site of responsibility in this context, arguing that it leads to a reflection on risk. Risks taken on behalf of populations asked to pay in austerity are the “affairs of men” who through “collective actions and omissions” traded with life itself. This is a “collective irresponsibility” that calls for an evaluation of economic and political measures undertaken without consent of those asked to pay with life itself.

Eva Prados Rodríguez’s “Gender Violence and Debt Auditing” discusses the relation between gender violence and debt audits, specifically the citizen debt audit. A citizen audit, she argues, is a “political tool” against gender violence. Audits may be seen as key to ensuring fiscal responsibility and regaining access to capital markets. Alternatively, they can be seen as forms of accounting, as modes of holding accountable. They can thereby shift blame from the debtor to the “creditors”—banks, firms, politicians, and agents of capital who actualize a colonial political economy that trades with life itself, particularly with women’s lives. Financial debts make it possible to track the history of decisions and interests as well as values guiding the establishment of public priorities. They allow for a critical exposition of race, gender, and class norms that interpret problems and posit possible solutions. Fiscal policy and budget decisions in the context of debt crisis and restructuring are paradigmatically and directly related to gender violence in eroding pedagogical, economic, and political efforts to address this violence. A citizen debt audit therefore has the potential to interrupt the gender violence of debt and austerity.

ROCÍO ZAMBRANA is associate professor of philosophy at Emory University. Her work examines critiques of capitalism and coloniality in various philosophical traditions, especially Marxism, decolonial thought, and feminisms of the Américas (Latinx, Latin American, Caribbean). Her current work explores coloniality as the afterlife of colonialism, considering the articulation and deployment of race/gender as crucial to the development and resilience of capitalism. It considers the manifestations of coloniality in a colonial context by examining fiscally distressed Puerto Rico. Zambrana is the author of *Hegel’s Theory of Intelligibility* (2015) and *Colonial Debts: The Case of Puerto Rico* (2021), in addition to articles, book chapters, and columns on related themes. She is coeditor, with Bonnie

Mann, Erin McKenna, and Camisha Russell, of *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* and a columnist for *80grados* (San Juan, Puerto Rico).

Notes

1. La Colectiva Feminista en Construcción is a political project that follows the tradition of Black feminism in the struggle against heteropatriarchy, anti-Black violence, and capitalism. See Colectiva Feminista en Construcción, Facebook page; see also Colectiva Feminista en Construcción, “La Manifiesta.”
2. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 6.
3. Colectiva Feminista en Construcción, “Manifiesto antirracista.” For an English translation of the manifesto, see Colectiva Feminista en Construcción, “Anti-Racist Manifesto.”
4. Diplomatic recognition of Haiti, the first Black republic, born from a successful revolt, entailed a so-called “independence debt.” France and its allies secured economic capture and political control for over a century through repayment for “lost property”—land and enslaved people. When we speak of debt in the Caribbean, we must orient ourselves by looking to the case of Haiti, as Ferrer-Núñez argues. See Colectiva Feminista en Construcción, “Nosotras contra la deuda.”
5. Quijano, “Colonialidad del poder.”
6. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.
7. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 126. Note that Hartman also uses the term “elasticity” when speaking of Blackness. This is key for her notion of “fungibility,” the simultaneous disposability and indispensability of the captured and enslaved Africans subject to the normative and affective economy made possible by the economy of slavery (*Scenes of Subjection*, esp. 21 and 34).
8. For an extended engagement with these texts, see my forthcoming book, Zambrana, *Colonial Debts*.

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