Ni con dios ni con el diablo\textsuperscript{1}: Tales of survival, resistance and rebellion from a reluctant academic

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Abstract

Contemporary social movements challenge dominant discourses about democracy, freedom, independence, and autonomy; the daily experiences of the marginalized show these ideals have not led to decolonization. When one examines academic knowledge production and academic institutions, common assumptions about “autonomy” and “freedom” clash with the expectation to submit to institutionalized cannons. At issue here are the ways in which the academic establishment reproduces the coloniality of power. For radical sociologist Aníbal Quijano, coloniality of power is a pattern of domination that articulates the multiple forms of exploitation that took hold at a global scale with the conquest of Abia Yala (The Americas). As Lao-Montes (2010) explains, the exploitation of work by capital, as a pattern of coloniality, is expressed in all forms of labor organization that are subordinated to the process of accumulation of global capital. For those of us committed to knowledge production from a decolonizing standpoint, the challenge is to elaborate strategies of resistance in our daily practice. This auto-ethnographic paper explores (de)coloniality from the author’s experiences in survival and resistance as she faces the precarization and privatization of academic work and the possibilities for deeply emancipatory knowledge production.

Keywords: autoethnography, coloniality, decolonial standpoint, critical university studies

\textsuperscript{1} The phrase “neither with god nor the devil” describes a refusal to side with established and polarized positions.
Introduction

Ella está en el horizonte —dice Fernando Birri—. Me acerco dos pasos, ella se aleja dos pasos. Camino diez pasos y el horizonte se corre diez pasos más allá. Por mucho que yo camine, nunca la alcanzaré. ¿Para qué sirve la utopía? Para eso sirve: para caminar. (Galeano, 2001, p. 230)

Once upon a time not long ago, in lands submitted to the westernization of feeling, thought and action… the idea of “progress for the people” was tied to the possibility of achieving the highest degree of education possible. Such progress would lead some people to stable, well-remunerated and air-conditioned jobs. A few would make their mark within the realm of the university itself.

Study hard, get ahead, study some more, get a few loans to study even more, enter the (job) market, get hired, no doubt you will get hired, get another loan to buy one or two cars, one or two houses, have a family of your own making, don’t worry, just keep working ninety hours a week teaching, researching, publishing, thanks to all that fabulous technology that will not allow you a minute’s rest (happily forgetting what union workers bled for), you will be able to pay back your increasing debt, retire and then, maybe then, really enjoy your achievements… you’ll see, you’ll be fine.

At some point, though, the tale starts losing its luster as other stories emerge…

Decades ago my mother heard extended family in Mexico sarcastically joke about how in Mexico City they had “the best educated cab drivers.” Friends in Madrid renting their first apartment in the early nineties wrestled with the fact that they hired a medical doctor from Morocco as their cleaning lady. Years later, similar stories emerged about recently graduated PhDs flipping burgers in some overpriced city in the United States. Those were the horror stories that would wake me up in the middle of the night, fearing for my life, while cramming for comprehensive exams. Gloomy conversations with other minority colleagues did not help me sleep better… but we did give each other a mantra of sorts… “Don’t worry, that would not happen to you. You’ll just endure what ethnic minority faculty suffer until you get tenured…” But there is always a boogieman lurking in the dark.

Stories of success are part of the dominant tale that masks privilege and exploitation by upholding merit as the criteria for progress. While I studied in San Juan, Madrid, New York or Champaign-Urbana … no one looked me in the eye and told me that the possibility of reaching a comfortable, stable, and mildly exciting life after studying real hard and landing a tenured job at a vibrant university, was all part of a long-time inflating bubble, slowly shrivelling, steadily shrinking, so that soon most of us would not be able to breathe. No one required that I read what some courageous scholars had already been denouncing for decades, exposing the rise of the corporate mentality in higher education, particularly since the 1970s, and its direct impact on academia, the university community, and society at large (see Santos, 1998; Williams, 2012). No one ever said that most likely I would graduate into an economy that would devalue my efforts and disregard my objections.
The amount of student loans taken out last year crossed the $100 billion mark for the first time and total loans outstanding will exceed $1 trillion for the first time this year. Americans now owe more on student loans than on credit cards, reports the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, the U.S. Department of Education and private sources. (Cauchon, 2011)


The university is the scenario where I have lived most of my life – as an undergraduate and graduate student, researcher, colleague, writer, provisional professor, activist – and out of which I am attempting to reconfigure myself, writing a different script. The long road was up, up, and up, just to go downhill so quickly. A PhD in delayed gratification – working and working with the hope that this time you’ll get the job, the grant, the course, the publication – bringing me back full circle to earning less than when I was barely an adult, working for less than minimum wage, making the pointless line for food stamps as adjunct to nothingness. Following the rules, not looking around, keeping quiet just in case things could get better, after all you have to show that you are a good sport, to then, maybe then finally realize that the “master’s tools” can only take you so far (Lorde, 1984). The university is one scenario where the crises of the neoliberal hegemonic discourse and its consequences are manifested (see Lander, 2005; Santos, 2005; Williams, 2012). It is a place occupied by opposing and contradictory forces that can be at once a vehicle for a just and sustainable transformation of the way we live while perpetrating the patterns that keep colonial legacies alive and kicking. For some of us that tension is simply unbearable.

So these days I read about African slaves conspiring to take over towns in XIX century Puerto Rico, about Taínos rebelling once they realized the Spanish conquerors had no intention of playing nice, about post-emancipation favela dwellers in Trinidad struggling to be people, and very old Black men in the United States setting themselves free by confronting their masters for the first time. Meanwhile I try to figure out how to live communally, needing less and less things, slowly breaking the links in the chains of debt. I’m rereading my history, rewriting my story.

As I read, I try to understand an old question recently raised by Gary Gutiérrez (2011) and Carlos Rivera Lugo (2011) in the midst of the Occupy and other recent rebellious movements across the planet; a question posed under different circumstances by generations of Puerto Ricans in the island and the diaspora who, recognizing themselves as colonial subjects,

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2 In Puerto Rico, an adult has to earn less than $500 a month to qualify for food assistance, regardless of whether her source of income is temporary or how much she spends on living expenses.
unsuccessfully attempt to construct a different collective destiny… ¿Qué les pasa a los puertorriqueños que no se revelan?3 As soon as the question is asked, what comes to my mind, my skin, my heart, my memories, are the discourses that have and continue to keep us in our places, silenced and isolated from all the others in the same unbearable spot, justifying our exploitation, our debt to those who provide the means to keep the chains in place, wondering how to avoid offending the offenders, without tirar al medio4 those who exploit us… and break free.

Las malagradecidas5

Today the new mayor of a northern town was exposed for threatening public employees with chopping their heads off, if they failed to collect money from others and add their share - from their own pockets - in campaign contributions for his party (now in power). His predecessor was ousted and jailed last year for demanding payoffs for public contracts. The current mayor rhetorically asked his employees, “If you do not contribute to the campaign, what do I need you for?” Someone recorded the pep talk and passed it on through the social networks. The incident revealed something we have known for a long time. In Puerto Rico clientelism is the rule. For decades public employees have been paying back with their votes, campaigning and providing monetary contributions, showing their gratitude to the party that gives them a job (see also D’Agostino, 2003).

In the late 1800s, although worker strikes were illegal in Puerto Rico, poor urban jornaleros6 found ways to let their demands be heard. Their bosses – who were also politicians, city officials, judges, and best friends – cried out “¡Malagradecidos!” José Rodríguez Fuentes, for instance, wrote to a local newspaper justifying the closing of his tobacco shop and subsequent firing of 100 workers.

Yo no puedo luchar con tanta ingratitud sin dar tregua a mi imaginación para luego emprender la lucha; porque si en cinco días he arrojado a siete ladrones de mi casa a los que he enseñado a trabajar… y cuando no se respeta el que lo da y enseña a ganarlo, no es por menos que aplazar el tiempo para la nueva reconstitución [de la fábrica de tabacos]. (Picó, 2004, p. 36)

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3 In 1898, observing from exile how his fellow country-men and women accepted being passed along as a possession from Spain to United States, Ramón Emeterio Betances (one of the rebels of the 1868 Grito de Lares, a failed armed rebellion to liberate Puerto Rico from Spanish colonial rule) asked: “What’s wrong with Puerto Ricans? Why don’t they rebel?” (Rivera Lugo, 2011).
4 The phrase is used to describe the act of pointing the finger at a person who has done something unacceptable, pushing the offender to the public sphere, so that his actions are in plain view.
5 The ungrateful ones
6 Day laborers
He could no longer fight against so much ingratitude, so much disrespect for the hand that feeds. So, he would rather close shop (and reopen later with other workers) than treat the thieves (workers) with dignity for securing his family’s future. During the first decades of the XXth century, labor unions eventually won that battle only to hear a renewed anti-labor discourse, decades later, stripping away their rights in the name of labor reform. In Puerto Rico, since the 1990s, public sector workers no longer have the right to go on strike; if they do, they can be fired.

So, it appears that, malagradecidos and malagradecidas have been around in Puerto Rico for centuries. The Spanish conquerors thought Taíno and African slaves owed them loyalty and gratitude. After all, slaves were fed something, had something to wear and were provided with a roof over their heads, as well as the true (Spanish Catholic) god. After working six days in a row, for 16 hours, they could even have a day off. There was no need to revolt, to sabotage the machinery or burn the crops, to attempt a take over of the hacienda, the town, the island, to escape - as they seemed intent on doing (see Sued Badillo, 2008; Baralt, 2003). Actually, hacendados did peasants the favor of having a store in the hacienda where they could buy whatever poor folks needed on credit, paying back with their labor and/or their meager crops. There was no need to try and settle their accounts with money earned, nor a need to come at night, tiznados, with sixty, eighty, a hundred men and women looking for food, the libreta de la tienda de raya, and some clothes to then light the whole place on fire. There was no need to change sides, jumping on the next bandwagon, like so many did when it was clear the United States was the new boss in town (see Picó, 2004).

“Conflicitive,” “negative,” “problematic”, anyone who raises her voice in disagreement - pointing out what has been silenced, what needs to be looked at, fixed, changed, transformed - becomes the problem herself. Anyone who questions those who are complicit with injustice, rather than looking at those who are worse off, becomes a troublemaker. These days in this island, the subjugated say, “Yes!” when they really mean, “Nope, won’t do it and don’t care” and

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7 “Los tiznados”, also known as “las partidas sediciosas”, were groups of peasants, small farmers and small businessmen, who painted their faces with charcoal and took up arms to settle accounts with European and criollo plantation owners during the late 19th and early 20th century as the transition from Spanish to United States colonial rule left an institutional vacuum in Puerto Rican society (see Picó, 2004).

8 The “libreta de la tienda de raya” was the accounting book of the store owned by the plantation owner. The low wages earned and paid in vouchers rather than the official currency, forced day workers to buy on credit from the plantation store. Their debt was diligently registered in the store’s notebooks and became a specific target of las partidas sediciosas (see Picó, 2004; García Leduc, 2007).

9 The United States took possession of the island of Puerto Rico (and other Spanish colonies) in 1898 as a result of the Hispanic American War. Since then, Puerto Rico has been an unincorporated territory, a possession, of the United States. Island-born Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens but cannot vote in U.S. elections. The island has its own government and constitution that are subjected to the authority of U.S. Congress and constitution. Our main language if Spanish but we do not have control over our borders and international commerce.
we kill each other on the road before confronting the new slave owners. The naturalization of inequality and exploitation (Santos, 2011) runs deep. Still, like so many of our Taíno and African ancestors, some attempt to pull off an escape… Ayti, Karukera, Ay Ay… Chicago, New York, Florida… hoping.

**Trabajando pal inglés**

Being able to say and do what one must, is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to unmask and transform the colonial legacy transmitted through dominant ways of knowing, acting and being. When one turns the gaze towards academic knowledge production and the university as an institution, the question of “autonomy” and “freedom” clashes with the omnipresent expectation to submit to theoretical, methodological and institutional cannons. At issue here are the multiple ways in which the academic establishment is complicit with the coloniality of power and the possibility of generating other ways of being/doing/knowing (see Pascal & Leyva Solano, 2011; Smith, 1999).

As coined by Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, coloniality of power is a pattern of domination that articulates the multiple forms of exploitation that took hold at a global scale with the conquest of Abia Yala (The Americas). For Quijano, this pattern is organized along three main intersecting axis: “exploitation of work by capital, ethno-cultural domination and domination based on gender and sex” (Lao-Montes, 2010, p. 3). Challenging coloniality requires recognizing that “all social and historical phenomena are part of, or express a social relation or a web of social relationships. As such, social-historical phenomena cannot be understood outside the relational field it belongs to, its socio-historical totality” (Quijano, 2000, p. 352). For those of us committed to knowledge production from a decolonizing standpoint (Reyes Cruz & Sonn, 2011), the challenge is to elaborate strategies of resistance to the reproduction of coloniality in our daily practice. As Agustín Lao-Montes (2010) explains, decoloniality is a long-term process brought about by the “combined effects of daily struggles, multiple resistance and diverse ways of organizing that constitute the anti-systemic movements” (p. 13). I’m starting with what is at times a timid and, at times, an unapologetic attempt at speaking truth to power, slowly losing my fear of being unable to keep the illusion of material autonomy, co-constructing a rebellious interdependence in the midst of a colony.

In Puerto Rico, when you asked someone, “Hey, how is it going?” she may reply, “Okay, trabajando pal inglés, ¡ya tu sabes!”

10 OK, working for the English man. You know!
or Irish or Castilian or Corsican or criollo men who claimed the right to take away the rights of others in pursuit of the capitalist dream. The scheme changes slightly but its logic persists.

Economic policy in Puerto Rico during the second half of the twentieth century, focused on attracting foreign capital, matching it with the excess pool of local labor, and exporting the resulting products to the rest of the world. (Lamba Nieves, Marxuach Colón, & Soto Class, 2006, p. x)

We are left with the low-paying jobs, importing 85% of what we eat (Hernández Vélez, 2011), and racking up a debt to the tune of fifty-nine thousand dollars per inhabitant (Gutiérrez, 2011). And when the government’s budget gets real tight, The Constitution of Puerto Rico states that we first pay the bondholders no one voted for (see ELAPR Const. art. VI, § 8)… So you see, we do work for the proverbial “English man.”

In this island caught up between paradise and nightmare, I slowly began to change my tune. When someone asked me, “¿Qué tal? ¿Qué estás haciendo?” I began to respond, “Bien, trabajando en la IUPI” quickly followed by a detailed explanation of the working conditions of part-time adjunct faculty, cutting swiftly through what otherwise was surely going to be a cheerful “¡Ay! ¡Que bueno!” I had heard before, watching as I spoke how my interlocutor’s expression slowly changed from congratulatory-envy (“So you don’t work during the summer, right?!”) to a puzzled-embarrassed-troubled-but-that-does-not-have-anything-to-do-with-me blank face.

In those places where the institution of slavery has been in fact eradicated, the discourses that allow some to exploit the work of others are alive and well. Undocumented immigrant workers, underground labor rings, marginalized underpaid and overworked others without collective recourse come to mind. An image of Puerto Rico’s current governor smiling and shaking hands at the newest Wal-Mart in his apparent effort to “create jobs” while workers are exploited and prohibited from organizing (see Peled & Lam, 2001; Greenhouse, 2011)... news from the University of Puerto Rico’s most recent initiative placing students as interns in McDonald’s (Inter News Service, 2012) appear, while politicians and administrators remain impassive in front of the growing mass of invisibilized workers struggling to survive in an ever-growing downward spiral.

The latest student strike at the University of Puerto Rico revealed the extent of my own invisibility and forced me to end the balancing act. During the 2010 student strike, a group of well-respected tenured professors of different disciplines circulated a seemingly conscientious

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11 How is it going? What are you doing these days?
12 Fine, working at the IUPI.
13 Dictionary.com defines adjunct as: 1. something added to another thing but not essential to it. 2. a person associated with lesser status, rank, authority, etc., in some duty or service; assistant. 3. a person working at an institution, as a college or university, without having full or permanent status
14 That’s great!
paper hoping it would bring the strike to a peaceful end. The strike was sparked by the administration’s attempt to eliminate tuition waivers. After a semester of stoppages, the students effectively closed ten of the eleven campuses of the main public university of this island territory of the United States. By then I went from full-time to a part-time adjunct faculty, working full hours for two thousand dollars and change per course, no health insurance, vacations or retirement, no institutional support for writing, researching or formally exchanging ideas with colleagues and students, no space to participate in decision-making processes notwithstanding the doctorate from a respected metropolitan university, recommendations from peers and students, publications and other so called well-esteemed academic achievements. I was walking that thin rope of the scholar activist, living the precarization of the academic work on my back, the terror of job insecurity breathing on my neck, yet seizing opportunities to expose the silences from one campus gate to the next, knowing that once the campus reopened the same colleagues that had been there since I was an undergraduate would be called upon to implement the most recent wave of neoliberal policies strangling the university. After all, the dismantling of our public university had been underway for decades with the, at times reluctant, nod of the faculty (see Guadalupe, 2009).

The faculty’s proposal asked every segment of the university community to “sacrifice” something. Tenured faculty would agree to wait a few more years for salary increases owed to them; students would have to agree to paying a smaller increase in tuition fees… and adjunct faculty, those teaching core courses across campuses and earning less than graduate assistants, were not even worth mentioning. As the proposal was gaining play, circulating electronically amongst faculty and students, I waited. Silence. No one seemed to notice. Our colleagues were willing to support the continuing freeze in tenure-track positions indefinitely, risking the survival of graduate programs throughout the system, maintaining a subjugated labor force, just so that they could get back to life as they knew it.

When I raised the issue, a well-known tenured professor explained - to the 60 something professors in this electronic “dialogue” and I - that there was no way part-time faculty could be paid proportionally to what a full time professor earns. The university could not afford it nor was it necessary in most cases. Departments had to be free to hire people to teach specific courses as needed, professionals who already have careers elsewhere and (apparently) don’t mind teaching five months for a token compensation.

I replied. Others wrote me back in support, privately. The proposal was submitted to the administration in the name of the university community by a self-appointed group of professors, while others attempted their own strategies at organizing and resisting. The strike eventually ended with a reinforcement of the administration’s agenda and further erosion of working conditions. I eventually, quietly, escaped.

Patterns endure because they are collectively recognizable, passed on from one generation to the next, organizing social life even in the most unbearable terms. Cultural patterns are ways of knowing and understanding social reality, negotiating the comings and goings of the day, the latest news, the most recent changes, deep-seated desires and fears, expectations,
longings and surprises… There are patterns of exploitation born so long ago, that barely anyone remembers how they came to be. In the long run, some of the patterns, deeply embedded in the collective mind and body, keep adding wood to ancestral fires waiting to forge something new.

I have talked to quite a few professors who have worked as adjunct faculty for decades. They typically teach more classes and work more hours than a tenured professor, juggling from one campus to another, from one institution to the next, making ends meet, staying quiet hoping for a contract for the next term. Some leave, a few eventually get a tenured positions (in their fifties), and others are still waiting. Echoes from “the English men” of the 1800s, the conquerors/imperialists/White men, are heard as we are told by colleagues, well-meaning strangers, even loving family members,

Stay, quiet down, you never know how the power will be reallocated next semester...
Have a foot in the door, at least you are doing something you like...
Keep building your curriculum … don’t bite the hand that feeds you, don’t ruffle any feathers, don’t be a malagradecida… otherwise you will have nothing.

And, apparently, having nothing is worse than feeling like a slave.

Es evidente que el trabajador libre no aceptaba las condiciones de trabajo de las haciendas azucareras. Leopoldo Krugg, Vicecónsul de Inglaterra en Mayagüez, una de las áreas de mayor producción azucarera en la isla, confirma en 1866 lo que 20 años antes había expresado Bertrés y Souteyran. Dice Krugg que el jornalero libre solo trabaja dos o tres días a la semana, y que solamente lo hace por diez o doce horas diarias, mientras que el día de trabajo de los esclavos se extiende de catorce a dieciséis horas. Alegaba también que, el esclavo, por no tener otra alternativa, desempeñaba todos los trabajos que le ordenaba el mayordomo, incluyendo el de las hornallas, ya que si no lo hacía, se le aplicaba el látigo y se les obligaba a trabajar. (Baralt, 2003, p. 80)\textsuperscript{15}

The most successful conspiracy by African slaves in 19\textsuperscript{th} century Puerto Rico, at the partido de Toa Baja, took place when a group of slaves left their plantations to meet in town and take over la Casa del Rey, where the militia’s weapons were stored, and march to the bell tower to let everyone know it was over, the start of a new day. The priest and his fellow white men squelched the rebellion. Other attempts did not come to be because some slaves believed their masters… “Don’t join the rebels, tell the authorities, and you will be free!”

\textsuperscript{15}“It is evident that the free laborer did not accept the working conditions in the sugar plantations. Leopoldo Krugg, England’s diplomat in Mayaguez, one of the areas that produced more sugar in the island, confirmed in 1866 what Bertrés and Souteyrand had expressed 20 years earlier. Krugg said that the free laborer only worked two to three days a week, and only for ten to twelve hours daily, while the work day of the slaves could be extended from fourteen to sixteen hours. He also argued that the slave, not having other alternatives, would do all the jobs ordered by the overseer, including working the burners, since if he did not follow orders, he would be whipped and forced to work”. 
Con dios y con el diablo… hasta nuevo aviso

The world of the mildly aware yet accommodating powerless – those doing well within the system they despise, even those who are barely getting by – requires a whole array of survival strategies that allow you to remain put, even climb a little, one boss after the other, without losing the possibility of achieving a measure of success always defined by the mirage of the “good life” as narrated by TV ads. The eternal smiles, nods, silences… the little and big lies, manoeuvres of escape, playing dumb, deaf and blind, pretending to care but not really, even throwing an empty threat here and there…

What does it really mean to survive?

So far there are two main survival strategies I have learned throughout my life. One is the route of the pendeja ilustrada. That’s how my mom calls it. Rather than confronting mediocrity, corruption and injustice upfront, you maneuver to expose it – usually publicly – by playing the role of the knowledgeable idiot. Asking “silly” questions, pushing the other to reveal the trick, the contradiction, the laziness or the lie, without openly exposing the culprit. Letting the other know that you know there is something unsavory going on without saying anything threatening but, then again, letting them know you are on to it. That’s my mother’s strategy of choice. And by choice, I mean that it is what she chooses to do within a very limited range of possibilities, to keep the job beyond a new political administration, sustaining two little girls as a separatist and socialist public servant, finding ways of telling without saying, pushing without rocking anything, moving without leaving a trace, challenging without setting off any alarms. She developed this strategy to an art form, as a truth teller difficult to let go or dismiss. She carved a space where she was recognized as a challenging but valuable asset without losing herself completely, without sparking any revolution, without giving it all up.

Another survival strategy involves public displays of non-threatening indignation, a righteous and safe rebelliousness that will not get you fired and keep the contracts coming… proclamations, counter-proposals, signing campaigns, flyers, forums… all the while doing what is expected so that the machinery keeps working and the invisible bosses can look the other way the next day.

At a coalition meeting, days before a massive protest called mostly by union leaders, a well-known leftist strategist replied to the non-unionized workers’ insistence of having a common strategic plan: “We just need to hold the march and wait to see how the government reacts. We need to focus on getting people to the demonstration.” Wait and see if the government would respond to a one-day demonstration of outrage. In the meantime, most workers on the island fall off the radar of the shrinking unionized sector, living in increasing precariousness, underemployed and hopeless. Solidarity is not for them.

A few years later in a different conversation, an older socialist and labor lawyer declared boldly over a plate of chicharrones, rice and beans, “Don’t get me wrong, I’ve done well, very
well, in the colony. I work towards my decolonization helping poor people. But I have done real well in this system just as it is”.

The consequences of not playing along leave collective marks. Alejandro Grimson (2004) argues that, a group of socially unequal and culturally different people, who consider themselves members of a nation, share historical experiences constitutive of ways of imagining, thinking and acting, experiences that sear those with less power (p. 180). Slaves who attempted to claim the few considerations given by the crown were sent back to their owners for punishment. Those who conspired and were caught were publicly shot or hanged by the military. Barely thirty years after emancipation, slaves-turned-day-laborers took to the streets in a struggle for their humanization at the risk of being clubbed or shot in plain view by the military and the police. A few decades ago, professors and student activists at the University of Puerto Rico who spoke out against the militarization of the institution were beaten and banned from the university for decades. Despite the veil of democratic progress, those who speak up, challenge, criticize and protest have been hurt, ostracized, blacklisted, jailed, tortured, and killed. I was barely eight when two young separatists were set up and shot in a covert police operation at Cerro Maravilla. The governor at the time hailed the cops as heroes. Our current governor just signed a new civil code declaring illegal any protests that disturb government functions.

Today in this struggling island people are not killed for their political ideas. Instead we are strangled daily by corruption, drowned by infuriating deception, marked by decades of precariousness riding the waves of unemployment and underemployment as we laugh, dance and eat pretending everything is ok most of the time, so that some can continue receiving some kind of paycheck. We are living in a veiled state of terror, hopelessly observing how the laws are ignored, changed or reinterpreted to serve the desires of the political and corporate class. Our daily censorship is broken only by the safe rebelliousness of radio listeners and newspaper letter writers who say what they mean and mean what they say, having nothing more to lose.

And so, some people end up enacting a different survival strategy, the hopeless passive aggressive or la línea de menor resistencia. Slowing down work rhythms, signing in just to escape for hours at a time to some kind of personal errand, making others wait while answering personal cell phone calls during office hours, doing the least possible without totally disappearing, not demanding anything, saying yes to get people off their backs, staying down through the changes in administration, holding on to a fragile sense of safety despite the imminent death of public retirement funds (Long, 2012b)... being with god and the devil for as long as they can.
Back to the future

“Las fugas individuales fueron la manifestación más frecuente contra la institución de la esclavitud…” (Baralt, p. 119, 2003)

At times, for some people, in some contexts… the university has been a safe place for thinkers of all persuasions to express without major threats what is in their hearts. Other times, for other people, in other circumstances, the ways in which the institution attempts to repress the creative work, political will, and autonomy of deeply progressive faculty are cautiously masked in discourses of scholarship, neutrality, objectivity, merit, success, and timing (of course, there are also some who have been fired outright and blacklisted just for disagreeing).

For me, another brown colonial subject, staying at the university and paying dues as an adjunct, going through the ringer as so many others have before, hoping that at some point it will all lead to a greater sense of autonomy and agency, forced me to ignore the multiple ways in which one ends up reproducing the very same institutional structures that one critiques in hallway conversations, a class, or even on an occasional paper. Remaining “relevant” forced me to work additional unpaid hours writing proposal after proposal praying for some kind of grant that I don’t really need for the kind of work I love doing, so that the university could keep half of it and choose whether or not to renew my contract. Continuing to build the CV would require even more hours researching and writing and submitting and resubmitting, paper after paper that would be reviewed for free by other colleagues, usually paid by public funding, to hopefully give it away to some corporate foreign journal (some believe that a different kind of publication doesn’t count as a “real” publication) that will, in turn, ask an unaffordable amount of money from my public university library for access to my work now owned by them (see Monbiot, 2011; Flood, 2012). The exploitation of work by capital, as a pattern of coloniality, is expressed in all forms of labor organization (from reciprocity, slavery, servitude, small production, and salary) that are subordinated to the process of accumulation of global capital (Lao-Montes, 2010). My escape was unplanned but a long time coming. I do not really want to participate.

The university, at least the one I was trying to join (not just pass by), does not really want democracy, autonomy or freedom. The governor selects the majority of the trustees, the trustees decide who the president will be, and she in turn decides who the chancellors would be and so on and so forth, in a long line of an authoritative hierarchy that tolerates few spaces for the university community to express their views and desires to then simply ignore them. People complain and keep going. At times, some ask for solidarity with their own cause but rarely for the common good. Meanwhile, the university gets by with its shrinking budget, speeding students through, redefining in the least democratic ways what is worth paying for (gates, private security, redundant and exorbitant legal fees) and what it can’t afford (better working, studying, and researching conditions for a vibrant, plural, free, and open university). Nowadays, the most

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17 “The most frequent manifestation against the institution of slavery was the individual escape…”
sensible members of the university community do all they can to hold the downward spiral at bay, hoping things remain as they were yesterday, clear on what they do not want, ignoring what could be... or, at least, not sharing their dreams out loud, hoping things do not get a lot worse.

The Taínos did not die without a fight. African slaves rebelled constantly, conspiring together to take over their towns, killing the mayorales\(^{18}\) because enacting such violence was worth dying for, escaping alone because staying was worse than dying... The bozales, the slaves born in Africa, were the ones who most often organized the uprisings and escapes. They knew life could be different, they knew they were people; they remembered their sense of dignity (Baralt, 2003). When the first colonial rulers were forced to make way for the next, in that liminal space where the veil of the fiction – created to naturalize the colonialist and capitalist dehumanization project – lifted just enough for some to be real scared and others to be bold, when years, decades, centuries of submission were transformed into possibility... fire started.

I often imagine a person moving slowly and consciously towards the horizon. She does not want to stay where she is any more, so she starts moving with purpose towards something that is not yet. Eventually she looks around and realizes that she is not alone. The more she walks the more people she finds moving in the same direction, from all kinds of places, with the same sense of purpose. People of all walks of life, opening roads, pedaling, riding, running, rowing, some in large groups others at the rhythm of two... all moving towards a different and tangible place, somewhere out there, where no one has really ever been... They might not know exactly how it will be, but they know what they are after. Utopias are like the horizon, it keeps moving so that we keep trying to reach it (Galeano, 2001).

In the meantime, as I figure my way into deeper emancipatory practices, autoethnography\(^{19}\) is what I am willing to do... no funding, no salary, no institutional support, just the social world I experience, always with others, without attempting to make myself disappear. Autoethnography challenges the canonical ways of doing research and representing others, creating new and personal ways of relating. It treats research as a political and socially conscious act (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Autoethnography is what makes sense to me in this movement somewhere else, where I do not have to submit to externally funded agendas and westernized ways of knowing and doing in the name of a problematic notion of objectivity and neutrality... following at last my emancipatory yearnings to disrupt coloniality with each step. After all, our destiny is not to obey the powerful (Galeano, as cited by Arreola, 2012).

Now, as I join the disturbing numbers of the educated dispossessed, those who got caught between the short dream of progress and the crude realities of the scheme, who followed instructions until it made no sense anymore, I wonder if there are gods sending us “back to the future” smiling. There is a growing critical mass of professionals across the planet who are...  

\(^{18}\) The overseer of the plantations  
\(^{19}\) “Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience... A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).
finding themselves going back to a place they have never really been, getting their hands dirty, literally, as they learn how to grow what they eat (Buerk, 2011; Atiénzar, 2007; Donadio, 2012; Charles, 2011), some consciously moving as far away from the capitalist economy as they possibly can. Here in the plot of land where I am relearning myself, as we plow the earth together with a growing number of neojíbaros\(^{20}\), glass appears everywhere. Glass bottles of every size and color, abandoned shoe soles, pieces of cloth, nails, discarded wood, an old ice box, some box springs… The land is not mine in any property rights sense, just as it wasn’t theirs fifty, seventy or a hundred years ago. We find ourselves in the midst of an anthropological site of sorts, a coffee plantation decades ago, where agregados and agregadas\(^{21}\) lived and worked the land of others, now filled with their garbage. Perhaps there was no specific place to dispose of their waste. Perhaps there was no way of sending it elsewhere. Perhaps their only claim to the land was their work and their garbage. The work did not belong to them… their garbage is their only witness.

Author’s note

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References


\(^{20}\) New peasants

\(^{21}\) “Agregados” and “agregadas” were peasants who lived in small plots in larger plantations in exchange for work.


ELAPR Const. art. VI, § 8


