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Pedro Caban
pcaban@albany.edu

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CHAPTER 1

REMAKING PUERTO RICAN STUDIES AT 50 YEARS

Pedro Cabán

In 1969, Puerto Rican students, faculty, and staff rebelled against a major urban public university and demanded an education that was responsive to their needs. The beleaguered City University of New York (CUNY) administration was shaken by the militance of the protests and abashed by accusations that it was complicit in perpetuating a racist educational policy that demeaned the experiences and accomplishments of black and brown people. Unapologetic university officials relented and grudgingly established the first Puerto Rican Studies departments and institutes in the CUNY system. In July 2019, a popular uprising in Puerto Rico upended the political order in the archipelago. The uprising was the culmination of a series of tribulations that have plagued Puerto Rico for over fifteen years. Puerto Ricans endured a financial crisis, radical austerity measures, devastating hurricanes and earthquakes, thousands of deaths, and massive outmigration before their collective indignation exploded the political landscape. Puerto Rico's popular uprising over 50 years after the establishment of the first departments of Puerto Rican Studies creates an opportune moment to evaluate how and why the research priorities of Puerto Rican Studies (PRS) and the study of Puerto Rico have at moments coalesced, while at other moments they have diverged. In addition, this essay will trace the evolution of PRS, noting its growing epistemological diversity, varied analytical concerns, and conceptually challenging explication of colonialism's enduring impact on the Puerto Rican experience.

Four features corresponding to different moments in the evolution of Puerto Rican Studies make this interdisciplinary field distinctive. The first to be addressed is the moment in the early 1970s when both PRS and Puerto Rico studies advanced a radical critique of university-sanctioned scholarship. The second to be discussed is how PRS became increasingly defined by its research on the Puerto Rican experience in the United States; the salience of the archipelago as a focus of study declined as the diaspora continued to grow. As this reorientation of the field was taking place, PRS departments came under increased pressure by university administrators to adapt its curriculum and instruction to appeal to a rapidly diversifying urban Latinx population. PRS departments were required to expand their curriculum to be inclusive of the experiences of other populations. University administrators called for merging PRS with race and ethnic studies units. Some administrators proposed eliminating their departmental status (Cabán 2003). The reconfiguration and dismantlement of Puerto Rican Studies departments led to a third feature of contemporary PRS; its scholarship moved from a position of relative academic isolation and marginalization to one of growing institutional acceptance. Accusations that PRS catered to the provincial interests of academically unprepared students diminished as PRS scholarship was viewed more favorably when it became clear it contributed to the university's newfound multicultural and diversity missions; pressures were growing for educational institutions to be more inclusive. These changes in PRS can be described as *dispersion*, *differentiation*, and *dialogue*. Fourth, the crises that have consumed Puerto Rico for the last fifteen years have generated new forms of collaboration between scholars and activists in Puerto Rico and the United States. At the moment, PRS scholars and intellectuals in the diaspora are joining their colleagues in the archipelago in action-oriented research and analysis that advance social justice in Puerto Rico.

1. THE PARTICULARITY OF PUERTO RICAN STUDIES

Puerto Rican Studies scholarship has expanded rapidly in part because it is not bound by the epistemological constraints that delineate the parameters and methods of knowledge production constitutive of the traditional disciplines. Freed from disciplinary limitations, scholars have embarked on original research on the varied dimensions and manifestations of the

Puerto Rican experience. There is no distinctive Puerto Rican Studies epistemology, a unique theory of knowledge creation or consensus about which research methods are distinctive to the field. Yet, PRS is unique among race and ethnic studies. Puerto Ricans in the archipelago are positioned as colonial subjects with a diminished U.S. citizenship status. They are also racialized subjects in the U.S.; their material and social conditions correspond to that of other marginalized populations of color. Where Puerto Ricans reside fundamentally alters their positionality and redefines their relationship to power. Puerto Ricans' binary attributes as racialized citizens and colonial subjects invests their experience with a layer of complexity that distinguishes them from other Latinx populations. Since 1898, Puerto Ricans have been in a state of coloniality imposed by the United States. A key task of the early PRS scholarship was to challenge and undermine university-sanctioned knowledge that is used to normalize colonialism and the racial subordination of Puerto Rico. Josephine Nieves, the inaugural chairperson of the Department of Puerto Rican Studies at Brooklyn College when it was founded half a century ago, observed that the efforts to build the field of PRS "involved, in particular, a critique of the way social science theory and methods had served to legitimize our colonial history" (Nieves 1987, 5).

Nieves was a major intellectual force in the elaboration of PRS as an interdisciplinary field of study. Along with her colleagues, she conceived and effectively advocated for the establishment of the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños (Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Centro).¹ In the 1970s and 1980s, Centro researchers Frank Bonilla, Ricardo Campos, and Juan Flores collectively helped forge an interpretive paradigm grounded in historical materialist and critical cultural theory. Rafael Ramírez, one of the founders of CEREP (Centro de Estudios de la Realidad Puertorriqueña), was recruited by Bonilla to Centro and was instrumental in building the Culture Task Force.² Led by Centro's staff and researchers, Marxist theory gained prominence in the young field of PRS. Centro also created Task Forces on History, Migration, Language Policy, Cultural Studies, Higher Education, and Film (Ortíz Márquez 2009). Later, the Oral History Task Force was established. Centro encouraged researchers to theoretically interrogate the continuities and ruptures in the racialization of Puerto Ricans living in the colony and Puerto Ricans living in the United States. An early Centro project entailed

exploring the relationship between foreign-financed capitalist development and population displacement in the colony during the immediate post-World War II period. Centro also published path-breaking studies on the cultural production and language practice of the diaspora.

In Puerto Rico, CEREP, formed by Angel G. Quintero Rivera, Marcia Rivera, Lydia M. González García, and Gervasio L. García, among others, questioned the accepted historical narratives that trivialized the complexities of economy and culture under colonialism, and denied the salience of race and class in the construction of agrarian capitalism. Although Centro and CEREP set about on different research projects, they collectively influenced the field's research priorities. PRS, from its inception, and Puerto Rico studies driven by CEREP's revisionist project of historical rediscovery, were emancipatory and critical, and contested the portrayal of Puerto Ricans as passive victims unable to resist their oppression. For these activist intellectuals, "the ones living in the island as well as the ones established in New York City, the main objective became to defy and question the traditional concepts that guided Puerto Rican society" (Vázquez Valdés 2010).³ Indeed, according to Josephine Nieves, "the reality of the movement of Puerto Ricans between the Island and the United States was an important point of reference" for interrogating the university "for its role in distorting our history" (Nieves 1987, 3).

2. THE SALIENCE OF THE DIASPORA IN REPOSITIONING PRS SCHOLARSHIP, PEDAGOGY, AND THE RADICAL CRITIQUE OF WHITE SUPREMACY

Despite the common analytical affinities and embrace of historical materialism and critical historiography, Centro, with its focus on the diaspora, and CEREP, with its focus on the colony, had embarked on two different political projects. This was not unexpected since Centro was the product of community-based struggles to expose the university's duplicity in legitimizing the racial order and perpetuating social inequities. The U.S.-based PRS movement demanded academic enclaves for independent knowledge production that would be deployed to empower the Puerto Rican community. As a result of Puerto Rican student activism, a "variety of sheltered spaces were won, where creative experiments with new modalities of academic

management, instruction, group study, and the organization of research and its dissemination have taken place” (Bonilla 1992).

Puerto Rican Studies was part of a much larger project to democratize the university and deploy its resources for community empowerment. Puerto Rican Studies launched a systematic and sustained critique on how university knowledge was created and how it was deployed to preserve and rationalize the economic oppression and political exclusion of the Puerto Rican community, even as the university celebrated the presumed superiority of whiteness. A new knowledge was vitally necessary to repudiate denigrating portrayals of our people (Cabán 2004).

Centro was a critically important achievement in the struggle to democratize CUNY. Centro became a locus of scholarly activity where faculty, students, and staff coordinated academic programming and collectively developed research agendas. Freed from the tyranny of the traditional disciplines’ canonical orthodoxies, Centro, and the scholars who relied on its resources, could construct a new scholarship that lay bare the corrosive bias of university-sanctioned knowledge. In a seminal article, Carmen Whalen explored the “radical context” that established Centro. She notes that Centro was not merely the product of the radical times; in fact, it “created another ‘radical context’ by providing physical space, alternative approaches, and support for the scholarship that laid the foundations for Puerto Rican Studies as a field of research today” (Whalen 2009, 222). In addition, Centro was a strategic focal point where the community devised action plans to counter CUNY’s relentless campaign to hobble PRS departments.⁴

In contrast, university-based revisionist scholars in Puerto Rico critically studied the processes and structures of colonialism. CEREP employed the academic resources of the university to discredit the established historical narratives and expose them as ideological tools to inculcate colonial subservience. According to Quintero Rivera, CEREP provided a counter narrative to “apologetic discourses of our social and political reality...presented as social science or history” (Asociación Estudiantes Graduados de Historia 2016).⁵ Moreover, as Marcia Rivera noted, “CEREP took as its challenge to investigate the history of those without a history: workers, women and blackness in Puerto Rico” (Asociación Estudiantes Graduados de Historia 2016).⁶ CEREP sought to dismantle the university-sanctioned narratives of Puerto Rico’s

early history under U.S. colonial rule. CEREP was a project led by professional intellectuals to decolonize the university by exposing its role in perpetuating a colonial mindset. CEREP exposed the university as an instrument of colonialism for disseminating and validating the knowledge produced in the metropolis, as it failed to acknowledge anti-colonial narratives produced by Puerto Rican scholars. While these were important episodes in a long history of intellectual opposition to colonialism, CEREP did not seek the systemic transformation of the university.

This stands in contrast to the radical educational and political agendas of Centro and PRS during this formative period. Working class Puerto Rican students and faculty led the initial attack against the public university, primarily the institutions of the City University of New York (CUNY). But, Rutgers University and some institutions of the State University of New York (SUNY) were also fiercely contested sites. These agendas included disrupting the public university's capacity to perpetuate white supremacy. Urban working-class Puerto Ricans braved arrests, police abuse, suspension, and expulsion in their tireless campaign to democratize the university by ending the systematic exclusion of the racialized working class. Institutional transformation required racial democratization. The thought that a racialized working-class movement could turn the university on its head, that is to say, to promote racial justice rather than operate on behalf of white supremacy, was revolutionary (Cabán 2007, 7).

But, Centro and PRS were also engaged in a campaign to expose the university's role in the production and dissemination of knowledge that perpetuated and reinforced notions of Puerto Rican inferiority and fatalism. The conceptual lynchpin of the Puerto Rican Studies movement "was its analysis of the relationship between university-sanctioned forms of knowledge and racial power" (Cabán 2007, 6). The students were fiercely insistent and unrelenting in their demands for programs and departments because it was essential to counter university-sanctioned knowledge that was deployed to legitimize the subordination of the Puerto Rican diaspora. Students, faculty, community leaders, activists, and artists were determined to expose the epistemological dimensions of university-sanctioned knowledge, which normalized racial oppression and demarcated the diaspora's subservient role in the rapidly expanding post-World War II urban economy. In effect, the diaspora community fought to decolonize the university

and, through praxis, organically developed a critique of the university as constitutive of the coloniality of power.

Fundamental differences in the social contexts influenced the respective research agendas of Centro and CEREP. The experience of migrant Puerto Ricans as racialized displaced surplus labor compelled to negotiate a new positionality in an alien environment differed from that of the Puerto Rican colonial subject. The metaphorical assault on the public university system in the metropolitan New York area was part of a larger campaign to democratize those institutions of the state that held such sway over Puerto Rican lives. This contrasted with the work of scholars in Puerto Rico who sought to demystify the practice and ideology of colonial subordination. Colonialism, dehumanizing and exploitative as it was, positioned Puerto Ricans on the archipelago as subjects of empire. The colonial state, whose function is to advance the geopolitical and economic interests of the empire, orchestrated the veritable expulsion of surplus labor to counteract the disruptive consequences of post-World War II capitalist development. The vast majority of the hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans who were relocated to the U.S. lived a precarious existence. Yet, their expectation of returning became increasingly unrealistic with each passing year given the intractable persistence of high unemployment levels. The post-World War II labor migrants who were deceived into believing their dislocation was temporary would form the core of the Puerto Rican diaspora. While the lived experiences of Puerto Ricans in the colony and in the United States were different, both were the product of capitalist development in a colonial social formation.

Despite the auspicious beginnings, a long-term radical collaborative project never materialized. Instead, scholars established two separate spheres of intellectual labor: Puerto Rican Studies and Puerto Rico studies. However, since PRS is characterized by an expansive embrace of all matters *puertorriqueñidad*, it is not surprising that the knowledge produced in the archipelago is considered constitutive of PRS. Moreover, the study of Puerto Rico as a colony subject to the dictates of a decaying empire was from the beginning an important area of PRS research and its teaching mission. In the last decade, PRS scholars in the diaspora have written extensively about the crises that have engulfed Puerto Rico. Such preoccupation demonstrates that the study of colonialism is an important

part of the Puerto Rican Studies research agenda. There is a certain irony to the effort, well intentioned as it is, to encompass the study of Puerto Rico in the field of PRS. Puerto Rican Studies scholars, particularly those whose intellectual labor takes place outside of Puerto Rico, and who employ historical materialism, positivist social science, or any of the litany of conceptual and analytical armaments derived from Western epistemic schemas might be criticized as producing studies about the colonial subject, rather than studies from and with the colonial subject's perspective.

3. RETHINKING PUERTO RICAN STUDIES

The contemporary Puerto Rican Studies field is *dispersed*, *differentiated*, and in *dialogue* with other fields. *Dispersal* denotes that PRS scholars have faculty appointments in a variety of academic units throughout the university. This contrasts with the early history of Puerto Rican Studies when scholars did their intellectual work in relative isolation in small, politically vulnerable academic departments that were interspersed throughout the CUNY colleges. Before CUNY established PRS departments, relatively few scholars of the Puerto Rican experience worked in colleges and universities outside the Northeast. Now PRS scholars have appointments in colleges and universities throughout the United States. They have appointments in traditional academic departments, as well as race and ethnic studies, including Chicana/o or Mexican American Studies. This is a measure of the import of PRS scholarship to the academic mission of the university and its contributions to diversifying the university's knowledge base.

PRS scholarship is also highly *differentiated*. PRS scholars are expanding the knowledge base in the humanities that either did not exist or were in their formative stages when CUNY established PRS departments. Scholars have diversified the research agenda of PRS to include sexuality and gender studies, women's studies, racial and Afro-Latino identities, music, performance, and media (often defined as cultural and lifeworld studies). This new scholarship challenged the materialist, determinist, and male-centric underpinnings of some of the early scholarship. During its formative stage, PRS was heavy on historical materialism and positivist historiography and was faulted for dismissing cultural studies. The cultural was often dismissed as derivative of the material. Consequently, the "classical approaches" in the early phase of

PRS may not have anticipated the significance of cultural and lifeworld studies to transformative political processes. Although Centro is known for the application of a Marxist conception of history, it was also deeply engaged in research to comprehend how the diaspora preserved its cultural identity. In Bonilla's words, Centro wanted "to understand how a people have managed to maintain a common culture, language, aesthetic and collective identity in a most hostile and destructive milieu" (Bonilla and González 1973).

PRS has undergone a paradigmatic shift and is almost unrecognizable from its origins over a half century ago. Over the course of the last ten years, the *CENTRO Journal* and *Latino Studies*, the lead journals for PRS scholarship, have published original, often transformative, research on the Puerto Rican experience in the diaspora and the archipelago.⁷ Prominent PRS scholars were engaged in planning the *Latino Studies Journal*, which emerged as the single most important scholarly journal in the field and in the process has contributed to the institutionalization of the field. Both journals have a good record of identifying emerging areas of research.

Pérez Jiménez in her insightful review of the history of *CENTRO Journal* observed:

We encounter a greater diversification of the theoretical frames employed to analyze Puerto Rican experiences. Advances in the fields of Latino studies, comparative ethnic and race studies, critical race theory, queer studies, colonial and postcolonial studies, as well as diaspora, migration, and globalization studies all became reference points for the journal's articles, reflecting the broader conceptual shifts reconfiguring Puerto Rican studies itself. (2017, 45)

The *CENTRO Journal* understood the shifting scholarly terrain and provided a venue which "amplified the range of voices, writing styles, and genres that could take part in a scholarly journal, an orientation consonant with Centro's foundational aims to establish broader networks of intellectual dialogue and social conversations" (Pérez Jiménez 2017, 45). In fact, Centro's research agenda in the 1970s was ground-breaking because it embodied the nexus between distinct intellectual traditions and analytical frameworks. The Centro Task Forces were conceived to promote collective research and to transgress the boundaries between and among policy

areas and research modalities usually claimed as the domain of a single discipline. Article titles in *Latino Studies* over the same period also show the growing scholarly production of these innovative and expanding sub-fields of Puerto Rican Studies. In contrast, history, colonialism, the political economy of Puerto Rico, as measured by published articles in these journals, appear to have lost their place of prominence in these journals. Gender, race, and sexuality studies have emerged as vibrant and critically important research areas. This scholarship has expanded the knowledge base and theoretical scope of Puerto Rican Studies.⁸

While cultural studies, defined broadly, has a marked presence in the preferred journals for PRS, scholars have continued to publish important books in the social sciences and history. The subjects addressed include state-sponsored migration, law and colonialism, the particularities of Puerto Ricans' statutory citizenship, the civil rights movement and political participation, surveillance and policing, the political and economic dynamics of the Florida Puerto Rican population, and others (Lebrón 2019; Meléndez 2017; Thomas and Lauria-Santiago 2019). Recent scholarship explores how marginalization, exploitation, and racial and gender violence are also constitutive of empire (Godreau 2015; Muzio 2017; Rodríguez-Silva 2012). Comparative explorations situate Puerto Rico within a matrix of colonial and neocolonial social formations and help elucidate the nature of Puerto Rican exceptionalism (the complicated dynamics generated by racism, capitalist colonialism, and population displacement) (Alamo-Pastrana 2016; Dinzey-Flores 2013; García-Colón 2020). In the century-long project of building the American empire, Puerto Ricans are but one segment among vast populations of racialized peoples whose centrality to capital accumulation and U.S. global prominence cannot be dismissed.

The valorization of the cultural has not only contributed to a rich differentiation of knowledge in the field, but also redefined the nature of its *dialogue* with Chicano/a studies. PRS has been in *dialogue* with Chicana/o Studies since at least 1971 with the founding of the Center for Chicano-Boricua Studies of Wayne State University. In the same year, Samuel Betances edited *The Rican: Una Revista de Pensamiento Contemporáneo Puertorriqueño*. The journal was an important source of path-breaking essays on the status and intersections of Puerto Rican and Chicano Studies. Indiana University Northwest began publishing the *Revista Chicano-Riqueña* in 1973, under the editorship of Nicolás

Kanellos and Luis Dávila. The Chicano-Riqueña Studies program was established in the University of Indiana in 1974.

In 1983, the Inter-University Program for Latino Research (IUPLR) was established. The IUPLR was the first funded national organization for interdisciplinary collaboration among university-based Latina/o research centers. Centro, under Frank Bonilla's leadership, was the driving force in establishing this consortium, which was a precursor to developing nationally based research agendas that conceptualized Mexican Americans/Chicano/as and Puerto Ricans in the diaspora as racialized minorities. Initially, Latina/o scholars working under the auspices of IUPLR studied the structural forces that shaped the economic and social conditions of the Latina/o working class. But, over the years with the ascendance of cultural studies, and cognizant of the importance of the visual arts to identify formation and political education, the IUPLR established the Digital Research Project and annually convenes the Latino Art Now! Conference (Inter-University Program for Latino Research).

Latinx Studies is the culmination of the gradual transformation of a political project that implicated the university in legitimizing the inequities inherent in capitalist economy, into a moderately disruptive academic project that is engaged in “decolonizing” the university and the traditional disciplines. PRS has been intrinsic to the development of a unified field of Latinx studies and has established itself as one of the key knowledge fields in race and ethnic studies (Cabán 2003). PRS scholars, alongside scholars who study the experience of Mexican Americans, U.S. resident Central Americans, and other people of Latin American and Caribbean descent, have created Latina/o sections within the major professional associations. Scholars trained in these disciplines, primarily female scholars, have established Latina/o sections to promote Puerto Rican-based research in Sociology (the Latina/o Sociology Section) and Anthropology (The Association of Latina and Latino Anthropologists). Latina/o Sections have also been established in the American Political Science Association-Latino Caucus and the Latin American Studies Association (LASA).

Recently, PRS scholars established the Puerto Rico section in LASA. The seven-member executive committee is composed of young scholars based in Puerto Rico, the United States and Great Britain. Shortly after the 2019 summer uprising, LASA/Puerto Rico released an “Urgent Comunicqué About the

Situation in Puerto Rico.” The section expressed deep concern, noting that its members not only “have academic and intellectual interests in the archipelago” but have family there as well. The section affirmed that “Puerto Rico, Puerto Ricans, and Puerto Ricanness are not merely objects of study, they are an integral part of our own positionalities within academia” (Latin American Studies Association (LASA)/Puerto Rico Section (PR) 2019). LASA/Puerto Rico evokes an earlier history of collaboration between scholars in the diaspora and archipelago. PRS scholars played a prominent role in establishing the Latina/o Studies Association (<https://latinxstudiesassociation.org/home/mission-statement/>). They have served as officers in the Caribbean Studies Association and the Association of Caribbean Historians. In 2003, Nelson Maldonado-Torres was among the founders of the Caribbean Philosophical Association and served as president. Other notable professional associations with a strong PRS representation are the National Latinx Psychological Association and the American Society of Hispanic Economists.

It is important to emphasize that while PRS is an inclusive and interdisciplinary field, it is almost exclusively located in the traditional liberal arts and sciences colleges. There is substantial and varied scholarly literature in legal studies, education and education policy studies, labor studies, public health and health disparities, and environmental justice in the Puerto Rican experience.⁹ The labor of scholars in these fields helps fulfill part of the promise of the early PRS movement to create new knowledge in service of disenfranchised sectors of the Puerto Rican community. More can be done to acknowledge the centrality of this research to the PRS field.

The vibrant academic dispersal, creative differentiation, and sustained dialogue of PRS with other fields of study accelerated in the aftermath of the virtual elimination of PRS departments and programs in the CUNY system. Only Hunter College (1969) and Brooklyn College (1970) have academic departments that include Puerto Rican Studies in their title. A decade ago, I wrote that “in contrast to the waning importance of Puerto Rican Studies academic units, Puerto Rican Studies scholarship has gained acceptance in some academic fields and disciplines” (Cabán 2009). From its early decidedly insurrectionary beginnings, PRS scholarship has extended the bounds of inquiry and theorizing beyond the early work on capitalist development under colonialism and the racialized history of the

diaspora. The growth and diversity of PRS scholarship is also a testament to the success of the Puerto Rican academic community in forging alliances and building networks to secure a presence in the university. The current moment, marked by heightened Puerto Rican activism in the archipelago and the United States, affirms that through their collective intellectual labor Puerto Ricans have developed the skills and insights to withstand a relentless campaign to deny their common humanity. While establishing common ground with other Latinx populations, PRS resists the subsumption of Puerto Rican specificity under constructed ethnic labels.

Many PRS departments have been reconfigured as Latinx Studies departments or as Latin American and Latina/o academic units. PRS departments, which once played an important role in building academic community, have been supplanted by professional associations. In addition to the conferences and symposia these associations convene, they are also the focal point of online chat communities and serve as social media sites. Professional associations have also become significant venues for the dissemination of PRS scholarship, building academic communities, and fostering collaboration.

The Puerto Rican Studies Association (PRSA) is one of the most consequential and enduring achievements of the Puerto Rican Studies movement. PRSA's first organizational meeting was held in White Plains, New York, in 1992. Since that time, the organization has evolved into the preeminent venue for disseminating the interdisciplinary scholarship that is the hallmark of PRS. PRSA has helped forge a robust professional identity for PRS scholars and has been an advocate for PRSA scholars wrongfully denied tenure and supported PRS departments and programs under budgetary assault. With the demise of academic departments, PRSA became indispensable for sustaining the dispersed PRS academic community. Through its conferences and seminars, PRSA promoted greater acceptance of Puerto Rican Studies scholarship. The research presented at PRSA conferences reflects the state of the field. By honoring the exceptional and enduring academic accomplishments of PRS scholars, the association has been pivotal in institutionalizing the field. Because of the activism of PRSA, apprehension that the closing or remaking of PRS departments into hybrid race and ethnic studies would lead to the demise of PRS scholarship has waned.

Yet, despite this achievement, some of the goals of the PRS movement were never fully realized. The goal of decolonizing the university and appropriating its resources to empower racialized and marginalized communities proved an unattainable quest. The ardent advocates of PRS surely underestimated the capacity of the university to resist efforts to erode the centrality of Western canon in higher education. But, PRS did make modest, yet profoundly important, changes to the university culture. PRS scholars gained the university's belated acceptance that their field of study was not a shambolic academic indulgence. PRS developed into a viable academic field. PRS's early project to rewrite a distorted history that had reduced the Puerto Rican experience to an accident of empire has expanded to embrace a much larger and richer spectrum of inquiry and theorizing.

Judged in this light, the Puerto Rican community did not fail in its disruptive project to transform the university. It confronted the university's most regressive features and staked the claim that the study of the Puerto Rican experience is inviolable. Moreover, if we envision PRS as including the professions, we can better gauge the transformative legacy of this upstart academic field. During the current neoliberal moment, the institutional viability of PRS has ironically been strengthened. To the extent that PRS, and literally all race and ethnic studies, are able to attract students from a national population that is becoming increasingly brown, the less likely the university is to eliminate courses on racialized communities from the curriculum. The public universities and colleges, where Latina/o Studies predominate, are cash-strapped, enrollment-driven educational enterprises that have shown an impressive alacrity in adjusting their mission to respond to shifting market demands. Ironically, as the university administrations attempt to promote a "multicultural educational experience," race and ethnic studies are under-resourced and are portrayed as marginal to the university's academic mission.

With the substantial reductions of state support in public higher education, universities have had to depend on student tuition as the primary source of revenue. Long forgotten are fervid battles between administrators and students over the academic value of race and ethnic studies. As universities fiercely compete for a diminishing number of students willing to take on debt, administrators are more concerned about the monetary value, rather than the academic value, of race and ethnic studies. Graduates of

market-oriented academic programs, who acquire a functional knowledge of America's racialized communities, are particularly attractive to employers who want a competitive edge in selling their services and products to a young and growing "minority population." This is indeed one of the ironies of PRS on its fiftieth anniversary. In their radical quest to transform the university and decolonize the production and dissemination of knowledge, the militant proponents of PRS helped the university respond to the demographic change and economic challenges that have transformed New York in the last half century. The university has adopted a market-oriented strategy to enhance its bottom line. This is a paradoxical, but not small, achievement.

4. PUERTO RICAN STUDIES AND PUERTO RICO IN CRISIS

PRS is marked by a conceptual tension along two fault lines. In the previous section, I discussed the seemingly divergent research agendas among cultural, gender, and sexuality studies (which valorize the non-material dimensions of the political sphere), and political economy, politics, and history, in both their historical materialist and positivist epistemological forms. In the last decades, scholars have analyzed and theorized important dimensions of Puerto Rican identity that were relegated to the margins of the field. Research on racism in Puerto Rico and in the diaspora, the experiences of Afro-Boricuas/Afro-Latinxs, queer and transgender persons, and feminist critiques of the male-centric research priorities, have redefined the scope of Puerto Rican Studies.¹⁰ Yet, these need not be mutually exclusive framings as Centro attempted to demonstrate when it established the Task Forces in the early 1970s. Despite different methodologies and theoretical framings between cultural studies and political economy, Centro scholars attempted to align these two forms of knowledge creation through praxis. Notwithstanding this initial and farsighted vision, the conceptual divides, and analytical priorities, between "cultural studies" and "political economy" have become more extensive and challenging to bridge. But, events that have transpired since Hurricane María, including the exodus of Puerto Ricans, the collapse of the colonial state's legitimacy, the formation of diaspora organizations in solidarity with the archipelago, and the rise of grassroots resistance and advocacy collectives (AgitArte and Colectiva Feminista en Construcción) create novel opportunities to promote a nexus at the organizational level between these alternative paradigmatic

approaches. The critical reappraisal of PRS that is taking place in the wake of the rejuvenation of the Puerto Rican Studies Association may also spur a conceptual reassessment of the constructive intersections of cultural studies and political economy.

The second fault line, also introduced above, concerns the distinctive modalities used to represent and interpret the Puerto Rican experience in the diaspora and the archipelago. Here, I am referring to the distinction between Puerto Rican Studies and Puerto Rico studies discussed earlier. The early attempts by the CEREP in Puerto Rico and Centro in New York to develop research agendas to explore the continuities and commonalities between the Puerto Rican experience in the diaspora and the archipelago did not yield the hoped-for collaboration.¹¹ This may change. The Republican Party's relentless drive to fortify white supremacy and establish a polity ruled by plutocrats, has fostered solidarity among all racialized populations. These recent radical political developments are eroding distinctions between Puerto Ricans in the diaspora and the archipelago, as well as among racialized and economically vulnerable populations. Puerto Rico's endless economic and humanitarian crises, and the resurgence of a campaign of hate against Latinx immigrants, are transforming the research agenda and modes of academic collaboration in PRS. It is a politically urgent moment to envision a holistic Puerto Rican Studies paradigm that is based on a conceptual and spatial unity (e.g., cultural and political economy/diaspora and diaspora-archipelago).

Since 2005, but especially after the archipelago's financial collapse of 2008-09, virtually every aspect of the Puerto Rican people's existence has been disrupted by the misfortunes that have befallen the archipelago. Puerto Rico has been afflicted by debt, destruction, displacement, and dissent. Puerto Rico's massive debt to the municipal bond market and hedge funds is without historical parallel. The systemic defunding of the public employees' pension was fraudulent and at a scale that is incomprehensible. The ruling political parties, the pro-commonwealth Popular Democratic Party and the pro-statehood New Progressive Party, have been exposed as inherently corrupt patronage operations detached from the people and unmoved by their plight. The Puerto Rico Oversight Management and Economic Stabilization Act of 2016 (PROMESA) stripped the Puerto Rican government of the limited autonomy it enjoyed for almost six decades. Puerto Ricans have been victimized by heart-

less austerity measures imposed by both the colonial state and a technocratic and unaccountable financial control board created by PROMESA.

Puerto Rico had barely recovered from the damage caused by Hurricane Irma when Hurricane María struck the archipelago on September 20, 2017. Hurricane María rained more destruction and death on Puerto Rico than any other hurricane in modern history. The hurricane claimed over 4,600 lives (Kishore 2018). Property damage was estimated at \$95 billion (Disis 2017). Hurricane María destroyed the electrical grid, thousands of homes were made uninhabitable, and the health care infrastructure was severely damaged. In the aftermath of Hurricane María, migration reached unprecedented levels. From 2017 to 2018 about 133,500 Puerto Ricans migrated to the United States, and about one-third settled in Florida (Glassman 2019). The 3.9 percent decline of population in 2018 was the largest single year decline since 1950, the first year that annual data were collected (Flores 2019). Puerto Ricans were displaced by the collapse of society in numbers that were unimaginable at the start of the millennium. The scale and pace of exodus resembles the mass migration of refugees fleeing an active war zone.

The public institutions, federal as well as insular, responsible for safeguarding the well-being of the population, utterly failed. Puerto Ricans were abandoned by their government to fend for themselves in a denuded and devastated landscape. The people had reached a limit with the prolonged period of collective suffering and government malfeasance. The political class's blithe contempt for their fellow Puerto Ricans, who were shell shocked at the visible collapse of their society, provoked the massive uprising of summer 2019. Nearly a million people, almost a third of the archipelago's population, roared their collective indignation at the abuse of their humanity.

The despised Governor Ricardo Rosselló Nevares was forced to resign on August 2. Key members of his cabinet also resigned. The Puerto Rico Supreme Court ruled that Rosselló violated the constitution when he appointed Pedro Pierluisi as his successor on August 5. Wanda Vázquez Garced, Secretary of Justice and third in the line of succession, was appointed governor on August 7. Her administration has been marked by the incompetence and lack of transparency that were hallmarks of the Rosselló administration. Vázquez Garced and her administration have been condemned for their ineffectual response to the devastating

earthquake that inflicted much damage to southwestern Puerto Rico. Thousands have protested, demanding her resignation.

Puerto Rican Studies is most vibrant, creative, and relevant when the Puerto Rican community in the diaspora and the colony is under threat. Collaboration becomes more compelling and vigorous during periods of genuine crisis (Hurricanes Irma and María, the summer 2019 uprising, the Navy out of Vieques movement, the anti-PROMESA campaign, the anti-coal ash protests, the student strikes at the University of Puerto Rico, and the December 2019 and January 2020 earthquakes). Puerto Rican Studies scholars, public intellectuals, and activists in the diaspora and the archipelago directed much of their research and intellectual labor to documenting and evaluating the litany of traumas that had transformed the Puerto Rican experience. PRS scholars in the U.S. were instrumental in disseminating information, providing analysis, and creating venues for PRS scholars and activists from the archipelago to share their work. Puerto Rican researchers were invited to conferences and offered short research appointments at universities in the U.S. Most prominent among these was Princeton University's Program in Latin American Studies that established the Princeton Task Force on Puerto Rico; Arcadio Díaz Quiñones was actively engaged in this initiative.

The impact of the shocks that befell Puerto Rico has had an effect on Puerto Rican Studies. In particular, it is leading to a reappraisal of the two faulted lines I described above; the divide between cultural studies and political economy and rethinking the intersections between Puerto Rican Studies and Puerto Rico studies. The massive, ongoing exodus of Puerto Ricans, many of whom see themselves as forced to embark on a peregrination they fear will be permanent, has strengthened the links between Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico and the United States. In addition, the connection between research and activism, which was a defining goal of the early PRS movement, has been regenerated. Increasingly, the boundary between knowledge production and political empowerment of disenfranchised communities, which academia valorizes, is under scrutiny by a generation of young scholars steeped in the legacy of the insurrectionary period of the Puerto Rican students' movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

There is little doubt that the study of Puerto Rico is gaining prominence in PRS. Scholars, activists, journalists, and organizers in the dias-

pora and the archipelago published hundreds of articles and essays in a wide array of online periodicals, newspapers, magazines, podcasts, and blogs about Puerto Rico's protracted crisis. They published incisive analysis and illuminating commentary on events and actors that are remaking Puerto Rico. The reports of Centro de Periodismo Investigativo (Center for Investigative Journalism) and the Centro para la Nueva Economía (Center for a New Economy), both in Puerto Rico, exposed the incompetence, corruption, and confabulations of the colonial government. They are bulwarks against the highly concentrated corporate media in Puerto Rico, which filter and sanitize news in an insidious "commercialization of public discourse," thus seeking to normalize colonialism and citizen passivity (McChesney 1998).

This abundance of information armed scholars and activists with the vital insights that are necessary for informed and effective analysis and action. *The Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Huffington Post*, *El Nuevo Día*, *CENTRO Journal*, *Jacobin*, *NACLA*, *The Guardian*, *The Hill*, *New Politics*, *Conversation.com*, *Latino Rebels*, *The Nation*, *The Intercept*, *Dissent*, *80 grados*, *Democracy Now!*, *Atlantic*, *New Yorker*, *Hedge Clippers*, *NOTICEL*, and other sources published reports and commentary by scholars, policy makers, organizers, lawyers, health care providers, and activists. The critical popular writing revealed the mechanisms of colonial subjugation, and the perfidy of multinational banks and hedge funds in their schemes to impoverish Puerto Rico, and exposed the institutionalized corruption that permeated virtually all of government. But, it also documented the resistance and resilience of humble Puerto Ricans as they struggled to rebuild their devastated society and protested to bring down Rosselló's administration.

Puerto Ricans also creatively used the arts in a campaign of cultural resistance that was disseminated in a variety of media. AgitArte was among the most creative and daring activist groups deploying art and performance to challenge the authorities and build solidarity. Music had a vital and energizing presence at every protest event. The woman's collective, *Plena Combativa*, is well known for performing original compositions at protest events and was ever present at the uprising of summer 2019. The visual arts and music were indispensable mediums to educate, mobilize, organize, and to ridicule and discredit corrupt and incompetent government officials.

This unity of diverse forms of resistance (academic and journalistic writing, and performative and physical action) is nicely captured in *Aftershocks of Disaster* (Bonilla and LeBrón 2019). This ground-breaking and original anthology, edited by Yarimar Bonilla and Marisol LeBrón, is a collection of essays written by academics and journalists, activists and community organizers, artists and poets, arranged into a sweeping and contemplative portrait on the transformative physical and emotional impact of Hurricane María on Puerto Rico. Arcadio Díaz Quiñones, an emeritus professor from Princeton University, eloquently described the Rutgers University conference on which *Aftershocks* was based as a demonstration “of the strength of the ethos of solidarity among diverse diasporic communities and the institutions they have created as well as the moral sensibility of their allies at universities and research centers” (Díaz Quiñones 2019). *Aftershocks* shows how politically progressive individuals are dismantling a metaphorical border that was devised by the colonial state to discourage transnational community building.

Valor y Cambio, created by Frances Negrón Muntaner and Sarabel Santos Negrón in 2019, is described as “a story-telling, community-building, and solidarity economy project.” *Valor y Cambio* combines technology, culturally appropriate material incentives, graphic art, and history to provoke “a broad conversation about what is a just economy and how to foster collective empowerment” under conditions of severe austerity (Negrón Muntaner and Negrón 2019). *Valor y Cambio* was installed in economically vulnerable communities in Puerto Rico and New York, and furthers the evolving Puerto Rican transnational identity. The *Puerto Rico Syllabus*, conceived by Yarimar Bonilla, Marisol LeBrón, Sarah Molinari, and Isabel Guzzardo, is another creative project which fosters a link between research and activism, and which blurs the boundaries between cultural studies and political economy (Bonilla et al.). It promotes and sustains an ongoing exchange of knowledge between scholars and activists in the diaspora and in Puerto Rico on the origins and repercussions of the debt crisis. It is an accessible digital resource that offers the general public a variety of information sources on Puerto Rico. The goal of the *Puerto Rico Syllabus* “is to contribute to the ongoing public dialogue and rising social activism regarding the debt crisis by providing historical and sociological tools with which to assess its roots and repercussions” (Bonilla et al.).

Many colleges and universities, particularly those in CUNY and SUNY, participated in Puerto Rico's recovery process and provided humanitarian assistance. The *Listening to Puerto Rico* Teach-Out is an innovative program developed by the University of Notre Dame and the University of Michigan to create an archive of "film testimonies from Puerto Ricans of all walks of life." Described as "an engaged digital learning project," *Listening to Puerto Rico* aims to deepen awareness and comprehension of the "urgent multidimensional crisis" that Puerto Rico faces and to "learn of successful organizations, strategies and solutions that are contributing" to its recovery (*Listening to Puerto Rico*). *Listening to Puerto Rico* and *Puerto Rico Syllabus* have given joint presentations at academic conferences to discuss digital projects and solidarity work. Both are exploring strategies to expand the use of "digitally engaged scholarship." According to Sarah Molinari, Ph.D. Candidate in the CUNY Graduate Center Anthropology Program and one of the participants, both groups are looking at contrasting interpretations and new knowledge that the "mainstream media and academic accounts" are unable to provide. Their collaborative initiative also responds to the "growing public interest in alternative learning methods" (Molinari 2019).

The Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños has undergone a sea change since its origins. It has established an expansive social media and video presence, and through its *Puerto Rican Nation* program helps promote community solidarity. While researchers continue to generate timely analysis on political and economic conditions of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. and Puerto Rico, Centro has embarked on an ambitious schedule of summits, symposiums, and conferences. Some of the conferences are network and community building events, while others are designed to promote coalitions and partnerships among an array of Puerto Rican community-based organizations, service agencies, and corporate stakeholders. Through its Diaspora Summits, Centro has taken a leadership role in promoting a dialogue among academics, public officials, community organizations, and "multimedia makers" with the aim of setting "policy priorities and focusing on stateside-led rebuilding efforts for Puerto Rico in the aftermath of Hurricanes Irma and María" (Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños 2019). Conferences have been organized in Puerto Rico, the Northeast, Washington, and Orlando and regularly include scholars and activists from Puerto Rico. The Centro

also launched the *Rebuild Puerto Rico* initiative, which is described as “an online information clearinghouse for the stateside Puerto Rican community and other allies to support disaster relief and recovery efforts” (<https://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/events-news/rebuild-puerto-rico>). Centro operates an ambitious program to promote the arts and culture and creates accessible spaces for community education and dissemination of the latest PRS scholarship.

There is an undeniable urgency to deploy social media, digital communication technologies, and web-based platforms to create and disseminate new knowledge and to build opportunities to expand the scope of solidarity work. The use of social media and other digital technologies has been instrumental for building scholarly communities, solidarity groups, and community-based movements following Hurricane María and *#RickyRenuncia*.

CONCLUSION

PROMESA, Hurricane María, and the summer uprising of 2019 have transformed Puerto Rico and created a bond of activist solidarity between Puerto Ricans in the diaspora and the archipelago. The Navy out of Vieques movement is the only comparable event, but the protesters’ goal was to reclaim territory and expel an occupying force from a Puerto Rican island. The 2019 summer uprising was different. Protesters challenged a corrupt political class and the *junta*, the despised agency the federal government deployed to impose austerity. However, before the uprising, few Puerto Ricans were aware of the explosive groundswell of opposition and affirmation that was percolating after years of colonial abuse. The relentless resistance against the junta, the self-reliance and human dignity shown in the aftermath of the hurricane, and the outrage and courage of those protesting the degeneracy of the political class awakened the world to the fact that after 121 years of colonialism and remorseless attacks against all who fought for self-determination, Puerto Ricans are not cowed. The colonizer and the colonial state had failed to strip Puerto Ricans of their dignity and humanity. Many PRS scholars, activists, teachers, and intellectuals in the diaspora clearly understood they had a responsibility to support the collective cry of indignation. Many of them fought battles to establish Puerto Rican Studies, protested police brutality, marched for Puerto Rican independence, and participated in the Navy out of Vieques protests.

Young scholars continue to be drawn to Puerto Rican Studies. This in itself is a revolutionary act considering that, despite PRS's heightened academic standing, the field is not immune from criticism. Its detractors label PRS, as well as Black Studies, as identity politics, lacking academic rigor and as nothing more than an updated version of angry demands of the 1970s by individuals whose presence in the university should be contested. Yet, the more cosmopolitan and progressive faculty, many of whom are of color, acknowledge the importance of the scholarship that marks the current state of the field. Paradoxically, as Puerto Rico appeared on the verge of deteriorating into a Caribbean dystopia, Puerto Rican Studies scholarship regained the vibrancy, urgency, and critical properties that marked its origins in the turbulent 1960s.

Puerto Rican Studies has come full circle. PRS was the product of urgent and persistent student demands for the university to cede a space for Puerto Ricans to control the narrative; to create new knowledge of their reality, and in the process to expose the racist underpinning of university-sanctioned scholarship. This knowledge was to be deployed in service of marginalized and precarious communities. The task, then as now, is for Puerto Ricans to acquire an education that will empower them to lead a life with dignity and economic security, as they effect positive social change. Today, Puerto Rican Studies is on much firmer academic grounds than 50 years ago; there are far more scholars who can draw on the expansive knowledge that has been produced about the Puerto Rican experience in the diaspora and the archipelago.

PRS has created new knowledge and deployed new technologies to challenge the institutions and agents who enforce a neoliberal agenda on an impoverished colony. PRS scholars are also studying the demographic reconfiguration of Latinx communities resulting from successive waves of Puerto Rican migrants who started fleeing the archipelago with the onset of the 2005 depression. PRS researchers are focusing on the lives of these economic exiles and their impact on the communities in which they settle. The economic, social, linguistic, and cultural challenges the new migrants face are simultaneously similar to, but different from, the experience of post-World War II Puerto Rican migrants. Fifty years after Puerto Rican Studies

was established with a clear social justice agenda, it continues to pursue the same quest. However, this time PRS does so with substantial institutional experience and the academic capacity gained by its enduring struggle to create a secure academic presence in the American university.

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NOTES

¹ See Vázquez and Otero (2017) on the origins of Centro and *CENTRO Journal*.

² My thanks to Xavier Totti for this information.

³ Author's translation.

⁴ See Ortiz Márquez (2009) for an analysis of Centro's impact on the development of Puerto Rican Studies.

⁵ Author's translation.

⁶ Author's translation.

⁷ See Vázquez and Otero (2017) for an insightful essay on the history and personal reflections by the long-standing editor of the *CENTRO Journal* on "the creation of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies" in 1973 and its journal. The essay traces the history of the *CENTRO Journal* as she guided its development from a modest newsletter into the leading academic journal in the field of Puerto Rican Studies.

⁸ Turmoil in the Puerto Rican Studies Association in mid-2020 was partially attributable, according to a sizeable portion of the membership, to the inability of the organization's executive board to "address the current needs of the field of Puerto Rican Studies: one that foregrounds Black, feminist and queer perspectives" (Open Letter to the PRSA 2020).

⁹ A very partial list includes the following: Anthony DeJesús, Milga Morales Nadal, and Sonia Nieto (Education); Juan González (Environmental Justice); Jodie Roure, Juan Cartagena, Tanya Hernández, and Natasha Lycia Ora Bannan (Law); Judith Aponte and Urayoán Colón Ramos (Health Disparities); and the late Angelo Falcón (Policy Analysis). See Lloréns and Stanchich (2019) for a discussion on environmental degradation, climate change, and the environmental justice movement in post-Hurricane María Puerto Rico.

¹⁰ See the essay by Mario Mercado-Díaz on anti-Blackness in Puerto Rico and the diaspora (Mercado-Díaz 2020). For a discussion on racism in the archipelago, see Franco Ortíz, et al. (2019).

¹¹ Indeed, the signatories of the Open Letter on PRSA criticize the association for “the displacement of the diasporic origins of the association” (*Open Letter to the PRSA* 2020). Eric Kelderman (2020) discusses the turmoil in the Puerto Rican Studies Association that resulted in the mass resignation of the Executive Board and the election of a new board.

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