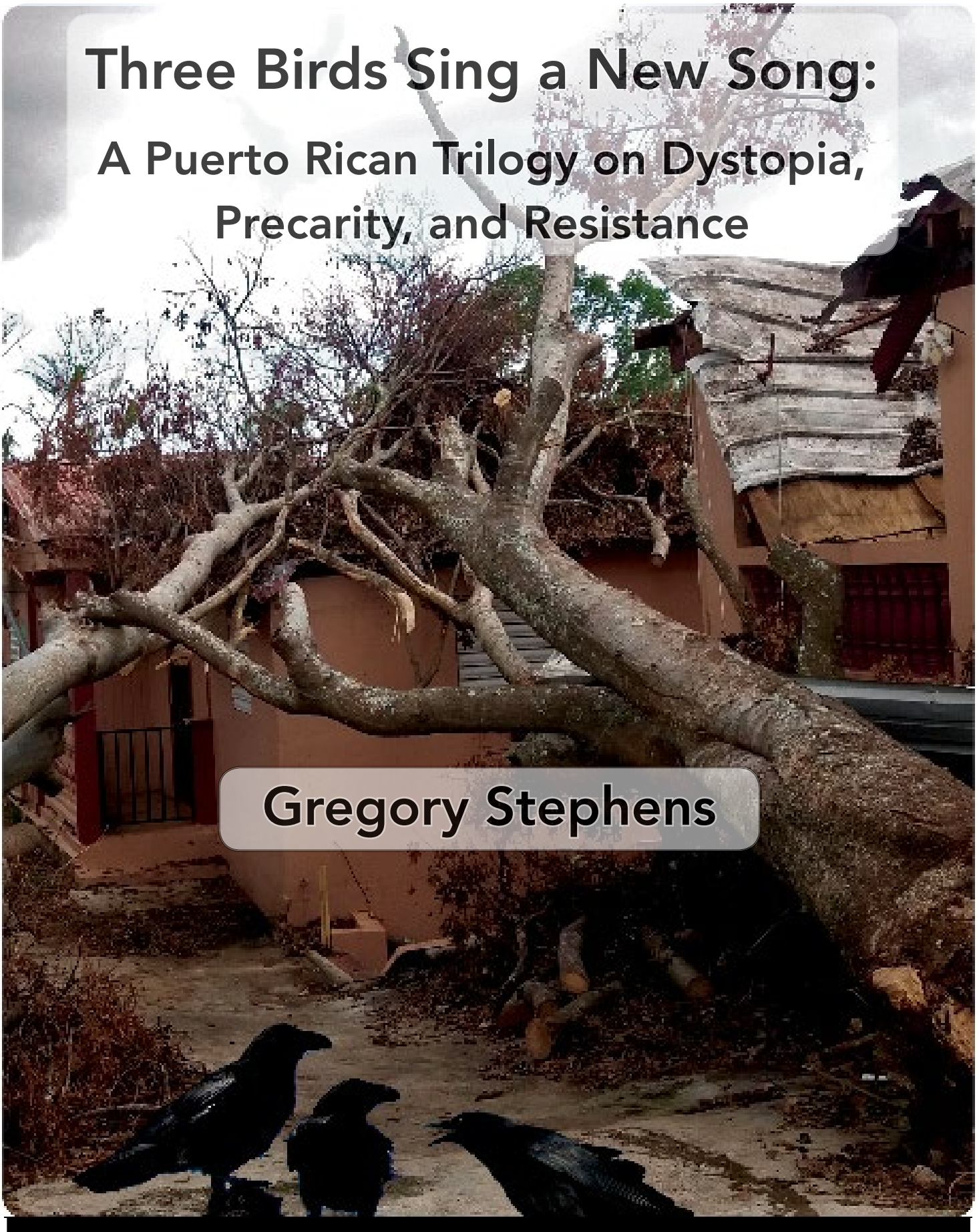
Three Birds Sing a New Song:

A Puerto Rican Trilogy on Dystopia, Precarity, and Resistance



Gregory Stephens

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ISBN: 978-0-9864333-9-9

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by

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Intermezzo
2019

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Originally published by Intermezzo, 2019

ISBN: 978-0-9864333-9-9
Library of Congress Control Number: 2019940080

Cover Image: "The Trees Have It" by Janice Cools (modified)
Layout by: Sergio C. Figueiredo, Kennesaw State University

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Janice Cools for her assistance in helping edit this manuscript at various stages of its development, and for her photos of the Mayagüez area in the wake of Hurricane Maria. Heartfelt thanks also to our neighbors on Calle Raúl BellasFlores (in Algarrobo) for their generosity and "grace under pressure."

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The most celebrated cultural rhetoric in Puerto Rico professes a patriotic resistance to the United States as an imperial force. But most Puerto Ricans are saturated by US commercial culture. There is little evidence of resistance to American cultural, political, and economic dominance in either spending or voting patterns. That paradox demanded attention in my cultural studies seminar.

~ Gregory Stephens, Three Birds Sing a New Song

PROLOGUE

In our dystopian times, the postapocalyptic has become a fashion, life is ever more precarious, and meaningful resistance is hard to envision. These are the themes of three essays in this trilogy, *Three Birds Sing a New Song: A Puerto Rican Trilogy on Dystopia, Precarity, and Resistance*. The title alludes to Bob Marley's "Three Little Birds." Unlike the utopian moment in that song when the birds/chorus sing "Don't worry about a thing' cause every little thing is gonna be alright," I will induce the birds to sing in a darker register.[1]

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing describes precarity as an inescapable need to "confront the condition of trouble without end."[2] As Marley put it, "There is so much trouble in the world." Let us "connect the dots" here, an interpretive and imaginative practice like first seeing stars in a pattern, and then imagining constellations with a story behind them.[3] Connecting Tsing and Marley here can lead to questions such as: Can we imagine a better way of life? Can we name the source of our endless troubles? What might meaningful resistance look like in this "dystopian precarity"?

This project was developed in Puerto Rico (i.e., "the last colony"),[4] especially during a series of crises and catastrophes that crippled the island in 2017. But I brought my own personal, cultural, and political experiences of *ongoing instability*. Dislocation and precarity in my life have been cumulative. For example, I had to leave the United States to find professorial work. Since 2004, when I first began teaching in English

departments, I have lived ten years to date in "foreign lands," first Jamaica, then Saudi Arabia, and finally Puerto Rico.

However, my experience of precarity precedes academic work and is rooted in a series of transitions, from earlier careers in journalism and songwriting to academic scholarship and teaching. I spent many years on the adjunct margins while making disciplinary migrations from communication to English, and now writing studies. On the personal front, I went through a contentious divorce; gained and then lost custody of two children.

The theme of resistance has been a constant in my life, beginning with a rebellion against the fundamentalism of my parents' world. But questioning the romance of resistance has been a more recent development, spurred by my disenchantment with the perpetually dismal outcomes of political revolutions, by a growing awareness that *the revolutionary* has mostly become a label used to sell products, and by disaffection with the romance of resistance in academic scholarship.

This backstory explains some of what I brought to Puerto Rico in 2014. I was inclined to look at the themes of dystopia, precarity, and resistance, which I witnessed in Boricua-land, not as something exceptional, but, rather, as normative. Perpetual instability in Puerto Rico cleared the cobwebs and sharpened my focus. The interpenetration of personal, political, and cultural forms of dystopia, precarity, and resistance were the matrix of this work.

From the beginning, I conceived of *Three Birds Sing a New Song* as a trilogy. Revising it, I have sought to make clearer the interplay between the three main themes. Yet I want to retain something of the discovery process. Although I had been teaching the interrelationship of utopia and dystopia since my sojourn in Jamaica ("think you're in heaven but you're living in hell"),[5] I only encountered research about precarity in Puerto Rico. "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear," Zen Buddhists say. The politics of refusal and the anthropology of precarity were bodies of research that I "found" in Puerto Rico, precisely because I was trying to make sense of the accelerating

instability I saw all around me. In a broader sense, I was looking for ways to reframe my perception that resistance itself was in a terminally precarious state, even though the romance of resistance seemed stronger than ever, at least amongst left-leaning academics.

* * * * *

The first essay here, "Teaching Dystopia in the Last Colony," reflects on the experience of "translating" the postapocalyptic genre for students in Puerto Rico. This piece sets the stage for the following two essays on resistance and precarity, and also introduces readers to some of the dynamics of teaching English language, literature, and culture in conditions of physical decay to second-language students in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. Nowadays dystopia is a one-way street: we no longer expect to return to or arrive at a utopian life. The permanence of dystopian conditions, without even a visible utopian horizon, has come to be known as *precarity*. Such a condition came into harrowing focus in Puerto Rico in 2017, when a mass exodus was set off by a worsening fiscal crisis, and then accelerated when Hurricane María devastated the island in September 2017. Puerto Rico came to embody precarity, one might say, which is an unstable life in which it seems we have nothing left to hold on to.

Originally I conceived of my treatment of precarity in a "glocal" context under the title "Precarious Life in Post-Paradise." I wanted to reflect on disjunctures between the way Puerto Rico is often marketed—as with other tropical islands, as a paradisiacal destination—and actual living conditions. The images of "beaches, babes, and boobs" are often in profound disjuncture with how life is lived on the ground outside of tourist enclaves, in this case in conditions of economic austerity and then natural disaster. Current events split my treatment of this theme in two. When my students returned in May 2017 after a two-month student strike, I provided a structure for them to process their experience. This led to "Reflective Essays in 'Last Days': On Non-Academic Genres

and Precarity in Puerto Rico," an ethnographic study which integrated student voices. But since it more specifically focuses on pedagogical issues, I am publishing this essay independently.[6]

During the strike, I looked to public-sphere debate, mostly conducted in Spanish, about the vexing issue of dependency, and especially efforts to voice or enact resistance. This more properly rhetorical study is the backbone of the second part of this trilogy: "Rethinking Resistance in the Puerto Rican Crisis: The Afterlife of Stuart Hall and Cultural Studies." This was first written for a conference in Jamaica on Stuart Hall's intellectual legacy. It also grew out of my efforts to translate some features of the cultural studies tradition into the context in which I live and work (the Spanish-speaking Caribbean). I use my experience of teaching cultural studies in Puerto Rico to rethink resistance. Does the cultural studies tradition Hall helped pioneer help us imagine and build an alternative to Marley's "world that forces lifelong insecurity"?[7] If dystopian imaginaries have distorted our political horizons, what might the "new song" of the Three Birds of the Precariat sound like?

Hurricane María demanded that I write about the lived experience of precarity in a more direct fashion. The aftermath of the hurricane is the raw material of Part Three, "Still Life in Motion: After the Apocalypse in Puerto Rico." My testimony, written more in the voice of literary nonfiction, draws on the voices of neighbors and citizens trying to stay afloat after a catastrophe. This piece provides new angles on the problem of resistance. María increased Puerto Rican dependence on the United States, and made less dystopian futures even harder to imagine.

The disintegration of the social order in Puerto Rico, accompanied by an environmental disaster, provides challenging food for thought about how the issues of dystopia, precarity, and resistance have been voiced, theorized, and narrated in the Global North.

Now for a note about disciplinary affiliations and writing style…..

While working as an English professor in Puerto Rico, I carved out space within

writing studies as a primary home. Increasingly, I utilized ethnography as my go-to research method. My own "disciplined interdisciplinarity"[8] is thoroughly suffused with voices from my prior careers as a journalist and a songwriter. So although I am flattered by a reviewer who described this trilogy as "an important and timely intervention in transnational, postcolonial, and resistance rhetorics," in practice I have decentered rhetorical theory, placing greater emphasis on research traditions such as Academic Literacies and creative writing pedagogy.[9] I do hope that my underlying writing studies framework, with an ethnographic anchor, will serve as something of a common language for dialogue with various people doing social and cultural analysis, including colleagues in rhetoric and composition. But I also aspire to reach a broader set of readers who are interested in topics like dystopia, precarity, and resistance, but who may have a low tolerance for "theoretical interventions." To the degree that this trilogy is an "intervention," it is thoroughly grounded in lived reality. The theory has provided insight on the experience, but the experience led me to the theory. Thus my first priority is narration, storytelling even, informed by but not overburdened by theory.

Part I

Teaching Dystopia in the Last Colony

Dystopia is glocal. Where I live, student strikes shut down the University of Puerto Rico system for two months beginning in April 2017. This Spanish-speaking island nation, *The Last Colony*[1] is going over a fiscal cliff. The UPR system is on life support, and the creditors are threatening to pull the plug. Reading the writing on the wall, I cast my net across the seas. I did a Skype interview for a position in Qatar, and a young woman on the search committee asked me, "Things look good on your CV—you're getting promoted, you're teaching interesting classes, and you are living in a tropical paradise. Why would you want to leave?"

The soundtrack in my head was a Bob Marley line: "Think you're in heaven, but you're living in hell." My mind ran back to Spring 2014, when I was an English professor in Riyadh. When I got an offer from the University of Puerto Rico-Mayagüez, UPRM for short, my colleagues and I saw this as utopian, but for different reasons. For me, it was (1) a chance to be reunited with wife and daughter after a year without access to women and children, and (2) the prospect of teaching creative writing—an exodus from theoretical shackles. For my Middle Eastern colleagues, Puerto Rico conjured heavenly visions. In Saudi Arabia you cannot see female flesh or get a drink. In Puerto Rico the women show a *whole lotta* flesh, and people drink like fish. My male colleagues imagined that I could just reach up and pluck a quasi-Jennifer Lopez from a tree, that

they grew them like tropical fruits. So strong was this fantasy that my housemate Hisham and his friends began to worry about my morals as a family man.

My morals survived. And my career as a creative writing teacher thrived. Or should I say *throve*: I "bore the transplanting well, and throve in the new soil."[2] But if I had been dismayed by the extent to which my Jamaican students were addicted to American mass media,[3] and surprised at how *au courant* my Middle Eastern students were about American popular culture,[4] I was stunned at my Puerto Rican students' all-American insularity. In Esmeralda Santiago's youth, when the *gringos* during Operation Bootstrap passed out canned food, "Negi" (as Santiago was affectionately called as a girl) and her family "comimos como americanos cuando apretó el hambre." They only ate like Americans in the lean times, when hunger forced the issue.[5]

But now it was all-American, all the time. A Jamaican colleague once told me that the Jamaicans copied the worst of the Americans. The Puerto Ricans had doubled down on this. My students were patriotic Boricuas, but American fast food was omnipresent, oversized vehicles crowded the narrow streets, and obesity was epidemic. The disjuncture between patriotism and a colonial mentality produced incoherences. Many professors in the humanities and social sciences taught a stale version of 1970s anti-imperialism and tried to indoctrinate their students. But most students were not ideological: they got their Pell grants, listened to American music, and left the island for greener pastures as soon as they could.

The "Life in Debt"[6] of Puerto Ricans had deep roots and was an accelerating dystopian force. In 2014, I was my department's first new tenure-track hire in five years. It looked like there would not be another one, no matter how many professors retired. As the crunch grew tighter, conditions deteriorated. Our department's copier was decommissioned after the paper ran out. Equipment went on the blink. Sometimes ceiling fans did not work, or they ran too fast and drowned out voices. Internet was unreliable. Projected visuals could not be seen because broken blinds let light into the

room. The roads were full of potholes. Our students totaled their cars in waves, obviously part of a larger pattern as many cars on the road had demolition derby-style mashups. Parking patterns resembled the beginning of a postapocalyptic film.

As more Puerto Ricans found that they could not sing the same song with "the Razor Boy" threatening to swoop in "take your fancy things away,"[7] the exodus north accelerated. But there was also pushback. The #*yonomequito* campaign asked people to sign on to the notion (and buy products declaring) that *I will not give up*: I will stay here and fight. Few of my students were going to turn down work in the US just to help bail out a sinking ship. Yet many understood that "when the leaders have no vision, the people perish."[8] In their own ways, they tried to "keep resistance vital," and to question the utopian dreams being peddled by both Puerto Rican leaders, and their partners in the imperial north. I could see them trying to connect the dots in my own classes, in which we focused on the relationship between dystopia and utopia.

* * * * *

For an older generation, the changes brought about by the "American Invasion," as Esmeralda Santiago calls it in her satire of Operation Bootstrap, was often perceived as dystopian. In "Caribbean Utopias and Dystopias," Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert describes the "devastating changes … brought about by the shift from an agrarian to a manufacturing and tourism economy" from the 1950s on as having *disappeared* the terrain of one's childhood.[9] This was specific to the colonial context of Puerto Rico's "Estado Libre Asociado," or "Commonwealth," status. But it was a Caribbean-wide phenomenon: "vertiginous changes ushered by a variety of post 1950s historical events … have turned Antillean geographies into unrecognizable landscapes." This rapid deterioration "has led to a 'sense of an ending,'" and indeed "to the apocalyptic dread of a potential ecological disaster that can erase the islands."[10]

However, my Millennial students had a different perspective. Looking north, they mostly saw the perennial "dream of unique luxury beyond our shores."[11] As for "apocalyptic dread," they knew this primarily through the mass media, especially via the postapocalyptic genre. In retrospect, a class I taught about this genre was strangely prefigurative. It allowed us to examine and prepare for "global dystopias" even in a seeming Caribbean paradise.

* * * * *

My teaching about dystopia has evolved through teaching students, and fathering three children. Having to constantly explain things to people who are younger than me, don't look like me, and speak other languages is a blessing. Again, I have Bob Marley's words in my ear. As he said in one interview, "Me is a common sense man. That mean when me explain things, me explain it in a very simple way; that mean if I explain it to a baby, the baby will understand too." As a teacher and a parent, I sometimes use a language that makes me one of Bob Marley's "babies."

At the same time, babies and students grow up; we must provide them with new literacies to help them find their way. Sooner or later, the fairy tales have to be transfigured, and the three birds sing a new song. One of the most meaningful instances of such transfigured "critical dystopias" in our era is the postapocalyptic genre. This genre has a novel solution to our "troubles without end," as Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing defines precarity.[12] Stories in the genre start with the idea that the only conceivable way to end these troubles is to end ourselves—in the sense of human dominance over the earth. The troubles we face, our shared precarities, are too big to grapple with. The postapocalyptic genre allows us a means to think small(er): starting over by clearing out space (getting rid of most humans), then rebuilding human communities at the local level. Although the origins of the problems are "global," the tentative solutions

proposed in this genre are inevitably small-scale. This is indeed a "utopian" solution to our dystopian dilemmas—utopian in the sense of an orienting horizon rather than a final destination. One could almost say the postapocalyptic genre is the home of the most successful articulation of the "think global, act local" philosophy.

* * * * *

In the Fall of 2015 I taught a new course, Post Apocalyptic Literature and Film. The class met in Sánchez Hidalgo, the old economics building, which had air conditioning and reliable projectors, unlike Edificio Chardón, the broken-down home of English, social studies, and the humanities, where cocks crowed through the windows, technology and equipment were iffy-to-prehistoric, and rooms were either hot as saunas or cold as meat lockers.

I want readers to see how different this corner of the world looks from the ivory towers in which "radical futurities" are imagined and the disembodied style is practiced. Sánchez Hidalgo faces the student center. But step out a back door and you are facing the border of a rain forest. The waters have washed away the red soil (see fig. 1) from the mango trees on a slope rising up from this eastern edge of the campus, facing not the Caribbean Sea but the interior, the high country homeland of the Jíbaros, the Boricuan folk. My wife Janice, who teaches with me at UPRM, describes this backside of the campus as "the backwoods of the backwoods."

My class was three flights up cement stairs, the passageways open to the tropical heat. Students sat on the stairs, creating an obstacle course. The economics head insisted that my classroom could only hold 23 students, which had to be strictly observed because of the fire code. I had 27 enrolled, so some sat on the floor. The director popped in early in the semester on a day when some students were late, so every seat was filled, but there was no overflow. Holed up in this windowless room,

shaped like a shotgun shack, the director's inspections made me feel like Bellamy in the postapocalyptic series *The 100*, who had to hide his sister Octavia beneath the floorboards. Having escaped an earthly apocalypse, leaders of a space station called The Ark had enforced a strict one-child law.

In this small "command center," like a cockpit above the jungle, I taught the students about dystopia and the postapocalyptic genre. At the University of South Florida in 2009, I had used dystopia to set up the novels *Eat the Document* and *My Revolutions*. In Saudi Arabia, I used dystopia to frame George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, which I also taught my first semester in Puerto Rico. In all these classes, to explain the postapocalyptic genre I started with a quote by Krishnan Kumar: that utopia and dystopia are "antithetical yet interdependent."[13]

The students in my postapocalyptic class were "intermediate," meaning that they were in the middle of the pack of our English-learning tracks: neither advanced nor basic. They knew social-media English, but their English vocabulary was limited. So I had to "make it plain" and limit the big words. We defined the terms: how many of you have heard the word antithetical? No hands. It just means *opposing*, I explain—the oppositional position. But as we know from dialectics, opposition creates a relationship, sooner or later leading to a synthesis. In a Caribbean context, theorists call this creolization—the in-between culture. Utopia is not the opposite of dystopia; they have a relationship. As in, you can't really understand freedom without knowing the legacy of slavery. That's what Marley's classic "Redemption Song" is all about. Freedom and bondage are interdependent—they rely on each other for meaning.

Put this way, the relationship between dependence and independence was clear to Puerto Rican students. They lived between those two opposites. But interdependence? Years earlier I had taught Carlos Fuentes' *Old Gringo*, first in Jamaica, and I used the theory of interpenetration to frame that novel's story of revolution in the borderlands.[14] The US-Latin American border itself is a mixture of utopian and dystopian

elements that cannot be separated. Confronting the dystopia, Fuentes' novel shows, can lead one to glimpse utopian horizons, or new beginnings. But those new scripts can only be written out of the personal, cultural, and political trauma of the clashing "opposites" that demand a redefinition.

A little theory goes a long way, I say. So we ran with Kumar. I asked students to define utopia. The perfect world, they said. But can we achieve a perfect world? Of course not. So utopia is the *idea* of a perfect world. We did variations on this until students took ownership of the difference. Then they could put into their own words just how far the idea of a perfect world was from lived experience—as with the Catholic claim of moral authority, on which most students were turning their backs. They were ready now for this definition: *dystopia is the nightmare outcome of attempts to impose the idea of a perfect world*.

Given the second-language context of most students, I had assigned Lois Lowry's *The Giver*. Leading students to see the elements of utopia in that story took some work because my Puerto Rican students were, if anything, more prone to worship freedom than North Americans. That is understandable given their colonial context. Complete freedom looks utopian to them, although they understand that in many ways the United States has degenerated because it offers too many freedoms and too many choices. But the citizens in *The Giver*, although they seem to lack the most basic freedoms of choice, have many utopian dimensions to their lives. Lowry makes visible the many benefits of a society that, having drawn conclusions from a long-ago social breakdown or catastrophe, "went to Sameness" as a reigning ideology.[15] Eliminating almost all differences, they also eliminated conflict, and suffering, and job insecurity. This apparent dystopia in fact had little or no precarity. All needs were met, and indeed anticipated.

The question became, how many freedoms would we give up in order to have security, to wipe away the dystopian dimensions of a precarious life? Outside the US bubble, in many societies, complete freedom is not a utopian concept. Attempts by

North Americans to export or impose their version of freedom, students saw clearly, had led to dystopian consequences. They were still working through their relationship to US culture. Our discussion of "Sameness" as a dominant ideology became a tool for critical thinking.

Figure 1

In many ways, the underside of American political culture is a version of "Sameness," students saw—in effect, a monoculture. We explored this through an examination of the heavy-handed patriotism at sporting events. The incessant militarism, the jets overhead, the returning servicemen dressed up as catchers to receive pitches from children, all choreographed. More recently, this hollow sameness is at the heart of *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*.[16]

As part of The Giver's critique of the limits of science and technology, at one point The Giver dismisses Jonas' teachers: "They know nothing." Jonas, the book's young protagonist, hears this as "a terrible accusation."[17] But as he starts to question received opinion, Jonas begins to act like the escaped prisoner in Plato's Allegory of the Cave. He wants to go back and share the truth. Here, Lowry's allegory challenges readers to think beyond their own blinders. The novel shows that critical thinking has a price.[18] Freedom has been romanticized, but breaking all social norms and leaving behind community in the pursuit of individual freedom often has dystopian outcomes.

Lowry's allegory speaks to sameness as a condition that occurs wherever tradition seeks to replicate itself by demanding conformity. Puerto Rican students saw this in their everyday lives, in the ways their parents' or their grandparents' generation tried to force on them uniform understandings of gender, or of their obligations to traditional religion or to their country. We examined how dystopia can be a byproduct of efforts to "share"

utopian ideas or technologies. How many problems started with promises of perfection, or freedom?

The idea that consumer culture and cell phone use had become dystopian was explored in several ways, using the parallel with apocalypse narratives pictured here (see fig. 2), or in clips from films like *Fight Club* and *Wall-E*, showing how consumer convenience becomes dystopian dependency.

ETHICS AND CULTURE

We explored the roots and development of postapocalyptic narratives through questions of genre, questions of ethics, and questions of culture. The roots of postapocalyptic narratives in dystopian literature I have already alluded to. The ethical dimension of postapocalyptic narratives in dystopian literature can be approached through many angles. At the beginning of the film *28 Days Later*, for instance, animal rights activists unwittingly unleash the "zombie apocalypse" from a science lab. They want to do the right thing, but their ideologically driven agenda opens a Pandora's box. Inevitably, the question of human hubris comes to the forefront, with the payback or vengeance written on a global scale. But the ethical questions facing survivors take on spiritual or at least quasireligious dimensions.

The notion of the apocalypse has deeply religious roots. Apocalypse is a synonym for "revelation"—to uncover, reveal, disclose, or literally "the lifting of the veil": *a time when all things are revealed*. Peering into the postapocalypse allows us to imagine radical shifts when we are no longer able to avert our gaze from this extreme unveiling. Mathew Barrett Gross and Mel Gilles analyze the proliferation of the postapocalytpic—in fiction, fashion, and political culture—in *The Last Myth: What the Rise of Apocalyptic Thinking Tells Us about America*. They then pose the question, "How have we come to interpret nearly every event through the prism of the apocalypse?"[19] Or as I translate this, *Why has this vision of life amidst the ruins/after the collapse become so popular?*

One answer is that we "long for the opportunity to clean house from top to bottom."[20] We imagine we are willing to pay almost any price to achieve a less cluttered, more focused life. The postapocalyptic cuts through the clutter and demands a fierce focus. "We're drawn to the idea of civilisation coming crashing to the ground because it would make most of our day-to-day worries irrelevant at a stroke," says author M. R. Carey. "For a writer, a post-apocalyptic setting can clear away a lot of unnecessary clutter and let you focus on the big, important stuff however you personally define that."[21] (As I later discuss in part three of this trilogy, human-made and environmental disasters indeed provide an occasion for a reevaluation of "the really important stuff," such as the loss of digital technology facilitating the reconnection with community in postcatastrophic contexts.)

The big stuff usually ends up being the small stuff in the postapocalypse. Following Clifford Geertz's model of cultural analysis as "patterned recurrence of activity over time,"[22] the patterns that repeat in the postapocalypse involve cutting away almost all human relations to radically revalue the few that remain. In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, this is boiled down to a father-son relationship at the end of time. This novel was somewhat over the head of my second-language Puerto Rican students, but I tried to "translate" it in such a way that it would also speak to hard choices that they would face. To borrow again from *The Giver*, critical dystopias demand that we "see beyond" the blind spots of the present troubles. McCarthy's *The Road* challenges readers to imagine having the courage to act ethically even when no hope remains. How are we to act when humans have lost their humanity and unethical behavior has become the norm? The father in *The Road* tries to pass on "the light" to his son before he dies. Like Marley, he speaks a language "even a baby can understand." What our children, our students, or our readers actually hold on to from what we try to give them is beyond our control. However, I aspire to give them not just theory but "equipment for living."[23] What if we discover that there really is no exit from our "trouble without end"? How do we react?

A dominant mode of post-apocalyptic narratives seems to be a "dystopian

narcissism," as Rob Goodman has called it.[24] This version of the society of spectacle was famously described by Walter Benjamin as a form of self-alienation so complete that we contemplated our own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure.[25] This is one plausible reading of some postapocalyptic narratives.

The ethnographer Bruce O'Neill imagines two possible reactions to dystopian precarity. One is to look around and conclude, "well, we're all screwed." Or in a different mode, one can "draw a deep breath, and say: 'boy, everything's really gone to shit.'" The first reaction is a state of resignation, while the latter, O'Neill suggests, is "a prompt to get to work."[26] Naming the problem, and imagining and building alternatives, is indeed an ethical stance, I agree. The experience of teaching dystopia in Puerto Rico suggests to me that beyond their entertainment value, postapocalyptic stories are also "good to think with," a tool for reordering our priorities.[27]

Interlude

Positionality in Flux

Let us speak of positionality: where I stand and how I enter. On one level, I am an outsider. The "Old Gringo," even. Yet things are not as simple as they seem to left-leaning intellectuals in the Global North, who are prone to project rather binary versions of favorite theories such as postcolonialism. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot remarked in his survey "The Caribbean Region: An Open Frontier," some "resident intellectuals have long been interlocutors in European debates about the region." As a result, "no discursive field is fully 'ours,' or 'theirs'."[1] The same interpenetration also operates in US-Puerto Rican relations. The resultant forms of intersubjectivity, however contested, should be a caution to those tempted to apply us vs. them binaries to the US presence in Puerto Rico, or the Puerto Rican presence in the US.

My combination of empathy and critical distance, in this gateway to Latin America and the Caribbean, grows in part out of my roots in the American Southwest, where kinship with those in the so-called *patio trasero* (backyard) of the United States is often a structure of feeling stronger than any sense of sustained affiliation with those who perceive Washington, DC, to be the "center of the world."[2]

When and where I entered, commonality and difference were both evident. Where I stand, we are American citizens, and mostly dissidents. Yes, my Puerto Rican students remind me that they are US. citizens. Many *norteamericanos* may have discovered that

Puerto Ricans were US citizens, and that membership has its privileges (and obligations) in the wake of Hurricane María. But my Puerto Rican students had no confusion whatsoever about that political fact. We shared a critical distance from national American politricks. In generationally distinct but still related ways, we also shared an immersion in US cultural expressions. My job description was, nevertheless, to teach English, which in second-language contexts is not free from issues of ideology or empire.[3] Specifically, I was an "agent of American English" in a context where this language had long been an instrument of colonial domination. Still, English was, in practice, first-among-equals for many of my students, who were thoroughly immersed in US popular culture and social media. My science and engineering students in particular—a majority at this STEM university—understood English not only as the language of most of the music, film, and news they listened to, but also as a "meal ticket" and a passport into international versions of science and business.

My perspective on "permeable borders" in intercultural relations is based not only in experience, but on a sustained critique of the "bounded culture" concept that has endured for half a century now.[4] I am speaking of a widespread assault on the tendency to treat cultures as a *thing* rather than a process.[5] Anthropologists have criticized the essentialist version of culture-as-other, which has long been hegemonic in the social sciences, in cultural studies, and in institutional practice.[6] Static views of culture and identity are pervasive in the cultural rhetorics that have emerged in the wake of ethnic studies. In fact, political and educational institutions are deeply invested in essentialized definitions of cultural, ethnic, or racial identity.

Puerto Rico, in its perpetually liminal status, is a case study for ethnographic definitions of culture as relational,[7] distributive,[8] and attuned to the "connections and interconnections" of lived cultural processes.[9] In the following essays, I take as a point of departure one persuasive critic of "bounded culture," Lila Abu-Lughold. In her essay "Writing Against Culture," Abu-Lughold argued that two important ways to avoid a

static, essentialist concept of culture were to focus on interconnections (rather than static categories) and to engage in "ethnographies of the particular."[10]

In adopting a self-reflexive stance, I was inspired by Abu-Lughold's comments about "halfies" as a "critical group" that can "expose and challenge" static concepts of culture. *Halfies* are in-between people, those "whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage."[11] Given my background as resident/scholar of racial frontiers, this resonated. Having lived outside of the United States for ten years, having fathered three biracial, bilingual children, and having done "overseas education," I considered myself, in relation to my family and community, a proud "halfie." In this sense, I am inclined to a certain sympathy with mestizo cultures, which by definition are fluid and *in motion*.

But having taken the "beyond culture" critiques to heart—going beyond static concepts of culture towards *processual* cultural analysis--it seems to me that the "writing against culture movement" has run its course.[12] I agree with Cristoph Brumann, who argues in "Writing for Culture" that cultural theory is too valuable to be discarded.[13] Like a growing chorus, I also see institutional cultural studies as a "stale" field that has "exhausted [its] potential"; still, the broader "study of cultures … needs to be reinvigorated."[14] My focus, as a writing studies scholar employing ethnography, is on communicative cultures. As this trilogy develops, readers will note that an increasing amount of space is devoted to Puerto Rican voices. These include the writings of students, voices in the mass media, and, finally, in the wake of Hurricane María, a broad array of in-person commentary by neighbors, friends, and colleagues.

Part II

Rethinking Resistance in the Puerto Rican Crisis: The Afterlife of Stuart Hall and cultural studies

What follows is an analysis of the romance of resistance in debate about Puerto Rico's fiscal crisis during a Spring 2017 student strike. As guides I use three tools refashioned by Stuart Hall: Gramsci's notion of hegemony, Raymond Williams' "structures of feeling," and creolization, or the in-betweenness of postcolonial or minority cultures. I have drawn on a series of "new" books by Hall (*Cultural Studies 1983*; *Selected Political Writings*; *Familiar Stranger*), as well as John Akomfrah's film *The Stuart Hall Project*. My purpose was not a comprehensive review, but to let my Puerto Rican students in a new cultural studies seminar know something of the British roots of this tradition. In addition, I first developed this essay for a conference in Jamaica titled "Whither the Caribbean?: Stuart Hall's Intellectual Legacy." By applying a sample of Hall's ideas to a crisis in Puerto Rico, my larger ambition was to develop a theory of cultural analysis better able to critically analyze expressions of resistance that arise out of the rhetorical situations of precarity.[1]

Conjunctural Analysis

"Conjunctural analysis" is a cornerstone of Stuart Hall's version of political critique. Hall defined *the conjunctural* as "the immediate terrains of struggle."[2] In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci observed that a crisis can last decades. Such duration pointed to

"uncurable structural contradictions." These persistent contradictions "form the terrain of the conjunctural and it is upon this terrain that the forces of opposition organize."[3] For Hall, a *Gramscian from creation*, "resistance had to be conceived in strategic terms."[4] In thinking strategically about resistance, there is one question I'd really like to ask.[5] Fredric Jameson posed it in a 2016 interview: "do we know any longer what oppositional means in this total system, or what might 'subvert' it, or even function as its critique?"[6] Jameson seems to suggest that truly oppositional spaces may be illusory. Revolution and resistance have become commodities, or fashions. Even if they are heartfelt, expressions of resistance tend to reinforce what they oppose.

My own "structure of feeling" about resistance has been forged by musics of resistance. Jimmy Cliff sang about powers-that-be "putting up resistance," but knew "my faith will lead me on." The Neville Brothers' version of "Sitting in Limbo" was part of a soundtrack of my own political resistance through music in Austin, Texas, in the 1980s. When I came to teach cultural studies at the University of the West Indies in 2004, songs such as Beres Hammond's "Putting Up Resistance" continued to shape my sense of musical resistance as a counterforce against "spiritual wickedness in high and low places."[7]

Seeking to step lightly over the quicksands of theory, I have aimed for a tone that is midway between Marley's self-description as a "common sense man" and Stuart Hall's talent for public-sphere debate, as evident in John Akomfrah's documentary *The Stuart Hall Project*. It is this public-sphere communicator, more than the theorist, that I try to translate for students.

Figure 2

Puerto Ricans do their own version of resistance, one not so easy to fit within lines drawn in the sand. The two images here show two faces of resistance, one serious and homemade, one playful and mass-produced (see fig. 3 and fig. 4). The cardboard sign in Figure 3, carried during the May Day 2017 protests against austerity measures demanded by US creditors, translates as,

Figure 3

"Respect the dignity of our way of life or expect resistance." The T-shirt on the right translates as, "Better a dumbass protest than a dumbass who doesn't protest." This is part of a Latin American "folk resistance" culture, as in the saying, "Vale más una pregunta pendeja, que un pendejo que no pregunta." Better a stupid question than a dumbass who doesn't ask questions.

Setting the Scene

In April of 2017, student strikers shut down the University of Puerto Rico system. The Fiscal Control Board formed by Congress's PROMESA law (Puerto Rico Oversight, Management and Economic Stability Act of 2016) mandated $450 million in cuts to the UPR system. Supporters and critics of the student strike alike agreed that such cuts would mean "imminent destruction of the University of Puerto Rico as we know it."[8] In Mayagüez, students chained the university's seven gates, set up tents, and made signs. The banner pictured here shows that students were influenced by the Latin American romance of revolution (see fig. 5). "Pardon the inconvenience, but we are building a better public university," alludes to Subcomandante

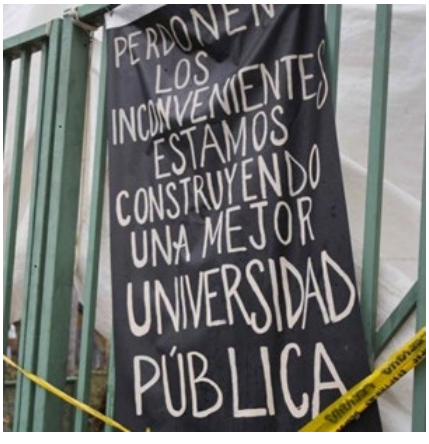

Figure 4

Marcos's comment to tourists as the Zapatista uprising began: "We are sorry for the inconvenience, but this is a revolution."[9]

The public face of Puerto Rican resistance is above all expressed in the arts: aspirations for more autonomy are frequently voiced in literature and popular culture, as with the protest music of the group Calle 13's René Pérez, who has been a key figure in the use of popular culture to express support for independence.[10] The Rastas provide a comparative example to Puerto Rican *independistas*—a small but influential minority who favor independence. Like the Rastas, the cultural influence of *independistas* exceeds their numbers. Just as few Rastas go to Africa (as professed in their music), few Puerto Ricans vote for independence, though they are saturated in pro-independence music, art, and literature. In 2012 and 2016 elections, independence candidates got only 2% of the popular vote. This has produced a cultural schizophrenia: pro-independence cultural expression is often seen as the "true soul" of Puerto Rico.

The documentary *The Last Colony* gives voice to statehood vs. commonwealth "status question" debates, as well as the politically marginalized independence option. In my seminar, we used this documentary and María Acosta Cruz's book *Dream Nation: Puerto Rican Culture and the Fictions of Independence* as interpretive frameworks. Acosta Cruz focuses on an apparent "disconnect" by asking: "Why has cultural independence succeeded whereas political independence failed?"[11]

The most celebrated cultural rhetoric in Puerto Rico professes a patriotic resistance to the United States as an imperial force. But most Puerto Ricans are saturated by US commercial culture. There is little evidence of resistance to American cultural, political, and economic dominance in either spending or voting patterns. That paradox demanded attention in my cultural studies seminar.

Stuart Hall and the Romance of Resistance in Cultural Studies

Much of what passes for cultural studies nowadays "has simply become too lazy," argues Lawrence Grossberg, in a common assessment of the "crisis of Cultural Studies."[12] Stuart Hall would come to distance himself from cultural studies. Much of what was being done in the field was frivolous, in his view.[13] Revisionist views of Hall's role in subcultural studies are gathering force. In "Resisting 'Resistance," Rayya El Zein describes the work of Stuart Hall and Dick Hebdige as a "profound influence" on a subcultural studies tendency to focus on symbolic resistance, even when "recast in a robust Marxist analysis."[14]

For me, Stuart Hall's *Cultural Studies 1983* lectures were often tough sledding. But Lawrence Grossberg and Jennifer Daryl Slack recall, "The lectures were riveting, and the mood during the lectures was electric."[15] That conveys a sense of the esteem for Hall in grad seminars I took at the University of California (Davis and San Diego) from 1991-1995.

Seeking to translate this tradition, I sketched an ethnographic concept of culture as our matrix: a mostly invisible, largely unconscious structure. Culture has been described as an "invisible structure of life."[16] Edward Hall characterizes culture as "a vast unexplored region of human behaviour that exists *outside the range of people's conscious awareness*, a 'silent language' that is usually conveyed unconsciously."[17] It is this largely invisible and unconscious quality of cultural norms that I encourage students to make visible and more conscious. We built on the widely developed concept of culture as "repeating patterns."[18] Within this framework, we discussed Hall's view of the "reproduction of normative representations and structures," and moreover, the punishment of deviance or variants to "normative structures."[19] I began to ask students to look for "repeating patterns" in Puerto Rican culture.

Repeating Patterns in Puerto Rican Culture: *The Last Colony*

I first saw Juan Agustín Márquez's documentary *The Last Colony* in Spring 2015. The Mayagüez audience had an evident affection for old-guard nationalists like Rafael Cancel Miranda, along with some resistance to clean-cut advocates for statehood like Ricardo Rosselló (elected governor in 2016). What most impressed me about the film was that I could understand the logic and appeal of all three positions—statehood, commonwealth, and independence.

When the film was screened to members of Congress on June 23, 2015, Agustín Márquez described *The Last Colony* as an effort to "make the topic of Puerto Rico part of the national conversation, and to educate the rest of the nation in our struggles and our paradoxes."[20] *The Last Colony* demonstrates that even the most political of material has cultural bases; the political speaks through the cultural, and vice versa. At first students only saw figures making political arguments in a climate in which almost everyone had already chosen sides. But these figures used different dress styles and different languages. Political differences were culturally embedded, the film showed. For example, Rafael Cancel Miranda, the now-aged independence candidate who alongside Lolita Lebrón opened fire on the US Congress in 1954 (see fig. 6), and who spent 1954-1979 in prison, in the film wore the customary "uniform" of Latin American leftists, a *guayabera*.

Figure 5. Rafael Cancel Miranda (right) and Lolita Lebrón (left).

In contrast, Ricardo Rosselló dressed like a banker and spoke the English of North American elites, having done his

Figure 6. Ricardo Rosselló.

BA at MIT and his PhD at Michigan. His athletic looks and clean-cut hair were read by some Boricuas as assimilationist. Whether his model of integration as the path to success should be embraced or resisted provoked fiercely opposing opinions.

Hegemony, and "Hegemonic Resistance"

Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony is often misunderstood as a dominant ideology imposed by oppressive rulers. However, Gramscian hegemony in fact describes how the "dominant order" is reproduced and maintained *both from above and below*. Hall stresses, "There is never any one, single, unified, and coherent 'dominant ideology' which pervades everything."[21] Gramsci's conception of hegemony, Hall insists, "radically challenges any such simple notion of domination."[22] As Hall translates this theory, "the dominant culture need not destroy the apparent resistance. It simply needs to include it within its own spaces."[23]

Within one of The Last Colony's academic strongholds, party-line versions of resistance are reproduced (and deviance punished) by many faculty and GTAs. This romanticized notion of heroic resistance is itself a form of hegemony. As Michael Brown observed, "If there is any hegemony today, it is the theoretical hegemony of resistance."[24] Moreover, "a myopic focus on resistance … can easily blind us to zones of complicity."[25]

My point of view is a cautious generalization about some 700 undergraduates I taught in writing courses over eight semesters in Puerto Rico. Like many youths worldwide, Puerto Rican students are deeply immersed in US popular culture. They express little resistance to this "imported" culture. Indeed, they do not perceive it as imported because, as my students remind me, "We're American citizens also." What my undergraduates perceive as hegemonic, in the negative sense of constraining norms, are traditional Puerto Rican cultural attitudes. Many Puerto Rican youths are in

rebellion against some normative attitudes in their parents' generation or that of their grandparents. They resist homophobic attitudes and machista attitudes about the role of women. When they look for models of less restrictive roles for women, or for alternative sexualities, they mostly look to examples from US culture. The commercial culture of the contemporary US is used to resist a different sort of hegemony in Puerto Rico, one in which expressions of prejudice towards gay, lesbian, or transgender children are all too common. A common story among my creative writing students is being harassed or even disowned by parents simply for getting a tattoo. Naturally, faced with such retrograde attitudes, the younger generation develops a certain hunger for symbols of resistance.

This generation of Puerto Ricans has also largely turned its back on the authority of the Catholic Church. In addition, most of my students resist two-party politics. They describe Puerto Rican politics as a form of team sports: one is expected to root for the home team.

These ruptures with traditional authority lead to resistance against another form of hegemony. While some of my students want to stay and help "uplift the nation," most feel little sense of obligation. They are intensely patriotic in a cultural sense, but professionally they are pragmatists. Given Puerto Rico's ongoing and worsening fiscal crisis, and the slow pace of change regarding "local hegemonies," they are inclined to see their homeland in a mental rear-view mirror when it comes to their careers, and indeed, their cultural aspirations.

Regarding my colleagues and my students, I saw that they had different "structures of feeling," which shaped a conjunctural crisis between two generations of Puerto Ricans.

Structure of Feeling

In *Familiar Stranger*, Hall describes Raymond Williams as a "father" who "hugely influenced" his growth.[26] However, he does not seem to have fully understood Williams'

theory of a "structure of feeling." In fact, Hall ends up dismissing the idea as "a lost concept."[27] After reading *Familiar Stranger*, I concluded that the affective domain was a blind spot for Hall.[28] But his description of alienation from his mother's colonial mindset in Jamaica, and the forms of cultural expression and political analysis he pursued as alternatives, reveals a generational structure of feeling that Hall shared with other Caribbean migrants to Great Britain.

Williams' idea of structures of feeling describes a domain in which *thought and emotion jointly structure our engagement with tradition*. As Ajamu Nangwaya extemporaneously commented at the 2017 Stuart Hall conference in Jamaica, "we must be able to *feel ideas*." In *The Long Revolution*, Williams insists on an intergenerational dimension of the concept:

> One generation may train its successor [in a] general cultural pattern, but *the new generation will have its own structure of feeling, which will not appear to have come "from" anywhere*.… The new generation *feel[s] its whole life in certain ways differently, and shap[es] its creative response into a new structure of feeling*.[29] (emphasis added)

In Puerto Rico, the experience of students often does not coincide with what their parents or professors think they should be experiencing. They have a different structure of feeling specific to their generation. To say that each generation has its own structure of feeling is not to argue that these *structured feelings* are uniform, but that there exist some commonalities, an *underlying pattern* to the mode of expression in each generation.

In my seminar, students drafted an autoethnography focused on personal patterns, then began trying to connect the dots with larger patterns in Puerto Rico's conjunctural crisis. As we turned our attention outwards, I introduced students to creolization theory. To what degree did they feel that this theory still described some aspects of their own in-betweenness?

Creolization: A Case Study

In the story "La guagua aérea" (in English, "The airborne bus"), Luis Rafael Sánchez "changed the popular notion of the imagined community of Puerto Rico from the island *as an island* to an allegory of a floating nation going to and from San Juan and New York."[30] His story of a plane full of rambunctious Puerto Ricans who cannot be contained by the authorities has become a "guiding metaphor" and "the best-known work of contemporary Puerto Rican literature," argues Juan Flores.[31]

I asked students to look for patterns of Puerto Rican culture in "La guagua aérea," using Stuart Hall's "Créolité and the Process of Creolization" as a framework. Hall adapted Édouard Glissant's notion of "entanglement," which describes the interfaces between the center and the colonies (Martinique and France in Glissant's case). But long-term interpenetrations produce entwinements that become inseparable in character. Hall asks if the theory of creolization might be a better alternative to theories of hybridity and the postcolonial condition.[32]

Hall usefully compares creolité to Rastafarianism, another Caribbean diasporic identity. "The Rastafarian version is predicated on a notion of 'roots', whereas creolization deploys the logic of 'routes'," Hall observes.[33] Creolization offers "routes" as a variant of displacement. Its characteristic structure of feeling is not dread, but *jaibería*—"the art of dealing with it."[34] This insouciance I can see every day, bubbling over the evident decay of a dystopian colony set adrift.

I want to turn now to an analysis written by "Fernanda," one of my students (a pseudonym). Fernanda was an argumentative sort who only seemed interested in ideology, a problem in a class about cultural analysis. She would contest categories or comparisons of all sorts, yet the articles of her ideological faith—rigid forms of feminism and postcolonialism—were based on generalizations. I recognized her attitude as a descendant of deconstruction and the romance of resistance. In this worldview, "Domination was a relatively fixed and institutionalized form of power; resistance

was essentially organized opposition to power institutionalized in this way," Sherry Ortner writes.[35] This binary was "refined (but not abolished)," Ortner remarks.[36] In the backwaters of the Last Colony, binary forms of resistance had not been refined, but reified.

Watching the set of Fernanda's jaw, I was reminded of the scene in *The Wild One*, when a biker (played by Marlon Brando) is asked by a girl,

"Hey Johnny, what are you rebelling against?" "Whaddaya got?" he snarls. So it was no surprise when Fernanda expressed resistance to the notion of creolization as a "third space" which offered a less dystopian alternative to colonial subjugation. Fernanda disagreed that "the invaded are invading the invader," as she paraphrased the author. In "La guagua aérea," a Puerto Rican passenger releases some crabs, which are seen by the flight crew as terrorists. But the Puerto Ricans break into joyous anarchy. Rafael Sánchez concludes: "Es la reclamación legítima de un espacio, furiosamente, conquistador."[37] It is the legitimate reclaiming of a space by the new conquerors: "una nación flotante," the floating nation.

Creolized peoples "no longer exist in a 'pure' state but have been permanently 'translated'," Hall wrote.[38] Fernanda quoted this passage, and in doing so seemed to express a longing for a state of pure opposition. Translations are always imposed by the imperial center, she argued. The creolization of Hall, or that described in "La guagua aérea," may bear traces of Edward Said's "median category" identity, Fernanda suggested. She quoted Nick Scott, apparently in support of her own view, that "far from being a site of resistance," hybrid figures are tools used for the "maintenance of Western dominance" because the hybrid figure "neutralizes the potential threat of the colonized."[39]

I recognized here an old-school oppositionality, one shaped by a "naive belief in cultural purity, in untouched cultures," as Ortner remarks in her critique of the romance of resistance.[40] Puerto Rican "creole transnationalism" had been imposed by

the dominant culture of the colonizers, as Fernanda saw it, so that islanders would see rootlessness as a model to follow. In that way, "the 'local' continues to be subsumed by the 'foreign'," she argued. Puerto Ricans remained in a state of dependence, and "still do not consume what they produce locally."

I could not argue with the reality that Puerto Ricans are deeply dependent on imported food. This dependence would become dangerously apparent in the wake of Hurricane María. But the notion that creole identities were imposed seemed questionable. Such an idealized resistance ignores "zones of complicity," Michael Brown suggests.[41] Such forms of complicity with consumerism are evident everywhere in Puerto Rico.

The 2017 University of Puerto Rico student strike illustrates how difficult it is to "see beyond the resistance binary." To either idealize or pathologize resistance is "condescending," and moving beyond binaries requires us to "refocus attention on the cultural embeddedness and situated meaningfulness of resistance," argues Theodossopoulous.[42] I seek to gain a partial and provisional view of the "cultural embeddedness" of rhetoric by and about the student strike.

Rhetoric of Resistance in the UPR Strike

The student strikes that shut down the University of Puerto Rico system in the spring of 2017 prevented me from finishing the analysis of resistance and the Puerto Rican conjunctural crisis within a classroom setting. Theory got interrupted by reality. During the strike, the dynamics of the romance of resistance were everywhere to be seen.

In the early weeks of the strike, various letters of faculty support were circulated.[43] A local group of professors formed a support group, Profesorxs Transformándonos en Solidaridad Tornada en Acción (PROTESTAmos). One member, my English colleague Dr. Mary Sefranek, called the striking students "an example of resistance for the country."[44]

Institutional consequences of the student strike were not long in coming. The Department of Education notified UPR-Río Piedras on April 18 that it had lost eligibility for Title IV funding, which includes access to Pell grants. By late May, the accreditation of eight of UPR's eleven campuses had been put on probation. Admissions were down by 2,000 at the Mayagüez campus; admissions to the Río Piedras campus dropped 25 percent.[45]

The university's crisis came to a head after five law students filed suit in an appeals court against the Río Piedras flagship campus on May 5. Judge Lauracelis Roques Arroyo ordered the Río Piedras campus to open its gates and threatened to jail the UPR rector and the interim president if they did not succeed in removing students and opening the gates.

In this context, Puerto Rican media were flooded by commentary. I want to focus on an exchange between defenders of the students—who saw them as heroic rebels—and those who castigated students and their faculty supporters for being out of touch and without a plan.

Eva Ayala Reyes, spokeswoman for a "militant" teacher's union, EDUCAMOS, made an impassioned declaration at a press conference that the educators had no fear of the government, police, or judges, and that teachers would "convert ourselves into human shields" to protect the students. The group's lawyer, Alvin Couto de Jesús, called on people to "throw themselves to the street" and engage in "acts of resistance" in support of the students.[46]

Some of the most blatant hero worship and stances of "heroic resistance" came from Mayagüez, a supposedly conservative campus. In a newspaper commentary, Luis Ríos Hernández, professor of biology at Mayagüez and director of the Asociación de Profesoras y Profesores del RUM (APRUM), wrote that Puerto Ricans would come to "recognize these students as heroes and heroines." Wagging tongues translated Hernández's group's acronym as the "Puerto Rican Association of University Marxists."[47]

My English colleague Jocelyn Géliga Vargas aligned herself with groups such as Professors Gathered to Voice Solidarity in Resistance and proclaimed opposition to any "oppressive entities" which tried to move students. Reader reactions were venomous. One repeating theme was that the author was drawing a check without giving classes, and protecting privileges in a "nest of socialists." "The position of the students is irrational and intransigent, and does not lead to dialogue, only to a monologue," one respondent wrote.[48]

Dr. Jeffrey Herlihy-Mera, an associate professor in the humanities, published "Weaponizing Accreditation" in *Jacobin*, a magazine that still glorifies the Russian Revolution. His view of the student strike was "romanticizing resistance" fare: "Our students are engaged in a struggle with the colonial apparatus that threatens their education. Their solidarity movement is a check on the power of PROMESA." But then Herlihy-Mera went on to charge that in putting eight UPR campuses on probation, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education had "legitimiz[ed] La Junta." He went further: Middle States should demonstrate "solidarity" by "voicing opposition to federal legislation that is intended to supersede democracy."[49]

Such political solidarity is not the job of accrediting agencies. These opinion pieces led me to conclude that neither student strikers nor their faculty enablers could see outside their bubble. Students demanded that there be no cuts to the UPR budget. Their dismay and indeed their outrage are understandable, but *no cuts* was not an achievable goal. Outside the bubble in which faculty supporters of the student strike apparently lived, for the general public, the student strike appeared ever more "antipática," wrote Ricardo Chisea, a biology professor at the UPR campus in Cayey, in an opinion piece. "Antipática" means disagreeable or unsympathetic. But regardless of the lack of sympathy that the students generated with most Puerto Ricans, the pragmatic truth, as Chisea wrote, was that the goals of the students were in large part "unachievable, beyond the control of university authorities, regardless of who presides

over UPR or makes up its governing board."[50]

At a distance, it might seem like most professors are aligned with the student strikers. There is something of a "tenured radical" mindset among some colleagues. But support for the strike was always a minority position among UPR professors, and diminished as the strike devolved into a farce that threatened permanent damage to the institution. Emilio Pantojas García, a sociology professor featured in *The Last Colony*, pointed out that a majority of professors voted in assembly on March 27 to keep the gates open. Pantojas García took a swipe at the quasi-Marxist orientation of many student strikers: "Dialectics is not a strength of these leaders: their logic is, 'dialogue' and more 'dialogue' until their opponents give them what they want, even though in the process they destroy the space they are supposedly defending."[51]

José González Taboada, an accounting professor at Río Piedras, in his own on-line column wrote that the patience of his colleagues was wearing thin; a clear majority wanted an end to the strike. His critique that the students "act with total impunity and without suffering consequences" implied that this impunity was only made possible by the romantic defenders of heroic resistance.[52]

These debates occurred within a context in which Puerto Ricans felt frustrated, angry, and saddened about their lack of palatable or realistic political options. The plebiscite held June 11, 2017, seemed to demonstrate a majority in favor of statehood, the path that governor Ricardo Roselló has advocated. This was the central "plank" that brought him and his party to power. Roselló has emerged as a middleman, pitching to US conservatives the notion that as a state, Puerto Rico could be a "hub" bridging the US and Latin America. At home, he stresses that present options may be unsatisfactory, but inaction will make matters worse. "Keeping the university closed is not going to produce anything positive," he told one TV reporter. Cuts were inevitable and agreements essential. "If not, the next steps are not going to be very favorable."[53]

Reaction to Roselló has been polarized. Some critics compare asking for admission

as a state to dealing with the devil. Samuel Quiñones García—secretary of the pro-independence group ¡Marchemos!—wrote, "I cannot understand those who want to unite with their oppressor."[54]

In the end, these political traumas and the emotions they arouse can only be described in personal terms. In a 2017 newspaper column entitled "De dos males, el menor" ("The least of two evils"), Juan Antonio Ramos used two metaphors to describe Puerto Rico's loss of political hope. His first story is about his mother. After her husband died, visits to doctors began, and all the medicines they prescribed made her worse and almost killed her. After a visit to the emergency room, one wise doctor took her off the medications, and she returned to something close to her former self.

"Our country, who is our mother, is also very sick," surmises Ramos. "Her condition is so grave that in these moments we debate if she is closer to life or death…. But the certainty is that her health has **never** been in her hands. Others have decided for her, others have determined what is beneficial for her health." Like doctors giving pills to the elderly, many of Uncle Sam's prescriptions have made matters worse.

Ramos then provides the "moral to the story" by retelling the story of Aron Ralston, the subject of the film *127 Hours*, who fell into a crevice in a remote Utah canyon and had to cut off his right arm in order to escape. Of two horrible choices, the lesser.

Applying this as an allegory to Puerto Rico's conjunctural crisis, Ramos asks, "Is all lost for our mother and her children? Do Puerto Ricans have to emigrate to save themselves, leaving behind the land that gave them birth?" His response is that this "appears to be our final destiny as a people. To survive, Boricuans must sacrifice their homeland. Of two evils, the lesser."[55]

Ramos's allegory reminds me of the argument that not everyone wants to resist, finds it possible to resist, or believes that resistance will be beneficial to them and their families. Many also engage in "acts of collaboration," and these acts of collaboration

are as important as the more mythologized acts of resistance.[56] This shift in perspective helps me understand what is meant by the accusations that the Puerto Rican statehood party and its young US-educated governor, Roselló, are *vendepatrias*—sellouts, or collaborators. In trying to connect the dots, I also want to bring back Fredric Jameson's question about whether we even know what resistance means, and whether it is even possible to be "oppositional" or to "subvert" the forms of power to which we feel we are, or should be, opposed.

I wonder if the "acts of collaboration" of Roselló and his supporters are not also acts of resistance against the blind alley into which cultural mythologies have led Puerto Ricans. I remember watching the Independence candidate María de Lourdes Santiago Negrón saying, in *The Last Colony*, "I am not an American, and I will never be an American." She said this with a tone of contempt, and I could not believe her. Such a declaration is a form of "blind resistance" because by focusing on opposition to the United States, it excludes the rest of the Americas. How could a patriot in Puerto Rico be unfamiliar with José Martí's famous concept of "nuestra América," or our America—from the Rio Bravo (the Rio Grande) to the Straits of Magellan?[57] There are few people in that hemisphere who would not consider themselves to be Americans, a legacy that dates to Simón Bolívar.

Saying that "we are not Americans," or hitching a nation's destiny to a concept of being anti-American, seems a blinding form of romantic resistance. In Puerto Rico, what I have seen is a multitude of intersecting hegemonies. Some of them seem fixated on resistance and on the "punishment of deviance," as Stuart Hall wrote. But whatever their rhetorical posture, all of the arguing voices I have surveyed here illustrate Hall's claim that the "fantasy of a return to a reconstituted 'one-ness' and to the elimination of difference tends not to unify, heal and resolve but, on the contrary, it releases deadly pathological impulses."[58]

* * * * *

As I have revised for publication this and other writings about Puerto Rico, I have been struck by how some North American intellectuals seem to romanticize Puerto Rican resistance. There is an evident desire to see Puerto Ricans as the embodiment of certain theories, especially postcolonialism. I entered Puerto Rico with "fatigue" about postcolonial theory, which "designates far too many things" in a one-size-fits-all fashion.[59]. There is a tendency to convert the "post-" into "anti-" so that the meaning, in practice, gets reduced to "resistance and opposition."[60] Following this line of thinking, one would look for, hunger for, or indeed imagine/invent some sort of pure or authentic root. The concept of literature as the seed of national identity is well-trod terrain that I will not replough here. But I do want to follow up on the implications of Michael Gorra's comment, in *After Empire*, that seeing literature as a "seed … from which the community has grown" raises necessary, and still largely unanswered questions.[61] If we were to look for the seeds of Puerto Rico as a "coherent whole," where would we find them? The work of José Luis González on Puerto Rico as "The Country of Four Floors" is a necessary reference point—especially for African influences as a cornerstone of Puerto Rican culture. But the floors metaphor—*pisos* in Spanish—does not really begin to account for the radical interpenetrations in the rhizome of the most recent sedimentation: some kind of new Americanism, post-Americanism, or counter-Americanism.

My resistance to notions of "continuous" or "authentic" national or racial community are of course a window on my own "repeating patterns," characterized by an effort to claim kinship with "people in the middle." The present inquiry is an extension of that long-term project, in which I increasingly recognize cultural liminality—"between things, interbeing, intermezzo"—as normative.[62] This demand to recognize borderlands, flows, and in-betweenness as normative in human culture has been a cornerstone of revisionist cultural anthropology for a long time. It is especially relevant in contact zones such as the Caribbean. After all, as Trouillot insisted, "the Caribbean is nothing but

contact," and so one can hardly find a "pre-contact situation."[63] The seeds are hybrid from the root, and there is no privileged space of "pure" culture or untainted resistance.

This leads me, in closing, to the question of statehood and the limits of my own positionality. My students told me that some of the newspapers I was reading, such as *El Nuevo Día*, are owned by a pro-statehood family. This is a reminder of the limits of my outsiderness. I have access to an undoubtedly unrepresentative slice of Puerto Rican students, just as I have access to an arguably unrepresentative slice of Puerto Rican media. But as I have tried to suggest, the dominance of pro-independence rhetoric is also unrepresentative. The closest I can come to an "objective" measure are elections, in which those in support of statehood have become at the least a clear plurality and quite possibly a majority. But the Puerto Rican voices to which I have access repeat as an article of faith that the United States would never let them enter as a state. This self-fulfilling prophecy reminds me of all the people who said, over the years, that the United States could never elect a black president.

I do understand the emotional tug against statehood. This is not unlike my own "declaration of independence" from the right-wing nationalist version of America (which dates to my disaffection with the Reagan Revolution). But it seems to me that, on one level, the statehooders are refusing the myopia of sheer resistance. The structure of feeling that they are disseminating is of a break with blind resistance to America. It says, as I understand it, that the time is long past to redefine what it means to be an American, and that we can do that in bilingual and transnational terms.

Interlude

Student Voices

When our students returned in May 2017 after a two-month absence caused by the student strike, my wife—Dr. Janice Cools—and I wanted to hear what they had to say. As an ethnographer sends associates into the field to videotape patterns in their culture, so we sent out our students as apprentice ethnographers to do "mini-ethnographies."[1] Many students reported getting pressure from family and felt the need to educate themselves. In follow-up work, students were asked to provide specific details about which kinds of media they tuned into and how they responded to pressure to "represent" or explain the strike. Students then shared their perspectives during group work while negotiating differences. Applying skills they had learned in our classes, they analyzed and narrated their fused individual and group perspectives on an issue that affected every aspect of their lives: a two-month student strike. The strike was a symptom of a fiscal crisis which was producing dystopian conditions, or precarity.

Our assignment was divided into three parts: (A) What did you do during the student strike that was most interesting or unusual? (B) What is your personal opinion about the objectives and feasibility of the student strike? (C) What evidence can you see and hear about present precarity or "dystopian conditions" caused by Puerto Rico's fiscal crisis?

Student responses to Part A fell into a recovery phase and a restructuring phase. Observations that fused individual and group perspectives were often humorous and insightful. (In excerpting student writing here, I will use pseudonyms. Those not designated as CNF were from Advanced English, a freshman honors composition course). One student, Gilberto, began his group's reflection by writing, "When teens in their transition to adulthood are given too much free time and nothing to do they tend to enter a miniature mid-life crisis." Many responses seemed to follow that template, with a vegetation stage followed by a crisis, then some form of restructuring. During the recovery phase, many students dedicated "a lot of time to sleeping and watching TV." Nadia put it poetically: "At first, I gave myself into the pseudo-summer mentality instantly.... I could delight in small luxuries, … such as: sleeping and not stopping the 20 second countdown before a new episode played on Netflix."

Although sleeping until noon and Netflix binging seemed utopian at first, most students came to miss the structure that school provided. "We were left with an incredible amount of free time," Amanda's group observed. "We complain about the workload but as soon as it disappears we're left in mortifying limbo," wrote Carlos, a creative nonfiction (CNF) student. The new structure often came from parents who tired of their offspring's couch-potato regressions. Parents made their kids go to work in lumberyards, pharmacies, cement factories, cable companies, furniture workshops, etc. One theme that emerged was the newness of physical labor, the sense of "entering the world of men," and the physical and psychological consequences of doing demanding physical labor.

Like most students, at first Alan lived "the good life," waking up late. Finally, his father intervened and took Alan to work in the family's cement factory in Arecibo. During his "forced labor," Alan started off as an "errand boy." As the strike went on, he was taught "real work," learning to perform maintenance on a machine that turned out 18,000 blocks a day, then "how to stack 120 bricks by hand," and finally how to drive a forklift. As this factory sells its blocks all over the island, Alan was in a sense getting a

ground-level view of the foundations of Puerto Rico.

Elena narrated how she, a privileged young woman, entered a hypermasculine workplace.

> The first few days in my house felt like being in heaven. I got up at noon to eat real food, … and then I just stayed either in bed or in the living room watching TV until night came when I had to go to sleep, just to repeat the same cycle…. I thought "oh this is awesome, I do not want to go back to college." However, during the fourth day of wasting my life, my father confronted me saying: "You are a grown up, so you will work like your mom and I do." I was shocked and in some way angry. "How unfair," I thought.
>
> The next day he took me to his workshop in Toa Baja where he makes wood cabinets. That place was scary, full of big strong men drenched in sweat carrying heavy things. There were a lot of tools like hammers, chainsaws, drills, screws, and other sharp things that I did not even know existed. At first they didn't let me do much. But by the fifth day they let me start sanding the wood. I became insistent until they finally allowed me to drill and use the nail gun. I was initially afraid but once I drilled the first one I felt confident. In fact, it was exciting, and the most productive I have been without hating it.

Kevin's account continues this theme of toughening up and learning to work instead of depending on "papa":

> After I got a speeding ticket, my vacation took a turn. To pay off that ticket I started working with my dad in telecommunication, in the towers to provide internet service to Claro, ATT, etc.…. When it was time to lift an antenna or some material the wind was against us because it suddenly got stronger. At one point my hands started deteriorating and my skin started to get harder. My skin was callus, my hands looked bad but they looked like a hard-working man's hands. Evidence that the rope was burning me.

These commentaries on being exposed to "strong men drenched in sweat" and developing "a hard-working man's hands" also function as a metanarrative about

one of Puerto Rico's rites of passage, in which the "parents" are trying to lessen the dependency of this "last colony."

Opinion was diverse among 180 students in six classes, but a "map" provided by Irene's group rings true: "while many second-to-third year students agreed with the 'huelguistas' approach to the problem—closing the university altogether—, most first year and last year students didn't stand in favor of the strike." Indeed, seniors were intent on exiting to their careers, while freshmen voiced skepticism about the feasibility of the strike's objectives.

One common theme was the sense of having been scapegoated. Students felt the mass media engaged in a campaign of character assassination against them. Lauren's group wrote,

> The nation looked at every student as if he or she was to blame for what was happening. They expected each student to have an opinion and have an answer as to when the strike was going to end or why let a minority choose for them.… This helplessness was the main experience during the student strike.

This sense of having been collectively singled out by the media was voiced again and again. Whether they were for the strike, against it, or had mixed opinions, almost all students felt that they were being vilified by the media. As Carlos wrote,

> The media broadcasted constant attack pieces on the students. They didn't try hiding who their bosses were. That was journalism on the island, bloated and corrupt. It was about spreading an agenda of compliance amongst the people.

Carlos was not alone in drawing on an Orwellian framework. He felt that in the media spectacle, Puerto Ricans had become "addicted to our own version of the Two Minutes of Hate except that because of the constant media exposure, it wasn't minutes but hours." In short, "The students became the scapegoat to everyone's inadequateness."

Carlos went on to observe how this broader social dynamic also infected families:

> One curious thing, it seemed as if everyone's families had coordinated to interrogate us about the protest. They demanded answers…. There was no stopping them. These depraved lizards were hungry for blood and we were in the middle of the feeding frenzy.

Like many, Linda described the strike as causing tensions in families that intensified as the strike went on: "My mother demanded that I pick a side. The tension in the house became thicker and thicker with each passing day, what were once little playful fights turned into full on wars." Such tensions rippled out, infecting friendships, then relationships in a broader community. Nadia, in my CNF class, described the strike's divisiveness as a strain in the social fabric:

> This difference of opinions between my friends lead to strains in our relationships. When we talked, a simple conversation would transform into argument. The most painful part was that many people estranged me for not being on "their side."

As Jorge wrote, "I made lots of enemies thanks to the strike. But I learned my lesson, never provoke people you don't know, many people just don't know how to take a joke." Some students claimed people lost their sense of humor about the student strike. But students developed a range of coping mechanisms. Amidst friends and family demanding that she choose sides, Nadia "stayed obnoxiously calm." That serenity could seem obnoxious reveals that argumentativeness had become normative. Some students practiced a sort of "politics of refusal," such as responding to all queries with one of the strike's slogans: "Lucha si, entrega no" (i.e., "Keep fighting, don't give in").

Puerto Rico has been sold as a utopian myth, not only to tourists but to Puerto Ricans themselves. But this "utopian way of life" so persistently celebrated in Puerto Rican culture has been sustained through dependence on the US—"life in debt" (Black). Now this debt has produced dystopian conditions that social scientists call precarity.

In the end-of-semester reflective essay assignment, after reviewing definitions of precarity, we provided this prompt: "What evidence do you see of 'unending trouble'

and a system that forces perpetual insecurity in Puerto Rico?"

We were struck by how many students used figurative language. The assignment was framed by theory, but their experience was of a sort that could not be captured by analytical language. A world was coming to an end, and they often made use of an allusive language. For instance, Pablo recited the litany of things falling apart, then remarked: "I heard someone say that the island is the Titanic and the people are the violin players. Even though the ship is sinking, everyone keeps playing the violin as if nothing is happening."

"The center of many towns has turned into ghost towns, deserted, with many abandoned buildings full of graffiti," Mary observed. For Nadia, "The sight of the locked gates, the unkempt grass, and rotting mangos makes my heart ache for my beloved Colegio."

Decay often seemed cinematic. Estela, a CNF student, wrote this evocative passage:

> In some cities like Toa Baja the government has not taken the trash…. There is a big mountain of trash in front of all the houses, full of flies and bad smell…. As time passes, the amount and variety of pests increases every day. In some way the rats and cockroaches attracted by rotting garbage have joined the community. It's only been a month in these conditions, and the city already looks like a zombie apocalypse movie.

This text conveys a sense of precarity as a process of animalization. Once again, the student turns to allusive language to convey what precarity in Puerto Rico looks, feels, and smells like.

Some students made broader claims. "Individuals seem as hopeless and worn down as the buildings and physical surroundings," wrote Lorena. As the designated writer for her group, Nora summarized, "We don't see a country who is going through tough times and is going to get back up again, we see a country who has lost all hope."

Many students followed this thematic of what they could *see*, with broad strokes. "I see hysteria all over Puerto Rico," wrote Yolanda. Since many students were working and moving around, their observations were often grounded. Kevin, the student who acquired the "hard-working hands," narrated the following:

> Through my travels because of my work … I saw things that are being caused by Puerto Rico's financial crisis. One was the closing of schools. On my way to work in Juana Diaz (the other site that I worked on) I had to go through the mountain region of Puerto Rico and it was evident that so many schools were closing due to the crisis.

But even as businesses and schools closed right and left, students observed a disconnect. "People are buying more than they can afford; shopaholics have gone loose in the malls," wrote Paula's group. Similarly, Mary's group noted that "we still find the shopping centers full. People eat in restaurants rather than cook. Everyone is spending money like there is no tomorrow." These students' portraits of precarity in Puerto Rico seemed to add up to an indictment of a state of infantilization in this island colony. "I saw what most of the Puerto Ricans refuse to see and truly acknowledge beyond joking, Puerto Rico spiraling down to its doom by cause of self-destruction," wrote Nadia from CNF. "These are strange times," concluded Carlos. "All I'm worried about is when can I jump off this sinking ship and if I can do so unscathed."

Part III

Still Life in Motion:
After the Apocalypse in Puerto Rico

Hurricane María cast us into darkness. The day after, we picked our way through broken trees, mangled electric lines, and mud, a landscape from a postapocalyptic movie. We had no electricity, no water, no phone service, no communication beyond the local reality where everyone was just trying to dig out. Everyday life became a struggle. When it rained, we caught enough runoff to take "cowboys," as my wife Janice called these dousings. (For my parents from Oklahoma, they were called "spit baths.") But food and fuel were problems. Waits of up to eleven hours for gasoline recalled scenes from *Mad Max*. Thieves drilled holes in gas tanks and stole generators from the water company or from cell towers, delaying restoration of services. One neighbor with a concealed-weapon permit joked about picking off zombies. There were long lines at bank ATMs, at grocery stores (cash only), and at the Western Union when local cash ran out.

For the first seven to ten days, there was no communication aside from a few radio stations, one broadcasting "messages in a bottle" from Boricuas to their families in the US. A few people still had land lines, and we got word out, eventually, to our own families in the US. The president was coming, said people listening to their radios. On October 7, Janice got a weak Wi-Fi link in Kmart and had a WhatsApp chat with her

large St. Lucian family. After describing some of that day's wasted motion, Janice wrote, "I don't think anyone outside of Puerto Rico can have any idea of what people are going through every day."

Her brother Auguste in St. Lucia replied, "Why are you complaining? It's not like you had a real disaster like Katrina. It's nothing paper towels can't fix."

That's a good one, I laughed. During a short moment of weak internet access I read a story about POTUS telling Puerto Ricans they were not working hard enough, had not suffered like US hurricane victims. He tossed paper towels into the crowd. That made an impression in the local Spanish-language news. Puerto Ricans weren't going to look a gift horse in the mouth, but the symbolism was strange. Was that a substitute for toilet paper? A billionaire's view of "what we really need"?

I had been reading about the politics of refusal—a stance beyond resistance—and I thought of a quote by O. C. McSwite: "The next level of refusal is the refusal to grant deference to leaders."[1] But withholding deference didn't begin to describe the mood on the ground. The quote from Janice's brother, as with what I could hear all around me, gave evidence of a new phase, maybe a different era, in which people have moved beyond merely refusing to defer. The posture of ridicule is still normative, but underneath is a matter-of-fact acceptance of being leaderless. When leaders are buffoons and liars, sooner or later you don't waste time expecting leadership. After a disaster is a good time to look at people trying to make new connections, and do things for themselves, in the absence of leadership.

Members in my wife's family's WhatsApp discussion were scattered between St. Lucia, Puerto Rico, Maryland, New York, London, and Los Angeles, I noted. Such migratory webs look like the norm of contemporary human experience. Most of us are migrants or nomads; one way or another, we live our life in motion. This has implications that one might even describe as revolutionary. "Revolution" in the scientific sense describes planets or objects going in circles around what binds them, so in these orbits there is an "element of rupture and return," as Carlos Fuentes put it. But in a precarious

age, increasing numbers of people jump their traces and weave new and unexpected forms of family and community.[2]

What happens when the lights go out? That is what most interests me about the post-María experience: an intermission when everything came to a standstill, and yet people were all in motion, frantically trying to reconnect. They were trying to reconnect with technology, but disasters also force people to reconnect with human community. In that slice of time, we imagine new forms of interconnectedness, often outside of official or sanctioned channels.

In a transnational, postcatastrophic context, "Still Life in Motion" can be read in several ways. These perspectives came to mind as I titled this piece:

1) When catastrophe has disordered a prior order, still life may suggest *stillborn*. The social order is dead in many ways; has produced still life. But still, we watch spectacles like *The Walking Dead* for a reason. The zombies are in motion.
2) There is *still* life in motion, even after the disaster. Life goes on.
3) A still life is a portrait; this is my portrait of a corner of a postapocalyptic world (I say with tongue partly in cheek).[3] But in this portrait, everything moves.

We have tried to contain Nature,[4] but hurricanes are a leveling force, like Carnival on steroids. Here comes the ocean in motion from off the west coast of Africa, an uncontainable swirl that sweeps across the sea and reminds us of how little we control. The images on screen, having escaped their digital borders, have wiped the slate clean. Through circumstances beyond our control, operating outside of what can be represented in digital simulations, we are forced to begin again.

What did we see, hear, and say in those first few days? My point of view is limited to a neighborhood and parts of western Puerto Rico. What I write is in part self-reflective

ethnography, but inflected by the literary nonfiction I teach. Inevitably, this is my own still life in motion, with glimpses of Puerto Ricans I encountered during this threshold experience. I'm interested in what some Puerto Ricans thought and imagined in the moment when the world seemed to have been flattened and yet suddenly there was a great motion. During that in-between phase, the Puerto Ricans I talked to expressed hope for an awakening, yet also voiced skepticism about the future of their largely leaderless corner of the world. People seemed united by a sense of refusing available political options.

Sept. 19-20, 2017

In about a day's time, a mere tropical storm metastasized into a Category 5 hurricane that did once-in-a-lifetime damage. We first heard a mild forewarning on Saturday, September 17, when we dined on Thai food at the relocated restaurant Ode in the town of Aguada (formerly Ode to the Elephants in Rincón). The owner, Clay, said he might have to close next Thursday. He showed us on his cell what was then just Storm #15, one in a line of storms moving out from the Cape Verde area off West Africa, like airlines waiting on the tarmac for their chance to take flight.

When on Sunday Puerto Rican public schools, and the University of Puerto Rico system, both cancelled classes, we thought they were overreacting. It seemed like a typical instance of the local, tropical tendency to take any pretext to not go to work or school. But a mad rush on the stores was underway. WALKS Bilingual School, across the street from our house, did hold classes on Monday. But by that afternoon, conditions had changed. People were boarding up their windows. My parents called, wanting to help fly us out of Puerto Rico, but by then the San Juan airport was already closed.

On Tuesday, we bought candles, water, and batteries. At Pueblo, a grocery store next to the Medalla brewery, an employee was restocking a tall display of beer in front of the entrance. Drinking is a national religion here, so it was no surprise that alcohol was

a last-moment priority purchase for many Puerto Ricans we saw in line. Another clearly high priority was keeping the lights on. At Home Depot, there was a prominent sign: "We have no more generators."

I tied the outdoor hanging lanterns to the grating, put everything loose in the tool shed, and parked the Prius under the patio roof. We closed everything except the bedroom window, through which I could hear the winds build that night. The electricity cut off at 1:35 a.m. I began to hear retorts like gunshots, large trees snapping off like matchsticks. The fury picked up steam, and I closed the last window near dawn.

We had moved our glass dining table against the wood and glass windows, where we could watch and hear the spectacle. Boom! A big tree fell on the street up the hill. Boom! Another—the neighbors would not be driving out anytime soon, I thought. My next-door neighbor Reggie's banana orchard was flattened by mid-day. Another neighbor's storage shed was blown to bits. With leaves gone from the trees, the landscape took on the bleary color of water-scoured driftwood.

María was a blowhard, making the air smell like leaves in an oceanic blender. When the whistling roar is sustained, one feels a primal fear. The sound when the winds topped 150 mph was unlike anything I had heard. I rode out Hurricane Dean in Jamaica in 2007, but María was more intense in its periodic rages. One fears that the furies will continue at that level. But then they subside for a time.

My daughter Safiya, Janice, and I played Scrabble while looking south out the French windows, sheltered by the patio roof. At peak winds, the windows were covered in water, making it appear we were underwater. At the north end of the house, these wood-framed opening windows let in trouble. Janice and I had to keep battling the water on the northwest corner, where there was no overhang and the water blew in horizontally through the crevices between the panels and the frame. In my office and Safiya's bedroom, we threw towels and sheets on the floors and wrung them out in the bathtub, over and over. The continual wringing motion, all day, was exhausting. But the

water kept coming, forming a lake in these back rooms. It would have flooded the house and ruined the books in those rooms if we had managed to leave the island.

I felt like the coyote who kept drinking the lake, hoping to get at the "cheese" that was really the reflection of the moon.[5]

Thursday, Sept. 21, 2017

The chainsaws began their throaty choir. From a distance, they sometimes sounded like cattle lowing. A few neighbors walked around with shocked expressions, processing the damage. Jesús the radiologist and his wife, Cyndy, seemed to have contacted friends with a truck, who are armed only with a machete and axe. Cyndy jumped around in her sports tights, giving orders and dragging branches, clearly relishing the role of woman in charge. José, a 71-year-old retired math teacher originally from Moca, came out to help. So did Javier, a computer systems manager who lives with his Dominican wife and two daughters just past Cyndy's house. Javier brought out what looked and sounded like a toy chainsaw. But between them all, they cleared enough space for the truck to drag the tree to the side of the street, up against a disintegrating jungle slope.

Janice and I worked in a light rain. We could not back the car out until the driveway was cleared of a thicket of fallen limbs. We carried limbs, branches, and leaves across the street to a piece of "vacant jungle." It felt like coming out from under a rock—many dozens of trips just to clear out a bit of elbow room. If you lifted your eyes, you could be overwhelmed by the ravages, but circumstances demanded focusing on cleaning up your own corner.

Like the towel-wringing, the carrying of limbs was strenuous. A lot of people are going to lose weight, I thought. After clearing the driveway, we took the Prius up to Highway 2. It was an obstacle course. At the complex where we work out, the aluminum

roofing had blown all over the highway. Signs and light posts lay everywhere. Down below Mayagüez Resort and Casino, police had rerouted traffic while they hacked at the bamboo groves obstructing the southbound lanes. At the bottom Highway 2, by the student housing known as "The Terrace," streets were flooded. There were no traffic lights. Fallen trees had wrecked cars and houses. At least 100 vehicles were lined up below the Gulf gas station. Up by Western Plaza, the tall windows of the Kia dealership had been shattered. At another dealer, metal fences had fallen on trucks. The road to the Adventist grocer where we buy produce was blocked by a large tree. Power lines blocked traffic at the intersection leading into Kmart. The Pollo Tropical sign was twisted into a psychedelic shape.

We retreated home to cook rice and vegetarian chili, our staple for the next few days.

Friday, Sept. 22, 2017

Since Tuesday night, there has been no water, electricity, or communication of any kind. Up the hill, our neighbors looked like members of *The Magnificent Seven* after a shoot-out. Safiya and I hiked up Calle Raul BellasFlores. At the top, Wayne, whose wife runs a cake-baking business out of their house, had his generator running and let me grind my coffee beans at an outlet outside his garage. Safiya played with Amelia and Camila, two Dominican-Puerto Rican girls. Jesús and Cyndy had run an electrical cord to Javier to keep the refrigerator running.

We headed out to look for food and a place to charge laptops—an urgent need for writers with deadlines. The line of cars waiting to get into Gulf was longer. There was another half-mile line coming up to the Total near our house. People stood outside their cars talking to each other while waiting to crawl forward a few feet.

We found Mandarin open, running on a generator with the bathrooms blocked off.

No water, but they had electrical outlets. For a few days, this was our recharge station.

Our friends Fernando and Jessica dropped by. Without phone service, people drove to check on each other. The San Juan airport would reopen for commercial flights Sunday, said Fernando. The drive there was iffy, with many *tapones* (blockages). At Fernando's hospital, winds burst in, destroying many machines and files. He might be without work for a month.

That night we sat in the car listening to a radio station while I give "driving lessons" to Safiya's American Doll, which she'd named Luna. A flow of people took the microphone to speak to relatives in the US, who were hopefully listening on the internet.

Saturday, Sept. 23, 2017

After grinding coffee beans again, I talked again with Javier, whose sister Marisela, a young doctor, had previously lived in the house. Javier hoped this breakdown would awaken Puerto Ricans. Eighty cell towers had been knocked down in Mayagüez alone, Javier told me. The challenges were enormous. These were owned by AT&T and leased to local providers. But first AT&T had to get in. They had to get to the towers, which were often in high places and blocked by fallen trees and other debris. Support technicians were often Indians, but how to reach them? Getting supplies in was another hurdle. Javier thought it would be weeks until cell service was restored. He did all his business on his cell.

José was just back from Añasco, the same long lines as everywhere. Like Javier and Wayne, he hoped this crisis would show Puerto Ricans that they were living beyond their means. José, who always greets me with a peace sign, sports a "Libertad Para Oscar López Ahora" (i.e., "Free Oscar López Now") bumper sticker on his old car. José is "roots," in the sense of a man who is old enough to stop caring what people think about him. He is usually shirtless, sometimes in his plaid boxer shorts, gathering wood for his

carving. José advocated simplicity, but agreed that Puerto Ricans would not willingly give up their creature comforts.

While Janice and I were removing branches from the side yard, Safiya's science teacher Nora walked down the hill, accompanied by Ricardo and their daughter Violeta, who is in Kindergarten at WALKS. They rode out María in San Sebastian, which Ricardo described as "horrible." María cut across to Arecibo, turned west, and levelled the coast all the way to Aguadilla. The roads had only just cleared enough for them to make their way back. While checking on his folks in Utuado, they saw swarms of desperate drivers trying to get to family in Ponce. The police turned them back because Highway 2 had been washed out.

Washing dishes has become a challenge as we run low even on rainwater runoff. Janice obsesses about water. Having grown up on a farm, taking a piss outside doesn't faze me. Safiya treats it like an adventure, but Janice is mortified. When water was too low to flush, Safiya was willing to utilize the holes or trenches I kept digging, but things would have to get much more dire before the wife would stoop to that. Not even after the apocalypse would she contemplate answering Mother Nature's call outside.

We set out to reconnoiter. At Ricomini's, which was full of tense customers, we scored a tank of propane gas. Outside their store, there was an endless line of trucks with gas canisters in the back, waiting for entry to a gas station around the corner. Gulf had run out of gas, and lines elsewhere were interminable. Petrol trucks were coming Sunday, we heard. But the need to feed generators was creating a desperate mood, which could easily turn to riots. That's what our neighbors and colleagues feared.

We found the deli Massa semiopen for business, with hand-painted announcements on the plywood they had used to board up. The owner, Israel, said the gas-delivery man was coming by Sunday. He had enough gas to sell sandwiches and coffee for two hours, he told me, and keep his food refrigerated until Sunday. I asked him how he had communicated with the gas man given there was no phone service.

"Well, people are getting things done the old-fashioned way. I went and put a note on his door. His shop is closed, but he has canisters in his truck." Like all the men I had talked to, Israel wondered if this would spur people to become better-organized.

"This is the test," he said.

"At least people are talking about it."

"Yes, people everywhere are talking about it."

Reflecting on Puerto Ricans who hoped that this ordeal could spark consciousness, I thought about the Tibetans, who refuse citizenship in India in the faith that one day they will be citizens in their homeland.[6] In this sense, refusal is not only "hope that things will be different," but "the insistence that they will be," writes Carole McGranahan.[7] Such an insistent hope might seem delusional in Puerto Rico, but if I think of this hope as quasireligious, then such "blind faith" appears in a different light. As my own tradition teaches, "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." And, we "walk by faith and not by sight."

Sunday, Sept. 24, 2017

After five days in the void, we entertained desperate thoughts. Maybe we'd drive to San Juan and try to catch a flight. But if none were available, then we might not have enough gas to get back. So we went into a holding pattern. We were reading more books. We lived from one charge to the next so that some writing was possible. But the heat in the house in the afternoon and evening was sweltering. At night, it was hard to light enough candles to read without eye strain. The candles were burning low, and there were no replacements in the stores.

We saw a US military presence on the street for the first time—mostly at intersections, directing traffic. Young white men. "The law" had arrived, and there would be more order and a better organized clean-up, one sensed. But we had no idea of the

big picture, what news was getting out, or what was going on in the rest of the world. One began to feel complete isolation.

Reggie, whose family cares for aged veterans and whose daughters Shy and Brecia are playmates of Safiya's, let us fill buckets from his spigot. Caring for the elderly, they had to keep the generator running and water on hand, stored in large cisterns.

At dusk, I went out on the street with Shy, Brecia, and Safiya. Their granddad said Claro, Carlos Slim's company, was back in service. He had heard that 100 were dead in Puerto Rico because of María.[8] He had been to Añasco, which was destroyed, houses washed out to sea.

Monday, Sept. 25, 2017

Some teachers are meeting at WALKS, Safiya's bilingual school. We knew from experience that they would be open long before the public schools.

José gave us four coconuts from a felled tree. We drank the milk of one, wonderfully sweet and refreshing. Javier dropped off a hot baguette. And Jesús invited us to his radiology office for water because medical facilities were the first to get water back.

Catastrophes can enable people to envision ruptures as "the generation of something new."[9] People who refuse cynicism or despair, and seek to rekindle human relationships, are crafting "an aspirational move towards change."[10] Such aspirations, set into motion by María, are clearly visible in the mutual aid of our friends and neighbors, as they are in better-known places such as the G8 communities in San Juan.[11]

Tuesday, Sept. 26, 2017

With cash reserves depleted and no one accepting ATH cards, we got to Banco Popular at 8:00 a.m. and reached the teller in two hours. We were allowed, like

everyone, to take out $500. Police and military personnel were omnipresent.

At Massa, I was asked about "El Colegio," as the University of Puerto Rico-Mayagüez is known locally. We had just gone in for a look-see. There was no light or water. Big trees were blocking paths. The clerk had heard a rumor that the central tower at the Río Piedras campus had fallen, which in a Puerto Rican context is a powerful symbol of national identity and cultural autonomy. It was probably wishful thinking, given local resentments of the bloated bureaucracy of the UPR headquarters and the local mythology, passed on to students, about making a noise that "could be heard all the way to the tower."

Miriam Avilés, a school administrator in Aguada, promised to call my parents, and Janice's sister Rochelle, on a landline to which she had access.

Janice heard that there were $100 flights from Ponce to New York. Fernando said the roads were open now. Should we try to escape? Nora told us that when there is water, WALKS will open for half a day. Meanwhile, who knows what news we were missing. We had book proposals in circulation, and various job applications.

Wednesday, Sept. 27, 2017

We followed Javier to one of his contract jobs at Jani Clean, which had occasional Wi-Fi. I found an email request, written five days earlier, for a Skype interview with a university in Shanghai. I replied and selected the last of the times the English chair had offered, 10 p.m. Thursday. I had no idea if I could make that happen.

I talked to Javier, 39 and prematurely bald, while Safiya played with his daughters. Javier was excited about a diesel generator he was rehabbing. He kept telling me about all the parts he was having to buy, hoping to get it up and running and reliable. Short-term expenses, aspiring to long-term efficiency. Javier wanted to have us over for dinner, but was *shocked* to find out we were vegetarians. He loved to barbeque. I told him he

should get to Texas, where BBQ was a religion. Puerto Ricans really love their meat.

Thursday, Sept. 28, 2017

At 8 a.m., we arrived at Jessica's house in a crowded old neighborhood just down the hill from Plaza Colón. Pockets of old Mayagüez had gotten services back first, probably because of the abundance of hospitals and medical facilities in the downtown area. Jessica let us fill four buckets of water and agreed to let me use her cell for the interview. We made a date to play Scrabble by candlelight that night so I could take the call from China. Fernando told me that 300 container ships were waiting to be unloaded in San Juan, but there were no drivers. The drivers presumably had been conscripted to deliver petrol and cart off fallen trees. On the road to the Adventists, a never-ending stream of trucks was carrying limbs out to the city dump.

Friday, Sept. 29, 2017

A curfew was supposedly in effect, and by midevening the streets were mostly empty. Thursday evening we drove to Fernando and Jessica for the Scrabble date. Right at 10, the call from China came. I had to stand in complete darkness. The call cut off over and over. I was over China's mandatory retirement age. But I told them about Janice; when I said she was seventeen years my junior, the search committee laughed. They asked if she could send a letter and resume.

Génesis had gone with her parents to Añasco and seemed to have been traumatized. Fernando has a cousin there who had to be rescued from her house, flooded up to her neck. Her cats and dogs drowned. There were dead animals everywhere. Jessica saw dead horses, left to rot. The stench was overwhelming. It didn't seem that there was any governing agency in charge. People had meat in freezers, now 10 days old, putrid in the tropical heat. They were being told on the radio to bury their

rotten meat in the yard.

We headed home after curfew. The deserted, dark streets were creepy, Janice said, and reminded her of a scene from a postapocalyptic film. Indeed, one almost expected to see zombies spilling out of the many deserted buildings in the parts of old Mayagüez that already looked like a lot like Havana, as if bombed out and left to rot.

Saturday, Sept. 30, 2017

The water returned temporarily this morning. The trash truck made its rounds for the first time in two weeks. Amazing how happy one can feel just to see a trash truck, greeted almost like arriving liberators. On the UPRM campus, bulldozers pushed tree limbs and men loaded trucks. There was water, but no electricity. We saw more activity at WALKS.

Sunday, Oct. 1, 2017

The WALKS principal posted a notice that the school would open 7:30-12:30 Monday. Wayne and his cake-baking wife have a daughter, Fabiola, in her first year at UPRM. They had heard that administrators and staff were returning to El Colegio on Monday.

I strung twine and we "opened" clothes Janice had washed by hand using the rubboard in the pantry sink, channeling her Caribbean self, the daughter of a St. Lucian woman who had cooked over a charcoal burner.

At midday, driving out, I exchanged words with the owner of the house above us, where we've had problems with loud engineering students. A fat man who uses a walker, he had paid to cut the trees back, but the workmen dumped the limbs in the street. Cars came through there all the time for the school, I noted. He was hostile and said: (a) it was a state of emergency, and (b) "the government" would come and pick them up.

"¿El gobierno? ¡No hay gobierno!" I barked.

The people of Añasco were waiting for the government to come and pick up the stinking carcasses. People waited to be rescued, for someone up the food chain to clean up the mess.

We migrated south to Mayagüez Mall, hoping to find an internet link. But Office Depot was still shuttered. We had pesto pasta at Macaroni Grill, where employees were posting a sign saying they could accept ATH cards. That was the first evidence of a noncash economy that I had seen since the hurricane. I asked for a booth where we could recharge, and an extension cord was draped over our booth.

First thing this morning, we found a Post-it from "Cyndy, the dog woman," as she signed it, inviting us to do laundry in her house. That afternoon, as I was wringing out and hanging the clothes, her husband Jesús pulled up in his Lexus. He said he had a diesel generator at his office, but he had to find a way to let people know he was open. María was biting everyone's pocket except for the oil companies, I said. We talked about the rampant thievery. Jesús said he was carrying his gun with him everywhere, because you never knew what would happen when conditions broke down. He joked about the zombies coming and how he would pick them off.

At dusk, I talked with Javier about how *dependent* Puerto Rico was. The island lived like teens used to dad paying the bills. Wreck the car and dad will buy another one. Javier had a friend who would not fix his damaged roof because then he wouldn't get money from FEMA. Lots of stories were floating around about the amounts of money FEMA was handing out. Everyone I talked to took it for granted that all the aid money was coming from the US.

Monday, Oct. 2, 2017

What we saw and heard this morning alarmed us. Janice and I agreed that she would contact her sister in California to see if she can book a flight to Dallas (near my

parents) while we are in San Juan for Janice's final citizenship interview, scheduled for Wednesday. We talked to the people at Sultana, the shuttle service, which was running into San Juan again. But Javier later stopped by to show us a screenshot of a US Citizenship and Immigration Services announcement. They were closed until further notice. Citizenship deferred.

At UPRM, we talked to Cecilio and Marla, "the sustainability couple," as we call them, who are engaged in the Sisyphusian struggle to get a decaying university in a bankrupt "post-nation" to prioritize sustainable practices. "System breakdown," Cecilio said to me right off, a box of files in his hands. Thieves had broken into the water plant and stolen a diesel generator, he said, which set back the scheduled return of water. They still had no electricity, but a neighbor let them run their fridge off an extension cord. I asked Cecilio which of the available "status" options he favored for Puerto Rico. He hungered for an independent leader, a strongman who could bypass party politics, and the Jones Act that prevents Puerto Rico from trading with its neighbors. The Chinese were here right before the hurricane. But Roselló and the statehooders want to further dependency on the US, he felt.

We saw at least 100 people lined up for remittances at the Western Union office inside Pueblo. With money running out, some people were living on handouts. People from all over western Puerto Rico had descended on Mayagüez. The lines were getting longer and traffic had become a stalled free-for-all. I'd given up on driving in the downtown area, so we walked in to Jessica's, who let us use her cell, with service via Claro, to check Gmail. AT&T will never recover here, people say. We are now in the Mexican telecommunications orbit.

Figure 7

Kmart has been letting in only as

many people as exit the store; every customer must be chaperoned. This seems to be a result of the bum-rushing of Mayagüez. They are advertising free Wi-Fi, so we stood in line in the sun to try it out. The connection was almost useless, but like drops of hot water to someone dehydrated in the desert.

Tuesday, Oct. 3, 2017

The time had come to get in line for gas. At 8:00 a.m., I only had to wait 50 minutes to pump at the Shell across from Kmart. Wayne told us that he had to wait eleven hours his first time out for gas. Jessica has a big gas guzzler, like so many Puerto Ricans, and she's had to wait around five hours each time. Fernando and Jessica are talking about getting out. Running three errands that would have taken 90 minutes before now takes all day, Fernando said. Jessica came by this afternoon at 12:30 as Janice was about to pick up Safiya from school. She was near tears and told us that if things hadn't improved in two weeks, she would leave. But Fernando is back at the hospital, and they both have mothers in poor health living in their house.

Wednesday, Oct. 4, 2017

We stood in brutal heat, waiting to get into Kmart, hoping for a Wi-Fi connection. We drove out to Javier's office, but they had no link. He had been talking to a company with satellite internet service, but they were charging over $300 a month. He contemplated opening an internet café and charging $20 a day to defray costs.

The water returned this morning. Janice frantically filled everything—the dormant washer, paint buckets, the mop bucket, etc.

Saturday, Oct. 7, 2017

Janice said she feels like she is living "suspended in time." We went to Kmart to send off a job application, but the Wi-Fi didn't work. At the Toyota dealership in Hormigueros, a forty-minute drive, there was no Wi-Fi either, but I paid for maintenance on my 2016 Prius. While waiting, Janice talked to Marilyn, who did some child care for Safiya when she was an assistant at WALKS and we were on grading deadlines. She told us there was Wi-Fi at Krispy Kreme and Burger King—a pretty good indicator of her diet. But they also were down. We heard the theft of a generator had knocked out a cell tower.

We begin to get a picture of the scale of the relief effort. Newspapers bring reports from San Juan and beyond. In today's *El Nuevo Día*, Ricardo Roselló laid out the global view: "We have to make a new Puerto Rico." He put the price tag, which he said he had relayed to US Senators and Congressman, at $80-90 billion.[12]

Sunday, Oct. 8, 2017

A huge Caterpillar rumbled down into our neighborhood and began clearing out the mass of twisted trees in the watershed. Drainage is a problem everywhere. Soon trucks came in to start hauling off the waste. The streets were left covered in a film of dust and mud, which along with the denuded trees made the area look like a scene from the film *The Road*.

Tuesday, Oct. 10, 2017

Last night we rolled down the hill to Western Plaza, but Kmart had just closed and Burger King's Wi-Fi was inert. Desperate to send off job applications and writing on deadline, we went to Holiday Inn, thinking we'd pay for a night or two just for their Wi-Fi. They were full of FEMA and Army personnel. Gemari, whose daughter Maya stays with her *abuela* near us, was on duty as acting manager. She has no water or electricity at her

house in Cabo Rojo. The clerk had one room for that night only, and then afterwards not a single room was open for over a month. She said the same was true for all motels near Mayagüez. US personnel had booked them solid. Up to 10,000 US personnel were on the ground in Puerto Rico, I was told. But news reports have put the figure at 15,000 or more, of which 4,600 were military men and women.[13]

Wednesday, Oct. 11, 2017

Janice was depressed by our life in motion, trying to just keep our heads above water. I promised to buy her a good breakfast to lift her spirits. The café at Holiday Inn would not share their Wi-Fi code. I told the front desk clerk that we needed to send an emergency email. She took us to a room behind the desk, where her daughter was on one of two computers. On the other, Janice sent off her references for a job in Ohio because she had been unable to access Interfolio. Then we ate at Merendola, a hip café across the road from WALKS.

At home, the Caterpillar made a great racket, crushing trees around the power lines and continuing to dig out the creek bottom. During one heavy rain, I saw Cyndy, calf deep in muddy water, trying to unplug the grate over the drain with a shovel. She was like the Dutch boy who kept the sea at bay by sticking his finger in the dike.

Our English chair sent out a report that the Costa Azul Power Plant would fire up within a week. The university hoped to recommence October 30 and work through the holiday season.

Thursday, Oct. 12, 2017

The travel agency at Kmart, always empty before, was now flooded with people desperate to get out. Florida reported that 20,000 Puerto Ricans arrived on one-way tickets October 1-4, Fernando told us. But I know from talking to my students that this

exodus was already in full swing before the hurricane. Now it's a tidal wave. As I began getting a little access to the news, I saw things in context. Since Hurricane María, 23,000 Puerto Ricans had fled to Orlando alone. According to ticket sales, another 70,000 were waiting for a flight.[14] Seen in aggregate, this is a "demographic and population collapse on a monumental scale," said one migration researcher.[15]

The travel agency was next to the Wi-Fi area, always jammed with people. There was a big TV which always seemed to be playing *Boss Baby* or *Trolls* on continuous loop. The area had become an encampment, people trying to link, or leave, or just escape the heat for a couple of hours. While Janice struggled with a job application, I went over to Home Depot and sat under a tarp at the "Oak Cliff Collection," as if I were living the good life. These were the signs of the time: there was a stash of Echo chainsaws, 18" for $330, 20" for $380. They were going like hotcakes. One potbellied man with two women roughly tossed two chainsaw boxes in his cart, then came back for a third. Everything on display was for *digging out of the rubble*. Fiskar tree-pruning poles, towers of boxed lawn mowers, hundreds of Husky clean-up bags, O-Cedar mop buckets, weed-eaters, and stacks of chainsaw oil and fuel.

Our charge spots have been overrun, are dirty, filled with flies. We stopped going to Mandarin after it was "discovered." Today Janice woke in a panic because her cell, which she mainly uses as a flashlight, was at 18% and her laptop was depleted. We went to University Town Center, but there was no electricity. Mesón was rammed with people, a long line. Kmart had no link and was buzzing with swarms of flies. It felt impossible to concentrate amidst all the noise, filth, and smell of desperation. The theme of every day seems to be wasted motion.

After Safiya got out of school, we returned to Town Center. Still no electricity. I went on campus and parked next to Célis, the administration building. Lo and behold, a link. After catching up on a bit of news, we went home for dinner. On impulse, we went back to campus, just for the luxury of being able to read in the evening. But security

was not letting anyone in after 6 p.m. Mesón was open till 8 p.m., so we read there and enjoyed cold orange juice for the first time in a month.

Saturday, Oct. 14, 2017 (25 days in darkness)

The struggle continues. This morning I walked down to Casiano's at 6 a.m. to grind the coffee beans. Weekday mornings I usually grind them beside the soft drink machine at WALKS. That's what our life has become, just trying to find places to plug in.

Yesterday we went to our office to work in the cooler air, first time since the hurricane. But no link. I wandered the halls of Célis, Microsoft Surface in hand, all three floors, stairwells. No link.

Saturday afternoon we migrated north, hoping to find Ode open. Aguada was in bad shape, people lined up at trucks for water. There was no electricity. Ode was boarded up, immersed in sand. The beach was littered with house debris, downed lifeguard stands, etc. We moved on back roads towards Aguadilla. Lights were off. Once we reached Highway 2, the lack of traffic lights caused major congestions. No National Guard here. "Every Man for Himself, and God Against All," as in Werner Herzog's film.

Much of Aguadilla was in shambles. Many hangars at the airfield had been torn open. Telephone poles snapped in two, hanging like they had been executed; transformers lining the street. The bowling alley was boarded up. We did find One Ten Thai open, running on a generator, their bathrooms closed. Their food was a wonderful treat. But it looked like it might be months until electricity returned to the northwest of the island.

Sunday, Oct. 15, 2017

This morning, two "USO Official" electrical trucks came into our neighborhood. A group of men looked up at the cables. We drove the back roads to Jessica's and did a

load of laundry. She and Fernando were thinking about leaving their daughter Génesis in school here for a few months while relocating to Florida. Over 500,000 Puerto Ricans have left the island over the past six months.

A shocking view greeted us at the entrance to Western Plaza: every parking space in the sea of parking lots seemed full. Countless vehicles wandered the lanes. I forced my way behind Pep Boys and found one just-vacated spot. We walked to Kmart, but there was no link. *Boss Baby* ended and *Trolls* began, life repeating itself in dystopian fashion. We had to constantly swat away flies. I began to connect the dots: businesses close their bathrooms and flies proliferate. The travel agency was even more crowded than usual. Life had become unbearable for many people in Puerto Rico. The only solution was to keep on moving.

We wandered the campus, searching for an elusive link. At least we had a refrigerator in our office building to store food. When we got home about 6 p.m., we saw the street lamp on. It seemed like a miracle—26 days later, we had electricity! I felt a bit guilty because around 85% of Puerto Ricans still had no electricity. But as Jesús said, "I can always turn on the generator."

CONCLUSION: RESISTANCE AND REFUSAL

Thursday, Oct. 19, 2017

This morning, a month after this ordeal began, Jessica sent Janice the image of her Jet Blue ticket, one-way to Orlando, November 7. She is joining the "Jet Blue Revolution," which even optimists fear is part of "a self-reinforcing downward spiral."[16]

Our electricity is off again. When it cut out Monday, we went to Mesón rather than cook in the dark, or rather, by the nubs of the few candles we can still light. A young man charging his tablet beside us ranted "this was the one place where you could sit cool and charge your phone, but all of western Puerto Rico has discovered it." He was from

Aguada, where people lived as if in the Dark Ages, he said. He blamed all problems on "the government." I had heard all this from my students. Their cynicism about politics is not entirely a bad thing.

To flesh this out, I now want to connect Puerto Rico's life in motion to larger trends. "*Disdain for official politics*," a "vast refusal," is "widely shared throughout the world," writes Laurent Dubreuil in *The Refusal of Politics*.[17] Even so, it is difficult "to see clearly the amplitude of this refusal." But what would it mean, in practice, to go all the way, so "far as to *refuse politics*"? Catastrophes like María may lead some people to act on the conviction that we should not "*cling to the vain belief that all the ills of politics could have a political solution*."[18]

"Ethnographies of refusal" make sense to me because they can short-circuit "the repetitive stance of resistance."[19] The "romance of resistance" only reinscribes the power of the existing political center, many ethnographers agree.[20] Ethnographies of refusal offer models of how to disengage from this vicious cycle. Refusal does not automatically defer to authority. As Kennan Ferguson surmises, "*Put simply, refusal does not take authority as a given*. Where resistance looks for lacuna and interruptions in the constancy of power, refusal denies its very legitimacy"[21] (emphasis added). Examples include Israelis who refuse military service, American parents who refuse vaccination for their children, and Mohawks who refuse to recognize the legitimacy of Canadian and US borders.[22] People who do not advertise their refusal are most effective in carving out alternatives, without calling the attention of the state. Weiss sees refusal as an "abstention" that "hopes to avoid the state's gaze," and hence is a sort of "'playing dead' to avoid … the state's resistance trap."[23]

I could not teach the theory of refusal in Puerto Rico because a stale version of resistance was normative in Puerto Rican universities, as well as in popular culture.[24] Yet this calcified version of resistance was out of step with the pragmatic concerns of most students, and indeed with the aspirations for change voiced by my friends and neighbors.

What I was hearing post-María, I came to understand, was above all a refusal of Puerto Rican political norms. This insistent hunger for new models sought "a rearrangement of relations rather than an ending of them."[25]

Thinking of what rearrangements might look like in postcatastrophe contexts, or more generally in the "precarious life" that has become normative for so many, I see such restructuring happening on two tracks. First, a refusal of blind resistance can be developed in the arts—in visions of apolitics or "a non-political elsewhere."[26] The second track would be local self-reliance. Without self-sufficiency and sustainability, efforts at "refusal" are merely gestural. This is where the Puerto Ricans, so dependent on the US, face major challenges. The "Dream Nation" sings of independence convincingly, but self-reliance is hard to envision.

A sea change is occurring in US-Puerto Rican relations. The massive aid flowing into Puerto Rico indicates that a recognition that Puerto Ricans are American citizens has won the day in US politics. There is no going back from that. I know through my roots in core "red states" (Oklahoma and Texas) that most conservatives are patriots. When something is framed as a patriotic obligation, they usually get on board. Puerto Rico is now widely understood as a patriotic obligation. But the question of the terms of integration, or separation, is difficult.

There remains a problem of scale. "True democracy" can arguably only be practiced on a small scale. Plato emphasized that citizens needed to know each other, estimating the maximum size of a democracy as 5,040.[27] For Aristotle, the limits to democracy were citizens gathering in one place and being able to hear an (unamplified) speaker. Such forms of democracy can hardly be found in a society of spectacle. But democratic practices such as mutual aid (which is a principle of anarchism) do become evident during crises. Something gets lost in translation when mutual aid becomes a one-way flow of disaster aid.

Life is returning to "normal" here, insofar as that is possible in a dystopian crisis.

People are once again staring at their cells while they drive. The iZombies hardly lift their eyes. The vision of community that flourished briefly after the hurricane is difficult to sustain. But the image that people in the United States have of Puerto Rico is not going to be the same. Those 20,000 servicemen and volunteers will go home with stories to tell. The Puerto Rican exodus may radically tip voting patterns. As we sort out our new relationships, we will need to let go of many "misguided or quixotic ideas" about how governance might function in motion.[28] Will our refusals lead us to take stances "against democracy"?[29]
One thing that life in motion surely teaches us is that the language we use to describe community, and democracy, is inadequate and in need of revision.

Afterword

A Work of National Importance

President's Day 2018

Trilogies are a three-part discourse, which afford the opportunity to paint on a larger canvas. With trilogies, we can envision a larger social trajectory. By connecting the dots, we can picture the repeating patterns of the story across this triptych.[1] In the case of "Three Birds," what lies beyond accepting intolerable conditions as the "new normal"? Or is there a third way beyond engaging in blinkered resistance to one particular force, face, or entity that we perceive as causing these unbearable terms of existence?

At the end of this Puerto Rican trilogy, I want to reconsider the framework with which I started: *What might meaningful resistance look like in dystopian precarity?* I have suggested that the "repetitive stance[s]" of myopic resistance may be part of what reinforces our vicious dystopian cycles.[2] Disengaging from those cycles may require us to *jump the traces* of revolutions in the scientific sense. That is to say, the revolution of a planet is just orbiting around the same sun over and over. We also, as individuals and as societies, revolve around "suns." Both our addictions, and our resistances—as well as love, and faith—function as suns, structuring our endless circling around the same center.

Ethnographers of refusal suggest that, sometimes, "abstention" is more feasible path towards a "rearrangement of relations."[3]

Perhaps the broken patterns visible in Puerto Rico are like a crack in the world—an opening in the doors of perception that offers a glimpse of a previously invisible "counter-America." I offer readers two windows on the flows that result from hemispheric precarity. The context in both cases is resistance to limiting conditions in one's nation of origin, or to its perceived dystopia. One window is the historic scale of the current exodus out of Puerto Rico. The other window is a citizenship ceremony in which my wife Janice took part in San Juan on February 8, 2018. This swearing-in sheds light on a different sort of flow, and a kind of emergent Americanism that is hemispheric in scope, while operating mostly outside the English language.

Everyone I have talked to recognizes that conditions in Puerto Rico had been increasingly dystopian for a decade before the fiscal crisis and Hurricane María in 2017 crippled the Last Colony. Much of the infrastructure was rotten and ready to tumble. But the scale of the exodus in late 2017 is hard to picture from the outside. I could describe or show pictures of the empty housing at every turn. But perhaps one can only suggest the scope of this exodus with numbers.

According to a report dated December 29, 2017, in the three months since María, about 270,000 Puerto Ricans had arrived on flights to Florida alone.[4] A report from the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at CUNY's Hunter College estimates that over 470,000 people will leave Puerto Rico in the two years after María.[5] This is in addition to the 525,000 people that Puerto Rico lost from 2006-2016.[6] Depending on estimates of a shrinking population, this is a loss of at least 14% of the island's population. The report was released in October 2016, so the loss may be up to one-fifth of Puerto Rico's population. The Hunter College report estimates that the long-term blow to Puerto Rico will be "more than twice as damaging as the 1994 Peso crisis was to Mexico."[7]

News reports tell of Puerto Rican nurses and teachers who have been recruited

and doubled their salaries by moving to the US. The nurses have also halved their workload given that medical facilities in Puerto Rico are severely understaffed. The demand for bilingual teachers in the US is intense, as is the demand for health care providers for an aging population. I personally know teachers and nurses in Puerto Rico who have been recruited for better-paying jobs. Some are provided relocation assistance. Students and professors in Puerto Rico are being offered short-term grants by several universities in the US. Many of them will not return.

Beyond the gutting of professionals in Puerto Rico, one can only begin to imagine the political and cultural impact of this exodus in the United States. Over 10,000 incoming Puerto Rican students enrolled in Florida schools over a three-month period (mid-September to mid-December 2017). The Hunter College report estimates that migration of Puerto Ricans over a one-year period will be as high as 82,000 in Florida and 27,000 in both Pennsylvania and Texas.[8] Given that Florida and Pennsylvania are both political swing states, and that the growing Hispanic population in Texas appears likely to make the Lone Star State "purple," the Puerto Rican exodus has enormous political implications.

For decades, at election time national politicians would show up in South Florida wearing a yarmulke, swearing fealty to Israel, and vowing ever fiercer opposition to the Castro regime in Cuba. The probability is that the Puerto Rican exodus will put Florida firmly in the Democratic column, but the cultural reshaping is harder to project.

Now to the second window.…

I witnessed an emergent counter-America during the naturalization ceremony in which my wife, Dr. Janice Cools, participated, held at the United States District Court of Puerto Rico on February 8, 2018. Fifty-one people from 17 countries took the oath of allegiance. All but a Chinese woman and a man from Israel were Latin Americans. US Magistrate Judge Silvia Carreño Coll went down the list and asked people from each country to raise their hands. Everyone professed to know Spanish except for Janice.

The judge said she would try to do part of her comments in English for the benefit of "the lady from St. Lucia." But then the entirety of her comments continued in Spanish. The lady from the Anglo-Caribbean who spoke fluent English was thus the outsider in this ceremony, which in theory was providing membership in and access to an English-speaking nation.

Judge Carreño Coll saved the Dominican Republic until last. There was a gasp in the room as about two-thirds of the citizens-to-be raised their hands. The citizenship process in Puerto Rico, it seemed, primarily served Dominicans. The judge herself, if I understood correctly, was of Dominican origin. She told her audience that she took great pride in their trajectory towards citizenship. She encouraged them to hold fast to their cultural roots.

The assumption that the ceremony would be conducted in Spanish revealed a difference in how citizenship was conceived of here on the portal to Latin American and the Caribbean. Janice, sitting on the bench in front of me, asked me to help a young Dominican woman fill out her form. The woman did not understand the English words on the form. This was a last hurdle for entry to the United States, after having supposedly demonstrated competence in English. The form was an amendment to an earlier interview which, however, repeated questions. The formula was on the order of: "Since your interview…. have you joined in a Communist organization?... have you gotten married?"

That someone on the threshold of citizenship could not read simple English words on a form was hardly surprising to us, since I had accompanied Janice to San Juan about a month earlier to take her final "test." The proof of English competence was simply writing down this sentence, as dictated: "Lincoln was president during the Civil War."

Janice's inference was that the Dominicans were becoming US citizens to work in Puerto Rico, not to go to the US. They were filling a niche. Nature abhors a vacuum, they say. As soon as I moved to Puerto Rico in 2014, I began reading stories about Puerto

Ricans who had emigrated to the Dominican Republic because of the booming economy there. My creative writing students often write about their vacations in the Dominican Republic. My neighbor Javier is married to a Dominican. Clearly the flow of Puerto Ricans to its western neighbor is not one-way. Some Puerto Ricans are sponsoring Dominicans to come work in Puerto Rico. These Dominicans then gain a permanent foothold on a different kind of American soil.

Judge Carreño Coll had called upon three new citizens to offer testimony. One man from Venezuela spoke about the importance of not bringing bad habits from countries of origin. This idea had a dystopian subtext for me given the long legacy of US tax dollars supporting repressive regimes in places like El Salvador, Guatemala, and Chile. I have not forgiven nor forgotten the genocidal level of slaughter in Central America during the Reagan administration. And nowadays, given the crisis of political leadership in the US, the seemingly nonstop school shootings, etc., there is a sense of American citizenship having been devalued. But that was not the mood for the fifty new citizens who were Janice's cohorts. Each waved their flag proudly and recited the Oath of Allegiance in English. Did they understand that they were vowing to "bear arms on behalf" of the American republic?

As for me, one line held particular resonance: "I will perform work of national importance."

I could not deny that the ambition to perform "work of national importance" is part of how I am wired, at the level of a sort of cultural genetics. But the metanarrative here, as related in "Three Birds," is in part about an ongoing process in which I have reevaluated what "nation" really means, and whether in fact one can do or should attempt to do important work on the national level. The scale seems often seems too big to be meaningful. My own impulse has often been that the most important work on a national level would in fact be "letting go of America," in the sense of not holding on to the pretense that this empire is still a unity. The center will not hold. However, on

the margins, one still gets glimpses of how national traditions are reimagined from the perspective of people from other cultural traditions.

Hearing "America the Beautiful" sung in something like a soul style made me misty-eyed, as it often does. Janice told me later that this was also the most emotional moment for her. But the emotional impact, she thought, primarily resulted from the fact that this was one of the few moments in which she could participate in her native language. Being able to sing along and read the words in English gave her a sense of ownership, or belonging, that was otherwise largely missing.

Janice thought that "America the Beautiful" was a Ray Charles song, which somehow seemed "right," in a counterfactual way. This unofficial American anthem was actually written by a Wellesley College English professor named Katharine Lee Bates in 1893, after a visit to the Rocky Mountains, as the story goes.[9] But the Ray Charles version, recorded in 1976 for the US bicentennial, is to my ears a "work of national importance." It has *redeemed* patriotism for me, one might say, to return to Bob Marley's frame of reference. That is to say, United States patriotism had often come to seem as something foreign to me, too often done in poor taste, because of the jingoistic chorus of "the greatest nation on earth" over the decades. But hearing Ray Charles sing these words brought their spirit alive for me. The "redemption" of which I speak—"lost but now found, blind but now I see"—is something similar to the way in which Rastafarian reggae music redeemed Bible-based praise songs for me.[10] Through new voices, I reimagine my homeland, and my spiritual training.

Living in Jamaica, Saudi Arabia, and Puerto Rico has led me to see "America" with new eyes. The monolingual, monochromatic version of the United States lost its place in my heart a long time ago, but I have moved beyond resistance to the old center. However, I do refuse to pledge allegiance to small-minded and close-hearted versions of American identity. I know that this outpost on the frontier—or the far borderland—that we witnessed in San Juan is a window on a new version of Americanism. It may not find

representation in national politics, but it will be voiced in cities and on borders of all kinds.

My exploration of the intersecting dynamics of dystopia, precarity, and resistance ends with a declaration of refusal that constitutes a disciplined sort of hope. In "Refusal and the Gift of Citizenship," Carole McGranahan frames the issue clearly: "refusal marks the point of a limit having been reached: we refuse to continue on this way."[11] *I know where the path of intolerance leads, and I am not walking that way*. The silver lining in this story is that the great upheaval and precarity which Puerto Ricans have experienced is itself a "work of national importance." It provides an opportunity, on the margins, to withdraw from available options which have proven to be dysfunctional, and thereby to "redefine or redirect" certain social relations. When writ large, such refusals can go beyond merely "challenging authority" to rescripting or redirecting "rules of engagement."[12]

Puerto Ricans in the mainland United States will play a role, in ways large and small, in reshaping the "American Dream," perhaps making it more hemispheric. The work of rebuilding Puerto Rico itself is harder to imagine in the near future. But this could be an arena in which citizens of the United States and citizens of Latin America jointly invest in helping build a true bridge between North America and *nuestra América*.

ENDNOTES

Prologue

1. Bob Marley, "Three Little Birds," recorded 1977, track 9 on *Exodus*, Tuff Gong/Island, Vinyl LP.

2. Ana Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2015), 2.

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5. Bob Marley, "Time Will Tell," recorded 1977, track 10 on *Kaya*, Tuff Gong, Vinyl LP.

6. Gregory Stephens and Janice Cools, "Reflective Essays in 'Last Days': On Non-Academic Genres and Precarity in Puerto Rico." This is a chapter in *Communicative Cultures in Writing Studies: Ethnographic Approaches, Transferable Skills, & Non-Academic Genres*, as of Spring 2019 being finalized for University Press of Colorado.

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Part I: Teaching Dystopia in the Last Colony

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Part II: Rethinking Resistance in the Puerto Rican Crisis: The Afterlife of Stuart Hall and Cultural Studies

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