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“Borikén Libre”: Spaces of Resistance in Old San Juan, Puerto Rico

Luis R. Alvarez-Hernández

*To the people of Puerto Rico, mi gente.
Our voices and actions generate change.*

I visited Puerto Rico in November of 2019, over four months after the people of Puerto Rico forced ex-governor Ricardo Rosselló to resign. During my visit of historic Old San Juan, I used field notes and photographs to make critical connections between the history of oppression of the island, my positionality and reflexivity as a Puerto Rican in the diaspora, and the importance of space as a representative site of resistance.¹

It is evening, and the sun has gone down. I walk on streets that have been shaped by centuries of history, trod on by generations of Puerto Ricans whose lives, struggles, celebrations, and sorrows have often been eclipsed or forgotten in official records. Historic Old San Juan is a maze of narrow streets—built for a time of riders on horseback rather than in cars—hemmed in by old buildings with their hallmark doors of heavy wood, iron, and, often bright colors. The road is made of *adoquines* (cobblestones) that attest to its age, reminding visitors and residents alike that Old San Juan is an ancient city—already old when the pilgrims finally arrived in Plymouth in 1620. I am not a casual visitor. I am not a tourist who wanders these streets as part of an on-shore excursion from one of the many cruise ships that arrive here. I stand on these streets today as a Puerto Rican floating in the diaspora after leaving to the United States mainland 10 years ago due to the Great Recession of 2007. On the mainland, the recession has become past tense, while here, on the island of my youth, that economic downfall is not yet past tense. I occupied these spaces in Old San Juan for decades as a local. Today, after a decade in the diaspora, I feel more like a visitor—others perceive me in this way too. How I experience these spaces has now changed, contextualized by my own actions of resistance in the diaspora.

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Anyone who went to school in Puerto Rico can recite that in 1493, Spaniards, led by Christopher Columbus, stumbled onto the island of *Borikén* and the *Taíno* people. As with many other Latin American countries, the Spaniards claimed the island in the name of the King and Queen of Spain, the *Corona de Castilla*, and made the island their colony. The Spaniards' colonization brought death to many of the *Taínos* through illnesses and violence. However, the *Taínos* met this oppression through their own acts of resistance.

In 1511, the *Taínos*, led by their leader, *Cacique Agüeybaná*, drowned Spanish soldier Diego Salcedo, confirming that the Spaniards were mortal beings. Once the *Taínos* realized that the soldiers were not god-like, they tried to rebel against their oppressors. Unfortunately, this resistance was too late, and the *Taínos* were unsuccessful in throwing off the yoke of the Spanish colonization. *Borikén* was named Puerto Rico (or rich port) in the 1520s by the Spanish—colonizing the name of the island based on the exploitation of its geographical location for their capitalist benefit. Yet the resistance of *Taínos* lives on, and through the centuries, many other acts of resistance were attempted by the people of Puerto Rico to obtain independence from Spain, including the *Grito de Lares*, or Cry of Lares in 1868. Under the phrase “*Libertad o Muerte*,” “Liberty or Death,” the *Grito de Lares* was one of the most significant attempts to revolt against

Spain's grasp over the island. On September 23, 1868, the movement declared Puerto Rico as independent from Spain—a day later, the Spanish militia ended the revolutionary attempt. These historical broad strokes are commonplace knowledge in Puerto Rico. In the United States mainland, however, this history is largely unknown, even though Puerto Ricans are US citizens.

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Fig. 1. Simplified map of Old San Juan from La Fortaleza to Calle Cruz (Imagery ©2019 Google).

I walk down *Calle de la Fortaleza*, which ends with an old building that oversees the Atlantic Ocean: the fortress that also serves as the governor's residence. This structure, originally built in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century as a defense post, has housed governors since 1544 and is considered a world heritage site. The word *fortaleza* means fortress, though, in a slightly different context, it can also mean strength. *Calle de la Fortaleza* is the name of the road the fortress is on, though it can also be translated as Street of Strength. The fortress has been used by rulers to highlight their status and the power of the state, while down in the street, people have summoned strength to resist being ruled over, both by appointed puppets of the colonial state, and by popularly elected, corrupt politicians. I visited this street many times growing up and I always understood the strength of the fortress. Today, I witness the strength of the people. After the protests of July 2019, the people of Puerto Rico now call *Calle de la Fortaleza*, *Calle de la Resistencia*, the Street of the Resistance—although officially, the street name has not changed.

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In 1898, Puerto Rico became a colony of the United States as a result of the Spanish-American War—the same war that ultimately led to the independence of Cuba in 1902. The United

States attempted to suppress the language, culture, and values of Puerto Ricans, often through the use of imprisonment, torture, and murder of Puerto Ricans and their community leaders.² Attempts were made by Puerto Ricans to resist oppression and violence, including the formation of the Cadets of the Republic and the National Party.³ The acts of resistance by Puerto Ricans against economic, political, and human injustices continue to emerge through the current history of the island.

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Fig. 2. Spray-painted messages by protesters on *Calle de la Fortaleza*. Courtesy of the author.

On *Calle de la Resistencia*, leading to the governor's residence, many phrases against the Puerto Rican government remain spray-painted on the buildings' walls:

Estado de emergencia ya! (State of emergency now!)

Nos matan, nos violan (They kill us, they violate us)

Te llegó la hora Macharán (Time is up, macho man)

¡nos violan! (they violate us!)

Estado Asesino (Assassin state)

Navidad Combativa (Combative Christmas)

\$15 la hora para las trabajadoras (\$15 an hour for the women workers)

¡¡Nos matan!! (They kill us!!)

BORIKEN LIBRE/NOS ROBAN/NOS MATAN/ABAJO LA COLONIA (BORIKEN FREE/THEY ROB US/THEY KILL US/DOWN WITH THE COLONIAL STATUS)

As I read these messages, I am reminded of the economic struggles endured by most people in the island, the violence enacted as feminicides and hate crimes, and the shameless corruption and impunity of politicians. These messages resonate through time and space, and reach the generations of Puerto Ricans that have at some point attempted to survive decades of poverty, abuse, and oppression. At least one sign on a wall that reads “*Calle de la Fortaleza*” has been spray-painted in red over the word “*Fortaleza.*” It is almost as if the people attempted to take the *fortaleza*, the strength, with them by erasing the name of the street. The strength of the government was taken away with red and black paint, reclaimed by the people.



Fig. 3. Spray-painted sign of *Calle de la Fortaleza* by protesters. Courtesy of the author.

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In September of 2017, Hurricane María devastated the island of Puerto Rico, leaving the island without power or running water for months, disconnected from the rest of the world. At the time of Hurricane María’s arrival, the island had been in a financial recession for nearly a decade. In fact, the financial situation of the island has led the Puerto Rican government to declare bankruptcy in the past. Moreover, by 2016, the debt of the government was so astronomical, that the United States Congress imposed a law called the “Puerto Rico Oversight, Management and Economic Stability Act” (*PROMESA*) that establishes an outside fiscal oversight control board to manage the finances of the island (Trigo). Puerto Ricans have declared *PROMESA* another example of the oppressive system that penalizes the people living on the island under their colonial situation. In June of 2020, the Supreme Court of the United States upheld the enforcement of *PROMESA* in Puerto Rico (Liptak).

The catastrophic effects of Hurricane María in 2017 led to the death of nearly 3,000 Puerto Ricans, although the number of deaths remains unclear, and many state that it is higher than 3,000

(Fink). Despite the catastrophic effects of the hurricane, humanitarian aid from the United States was slow to come, disorganized, and nonexistent in most of the island. Due to the Jones Act, or Merchant Marine Act of 1920 (Torruella), Puerto Ricans were unable to seek aid from the international community, unless that aid was mediated through the United States. Hence, the colonial status of the island literally cost the lives of thousands of Puerto Ricans, including the lives of our most vulnerable citizens.

The residents of the island resisted the lack of humanitarian aid by organizing their communities. For example, the mayor of Morovis, my hometown in the mountains of Puerto Rico, which was severely affected by the hurricane, stated: “It was very difficult to find access to the main roads, but there were many citizens that among themselves organized brigades, and with a machete in hand, started to open access to the roads” (El Nuevo Día). Some examples of mutual aid efforts include the emergence of multiple community kitchens and gardens, holistic healing clinics, and multiple art and cultural grassroots projects.⁴ Manifestations against the poor response from the government and their lack of ability to have an accurate death toll also arose. In 2018, for example, Puerto Ricans left hundreds of pair of shoes in front of Puerto Rico’s Capitol in San Juan to show their indignation towards the government due to the number of people who died during Hurricane María (Boboltz). Those shoes represented friends and family members who, unlike me, will not be able to walk the streets of San Juan again. Along with death and struggle, Hurricane María left Puerto Ricans with a strong sense of community, patriotism, solidarity, and empowerment.

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Following the destruction of Hurricane María, beginning on July 13, 2019, the people of Puerto Rico organized a massive protest against the now ex-governor of Puerto Rico, Ricardo “Ricky” Rosselló, after hundreds of pages of chat transcripts showed him making fun of the victims of Hurricane María. The chat transcripts also contained homophobic, sexist, and misogynist statements from the ex-governor and other government officials (Hussain & Gerber). Thousands of Puerto Ricans filled the streets of Old San Juan, demanding the resignation of the governor (Vélez Santiago). Puerto Ricans in the diaspora joined the island in this act of resistance by organizing solidarity manifestations in multiple cities, including Miami, Chicago, Washington DC, and Seattle (Aratani). At the barricade that blocked the access to the governor’s residence, many faced the tear gas and violence of the police (Paul). Finally, less than two weeks later, on July 25, 2019, Ricardo Rosselló resigned to his post as governor of Puerto Rico (Allyn & Neuman).

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I finally arrive at the intersection of *Calle de la Fortaleza* and *Calle del Cristo*, the Street of the Christ, where the barricades were placed by the ex-governor during the protests, and which remained in place for weeks after the demonstrations were over and the governor had declared his resignation. The barricades were originally orange plastic rectangles that could not endure the push back from the protestors who tried to move them. The flimsy plastic was not strong enough to separate the governor, secured away in the fortress, from the angry and determined people in the streets. Soon after, concrete barricades were placed in front of the ones made out of plastic. The barricades were guarded by the police of Puerto Rico. The police, government enforcers of the

separation between the ruler and the ruled, seemed uneasy and afraid at times in news broadcasts: their faces flustered and their posture rigid. After all, their people and families were facing them on the other side of the barricades. Often, people would offer flowers and prayers to the police behind the barricades. The police would accept these gifts. More than peace offerings, the flowers and prayers seemed to be a calling from the people for the police to come to the other side of the barricades and join their island. The graffiti on the walls denounced the violence from the government, not the police. The governor never faced the people in person, *no dió la cara*, did not show his face—the police were the ones at the line of resistance. Today, over four months later, no plastic or concrete barricades are blocking the street; there are no police guarding the new governor.

The space where the barricades used to block the access to the gates of the governor's residence—keeping protesters at bay—is now walked by locals and tourists alike. These visitors take pictures with the oversized Puerto Rican flag that has been placed to hang horizontally along *Calle de la Fortaleza*, from *Calle del Cristo* to the governor's residence gates. It is as if the flag serves the purpose of attempting to connect the people and the new governor. Months later, the physical remnants of the protests are only subtly visible except for some graffiti on the walls. The summer of protests that led to the ousting of Governor Rosselló—the head of the Puerto Rican government—barely registers. Now, the street is decorated for Christmas with festive lights and Christmas trees. Behind the governor's residence's locked gates is a life-sized scene of the three wise men visiting baby Jesus. This portion of the street, guarded before by police that literally and metaphorically divided the government and people of Puerto Rico, is now inviting and festive-looking.



Fig. 4. Governor's residence and its gate decorated for Christmas. Courtesy of the author.

I turn around and walk towards *Calle San José*. On my right is one of many US stores. This specific store had a light-up sign but one of the letters had gone dark. In this same street, four months ago, thousands of Puerto Ricans gathered in unity. Then, they waved Puerto Rican flags while singing patriotic songs. Today, a US store, with an incomplete sign, is juxtaposed to that patriotic image. You can literally buy French fries inside buildings that centuries ago housed Puerto Rican politicians, philosophers, writers, educators, and artists. For many, this juxtaposition of the presence of the United States in the history and spaces of Puerto Rico could be seen as the constant colonial relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States. In this case, a historical part of Puerto Rico that houses buildings considered world heritage sites is adorned by a half-lit capitalist symbol of the United States.

I turn left on *Calle San José*, where, at the intersection with *Calle Rafael Cordero*,⁵ is the *Plaza de Armas*. Over four months ago, on multiple evenings, when the police attempted to disperse the protestors gathered at the barricades on *Calle de la Fortaleza* using tear gas, the protestors would run to *Plaza de Armas*—a square where many sit to relax on a daily basis—to take shelter and continue protesting. Ironically, or perhaps well-suited, *Plaza de Armas* can be translated into “The Square of Weapons,” which means protestors took shelter in a space that explicitly alludes to violence.

Today, at *Plaza de Armas*, some people are taking pictures and videos of a street performer. The performer has white body paint on and is dressed in white. He makes himself part of the Four Seasons Fountain, a fountain from the mid-19th century with four statues representing autumn, winter, spring, and summer. The performer was arrested in the past while performing on the streets of Old San Juan, after attempting to act on the then temporarily fenced fountain. He left the island for some time, and upon his return, he continued to perform on the fountain, now back open to the public. Tonight, his art has prevailed, and he is making himself, once again, part of this historic space. He tells stories about the history of Old San Juan and its spaces. He narrates how the fountain was commissioned using money that the government obtained from a local printing house as punishment for them publishing anti-colonialism articles. The performer concludes his stories with the infamous phrase “*El pueblo que no conoce su historia, corre el riesgo de repetirla*” (“The people who do not know their history, risks repeating it”). One can wonder who is at risk of repeating what version of history. After all, the performer made himself a representation of a fifth season on the fountain. Is this a symbol for transgressing what we have been taught? To rewrite history? To pull out what is underneath the official history cemented as a version of truth in our school books? To add our own stories of pain and strength to the colonial narrative? The collective history of Puerto Rico was simply not meant to be—it was not meant to be written, reinvented, and reclaimed by either the residents of the island or those of us in the diaspora. It could be argued that the performer asks us, beyond learning and not repeating our history, to not forge history in the fringes of our truth.



Fig. 5. Street performer on the Four Seasons Fountain. Courtesy of the author.

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Puerto Ricans have resisted colonial oppression and imperialism since Spain arrived at its shores 526 years ago, continuing to the present-day imperialism of the United States. These actions of resistance have permeated spaces throughout the island, as evident in just a few streets of Old San Juan. These spaces have borne witness to violence and injustice. This collective history of Puerto Ricans, beyond a metaphorical or poetic memory, is physically present and visible for both residents and visitors to experience. As a Puerto Rican living in the United States mainland since 2009, I experience the spaces of resistance on the island like many others living in the diaspora: pride for what we have accomplished as a country and regret for not being part of the resistance while physically inhabiting these spaces.

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After the street performance is over and the performer starts to ceremoniously remove his makeup in front of the lingering audience, I make my way to *Calle de la Cruz*—or Street of the Cross. The cross has been a symbol of faith for many Puerto Ricans, while also serving as a symbol of the religious oppression forced upon the island centuries ago by the Spaniards. The same group of colonizers who killed our *Tainos* (and other Indigenous communities throughout the Americas),

gifted us with a symbol on which we could hope our deaths stopped. In the corner of *Calle de la Cruz*, another US store occupies a significant part of a historic building. Its storefront is purposefully packed with dozens of pieces of luggage. For the tourist, this vast availability of colorful suitcases is an opportunity to get ready to return home, to buy an extra bag to bring home all the souvenirs they have collected on their visit to *La Isla del Encanto*—the Enchanted Island. For many people in Puerto Rico, however, (particularly those leaving after the economic crisis in 2007 and after Hurricane María in 2017) the suitcase is a more bittersweet symbol. It marks sadness and defeat—the necessity of leaving behind our loved ones, leaving behind the familiar streets and landscapes, leaving behind the comforting cadences of Spanish, leaving behind our personal and collective histories—in order to seek out more opportunities in the mainland.

For over a century, now millions of people like myself have filled suitcases with our material belongings and the *bendición*, or blessings, of our elders. We drag these suitcases through the *Luis Muñoz Marín* airport—an airport named after a Puerto Rican governor who utilized a gag law to silence supporters of the independence movement and his political opponents⁶—in the hopes for a better life. Many of us see our lives, work, and efforts in the diaspora as an act of resistance. On the mainland, more than 5 million of us are shaping and reshaping what it means to be Puerto Rican. From afar, we grow our families, obtain degrees, support our loved ones on the island, organize and lead movements, write about our experiences, and even become Supreme Court Justices of the United States.⁷ Meanwhile, today, the other three million residents on the island hang on to their *fortaleza*, their stories, and history. For many, staying is an act of *resistencia* itself.

Endnotes

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² Including, for example, the exile of Ramón Emeterio Betances in the 1800s, and the imprisonment, torture, and death of Pedro Albizu Campos in the 1900s—both leaders of the independence movement of Puerto Rico.

³ For a history of colonial oppression and the different acts of resistance by Puerto Ricans against Spain and the United States, see Nelson A. Denis' (2016) "War Against all Puerto Ricans: Revolution and Terror in America's Colony."

⁴ For more information on mutual aid and grassroots efforts see agitarte.org and <https://www.queerecoproject.org/firefloodfilm>.

⁵ Rafael Cordero (1790-1868) was a Puerto Rican educator of African descent who provided free education to all children right from his home; hence, known as the "Father of Public Education" in Puerto Rico.

⁶ The *Ley de la Mordaza*, or Law 53, was a gag law used to silence, imprison, kill, and violate the rights of Puerto Ricans who were "disloyal" to the United States and wanted the independence of the island. Under this law, even displaying the Puerto Rican flag was considered "disloyal." *Luis Muñoz Marín*, the first governor democratically elected in Puerto Rico in 1948 (previous governors were imposed on the people by the United States), was instrumental in passing and enforcing this law.

⁷ Justice Sonia Sotomayor is the first Latina to join the Supreme Court of the United States. She was appointed by President Obama in 2009. Justice Sotomayor is a Puerto Rican born in The Bronx, New York. For more information about Justice Sotomayor see her book “My Beloved World” (2013).

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