



## Puerto Rico Weathers the Storm: *Autogestión* as a Coalitional Counter-Praxis of Survival

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*This article theorizes autogestión as a coalitional counter-praxis of survival. It provides a case study of Vueltabajo Teatro and the work of other artistic grassroots collectives from western Puerto Rico, before and after hurricane María. In a context wherein climate disaster compounds colonial conditions and state violence, radical Puerto Rican artistic collectives disidentify from the state through decolonial performativity and place-making. Through autogestión, queer and women of color groups like Vueltabajo Teatro join mutual aid centers and initiatives across the archipelago to engage in a feminist decentralization of power as a radical response to rhetorics of dependence marked by colonial overtones.*

In late September of 2017, Puerto Ricans braced themselves for hurricane María. Mainstream media in the United States covered the destruction caused by the “natural” disaster, including how the archipelago was left without electricity or potable water services, a ruptured dam threatened several northwest towns, and approximately 70,000 homes were destroyed while another 250,000 incurred major damage (Guarnieri 2018; Lewin et al. 2017; Segarra and Bubello 2017). It remains unclear how many people died. Whether deaths were due to infrastructural conditions or a lack of basic services, the Puerto Rican and United States governments took months to update the initial death toll from 64 people to an estimate between 2,975 and 4,645.<sup>1</sup> Hurricane María compounded ongoing conditions of coloniality, such as the 100-year-old mercantile laws regulating shipments from countries other than the United States, and bureaucratic processes that prevented aid from leaving Puerto Rican ports. Infrastructural and legal processes converged with an economic crisis that resulted in death, migration, and scarcity.

In response to the hurricane, the United States government demonstrated remarkable disregard towards one of its colonial territories. For instance, it took three days for president Donald Trump to comment publicly on the devastation.<sup>2</sup> When he did, he simply defended his administration’s inability to provide aid because Puerto Rico is “surrounded by water, big water, ocean water” (qtd. in Shugerman 2017). When Trump arrived to survey the situation, he tossed paper towels at a small gathering of people, presumably as a performance of giving aid. Responding to criticism that he presented his administration’s response as a success compared to hurricane Katrina, Trump attacked the mayor of San Juan, Carmen Yulín Cruz, and “others in Puerto Rico” who “want everything to be done for them” (qtd. in Cillizza 2017). Despite Trump’s rhetorical constructions of Puerto Rico as a territory outside of the United States and his colonial tropes of Puerto Ricans as lazy and dependent, people across the archipelago and in the U.S. diaspora responded to the needs of fellow Puerto Ricans through *autogestión*.



In this article, I define *autogestión* as a coalitional counter-praxis of survival. The concept can be loosely translated in English as “self-management,” but that translation obfuscates the complex ways in which the term is used. The prefix *auto*—meaning “self”—suggests one cannot rely on anyone or anything else, whereas *gestión*—meaning “management, administration, or process”—does not necessarily indicate to what end. The concept of *auto/self* suggests an individualistic approach, yet in connection with *gestión*, it becomes open to and often calls for collective action. Given that *gestión* suggests action or process, I describe *autogestión* as a counter-praxis of survival in relation to conditions of crisis. Considering the root of the word *gestión* as *gestar* would also suggest to prepare oneself, or to collectively develop ideas, feelings, as Mariolga Reyes Cruz (2018) proposes gestating different kinds of sovereignties. *Gestión* also suggests a kind of action, as Gustavo A. García López (2017) and others elaborate environmental justice *autogestión* as a counter-hegemonic praxis. To develop a theory of *autogestión* as a coalitional counter-praxis of survival, I focus on the work of queer and women of color artistic grassroots collectives in Puerto Rico in the wake of hurricane María.

Through *autogestión*, grassroots collectives like Vueltabajo Teatro—a transdisciplinary theater group from Mayagüez, a major city in western Puerto Rico—create spaces of healing and communal support that the state has not provided. In the aftermath of hurricane María, with communication channels down, people who lived close to downtown areas of major cities relied on sporadic access to social media to tell the world they had survived. People also issued calls to support grassroots initiatives in supplying basic services like food, water, and electricity. Serving as a channel of communication between local organizers and Puerto Ricans in the diaspora, and as I describe further below, Vueltabajo used its access to the internet and material spaces to collect donations and serve as a hub for building community and ensuring survival.

Significantly, members of Vueltabajo do this work while eschewing heteronormative expectations by queering gender-binary Spanish language conventions in their self-descriptions. Two men and one woman form the collective’s core, yet they always use female pronouns to describe their work. They host feminist events, such as Viva la Reyerta Feminista (Hoorah for the Feminist Affray) held in 2018 and Boricuir (Puerto Rican-queer) events, such as the conference ¿Del Otro La’o?: Perspectivas Sobre Sexualidades Queer (From The Other Side: Perspectives on Queer Sexualities) in collaboration with the University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez (Powers and Géliga Vargas 2018). Grassroots collectives supplying spaces of healing and communal support represent a radical alternative that is *counter to*, and *independent from*, state approaches. Thus, in language and action, they manifest queer and women of color coalitional counter-praxis.

I theorize *autogestión* in the work of the Vueltabajo collective as a coalitional counter-praxis of survival against state violence, specifically colonial governance leading to a disinvestment in the land, labor, and people affected by dependence and debt. I argue that while hurricane María made visible what many Puerto Ricans already knew—that the P.R. and U.S. governments disinvest from the people while extracting resources from this population and their land—*autogestión* provides a radical response to both political and natural disasters. To illustrate *autogestión*’s potential, I start by contextualizing Puerto Rico’s colonial conditions as they have evolved in relation to U.S. empire and capitalism. I then explain the operation of colonial governance by focusing on state violence caused by complex racialization processes and forced austerity at the local and federal levels. In each section, I detail how groups like



Vueltabajo use *autogestión* to respond to these conditions. In addition to academic and journalistic writing, I rely on auto-ethnography, social media research, and interviews with Vueltabajo members to show how and why *autogestión* counters colonial dependence through a feminist decentralization of power.

In undertaking this analysis, I join queer, transnational, and decolonial feminists of color who write about the survival of people under the effects of imperialism, neoliberal economies, and colonial practices of white supremacist heteropatriarchy. José Esteban Muñoz's theories (1999) are fitting in describing Vueltabajo's *autogestión* because of his conception of disidentification as a strategy of survival particularly embedded in performance. He defines counterpublics as "communities in relational chains of resistance that contest the dominant public sphere" (2000, 92). In this case, Vueltabajo is an artistic collective that disidentifies from the state because it must imagine and enact alternative relations and strategies of resistance to counter governmental (mis)management. The concept of decolonial performativity is also apt for describing *autogestión* in the Vueltabajo collective. As Arturo Aldama et al. suggest, decolonial performativity are "effective means of individual and collective liberation...[because they] generate a pause in the activity of coloniality" (2012, 3). Vueltabajo resists by engaging in sustainable practices of survival, such as providing their artistic spaces for communal aid, especially in light of climate chaos. It should be evident that Puerto Ricans are one of many groups that can attest to the urgency of alternative place-making to deal with the effects of climate change.<sup>3</sup> Calling for theories of change, Eve Tuck reminds us that the "building of place-worlds is collective, creative, and generative. In building place-worlds, place-making is also a revisionary act, a re-memory act, in which multiple pasts co-mingle and compete for resonance toward multiple futures" (2018, 163). To extend these theories, I offer *autogestión* as a coalitional counter-praxis that can establish alternative relations through disidentification, decolonial performativity, and place-making.

### Capitalist and Climate Disasters Compound Colonial Oppressions

That there are still characterizations of Puerto Rico as "foreign in a domestic sense" highlights the connections among colonial relations, racialization of Puerto Ricans, and capitalist exploitation since 1898, when the United States acquired the territory from Spain (Villanueva 2015, 66; Whiteside 2019, 152). Over 120 years of U.S. occupation, capitalist and climate disasters have compounded coloniality, resulting in detrimental effects for Puerto Ricans. Tragically, the last hurricane to hit Puerto Rico as hard as hurricane María was San Ciriaco, which occurred in 1899, a year after U.S. occupation (Centeno Añeses 2019). The massive damage to the agricultural economy provided a clean slate for U.S. sugar companies to set up monopolies throughout the archipelago in classic colonial style. Cynthia Enloe frames the U.S. territorial acquisitions in the early 1900s as "strategically valuable for its plantation crops," (2000, 124), which mobilized a sugar industry that exploited Puerto Ricans' labor and land. It is worth noting how a natural disaster helped to construct U.S. interventions as beneficial to Puerto Ricans while providing the basis for colonial rule.

The geopolitical location of Puerto Rico has previously figured in feminist works, often focusing on the United States, that criticize imperialism and the overdevelopment of white, heteropatriarchal, capitalist nation-states. For example, Sunaina Maira (2008) underscores



Puerto Rico's role in the U.S. brand of empire. She writes: "The United States has a long history, since its wars in Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines in 1898, of 'imperialism without colonies' or of 'informal empire'" (320). Lisa Kahaleole Hall (2008) also refers to Puerto Rico in tracing U.S. strategies of erasure in the imperial conquest of Hawai'i. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty highlight how

the US state manages a set of advanced capitalist relations at the same time that it mediates colonial relations both within its borders (Native peoples and communities of color in the US) as well as outside (in Puerto Rico, Hawai'i, and the Pacific) where these operations are masked by an ideology of statehood and commonwealth status. (2012, 500)

Puerto Rico features in feminist analyses of U.S. imperialism because scholars critique the nation-state's construction of itself as a global capitalist superpower, which ignores colonial relations that provide racial capital at the expense of the colonized peoples under its purview.

During the twentieth century, a series of political shifts shaped the neoliberal coloniality that governs Puerto Rico. For example, Alyosha Goldstein (2016, para.1) writes that the United States "successfully lobbied the United Nations General Assembly to have the archipelago removed from the UN's list of non-self-governing territories in 1953" based on the victory of the first elected governor of Puerto Rican descent, establishing a supposedly "free associated state" status. With the promotion of a cultural nationalism premised on this self-governing status and racialized Puerto Rican-ness based on the *mestizaje* of three races (i.e., Indigenous, Spanish, African)—ultimately, whitening the figure of the *jíbaro* or Puerto Rican peasant—the political association brought a series of tax incentives for U.S. corporations and military industries, primarily encapsulated in Section 936 of the Internal Revenue Code. Enloe points to how the establishment of garment factories in Puerto Rico "fell under the US customs protection and thus provided the best of all worlds: a Third World labor force inside the American trade sphere" (2000, 154).

When president Bill Clinton's administration issued a phaseout of Section 936, local government administrators in Puerto Rico found themselves without "the primary source for external investments" and "very little influence on the federal government's decision to terminate the tax legislation," which caused the loss of up to 270,000 jobs (Cabán 2018, 167). After the 2006 market crash, the tendency of Puerto Rican governors to sell state bonds eventually led to a \$74 billion debt by 2016 (ibid). In response to the deficit, president Barack Obama signed the Puerto Rican Oversight, Management and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA, which means "promise" in Spanish). Although the federally-mandated board was supposed to restructure the Puerto Rican government's economic management, it has resulted in austerity measures. This context illustrates empty promises within colonial governance, where there is an assumption of political independence that places the burden of survival on Puerto Ricans while the United States continues to extract resources through the bureaucratic trade and labor loopholes afforded by neoliberal capitalism.

Today, hurricane María exacerbates the presence of a colonial control board charged with "restructuring" Puerto Rico's debt for Wall Street hedge funds. Yet the economic complexity of insurmountable debt cannot be separated from longstanding colonial relations. For instance, the Jones Act of 1917 provided U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans in exchange for soliciting their bodies for military service. Moreover, an amendment to the Jones Act, the Merchant Marine Act of 1920, still regulates the ability of non-U.S. ships to set up port in



Puerto Rico, which has contributed to the economic crisis, costing upwards of \$300 million for food and beverage imports alone (Díaz 2019). After hurricane María, these policies restricted aid from countries not affiliated with the United States and blocked Puerto Ricans' access to life-saving resources (Rodríguez-Díaz 2018). Outdated policies from the early 1900s that are *still in place* affect Puerto Rico's free trade abilities (Chuck 2017) and the people's capacity to recover from climate catastrophes. Attending to how climate catastrophes are compounded by capitalist and colonial oppressions highlights that there is no such thing as an *exclusively* natural disaster, and that political conditions significantly affect the potential for survival.

### Empty PROMESAs Prompt Radical (Re)actions

Questions about Puerto Rico's political status and consequent social injustices are pressing issues to address, as U.S. federal courts continue to impose austerity measures impacting Puerto Ricans. The most recent ruling regarding COFINA—Corporación del Fondo de Interés Apremiante (the Puerto Rico Urgent Interest Fund Corporation—created in 2006 as “a public corporation whose sole purpose was to issue bonds to refinance the so-called extra-constitutional debt” (Dennis and Connor 2018), indicates that it is the responsibility of the Puerto Rican people to come up with \$18 billion to pay off debt over the next 40 years (Scurria 2019). In line with neoliberal practices, this payment will not come from the governing *criollo* elite class. Although *criollo* can be translated as “creole,” in this context it refers to the historically racialized and classed category of those inheriting whiteness and marginal power from colonial powers. This class will not shoulder the burden of repaying the debt; instead, payments will come from cuts to pensions and public education, privatization of basic services, or selling public land and water to multinational companies and tourism development. As Abner Dennis and Kevin Connor write, “Hedge Funds Win, Puerto Ricans Lose” (2019). This situation is colonial because the federal ruling does not answer calls for a Puerto Rican citizen-led audit of the debt (AuditoríaYa 2019). It also cannot account for the audacity of Julia Keleher, the U.S. white woman appointed Secretary of Education in Puerto Rico who wanted to pay herself a salary of half a million dollars but settled for \$250,000 (Cordero Mercado 2019). Keleher's expertise and priorities lie not with serving students or teachers in public schools but in reducing state responsibility for education provision and its associated costs, and maximizing profits for private companies, both of which are implicated in the economic crisis. Closing schools and exploiting the labor of Puerto Rican teachers and school administrators have been at the forefront of Keleher's efforts since 2016 (Bonilla, Brusi, and Bannan 2018).

Throughout these shifts in sovereignty and economic conditions, Puerto Rican people have resisted and responded to political and climate catastrophes. It is worth mentioning that anarchist, communist, nationalist, socialist, and pro-independence groups have advocated for different expressions of sovereignty as solutions to the colonial problem over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Now groups of women protesting PROMESA, such as the Jornada Se Acabaron Las Promesas (Promises Are Over Campaign), join diverse efforts to demonstrate dissent against the oppression of Puerto Ricans by P.R. and U.S. governments. Grassroots initiatives create opportunities for Puerto Ricans to help each other regardless of what the state's political climate makes room for. In these spaces of resistance, *autogestión* is made most explicit.

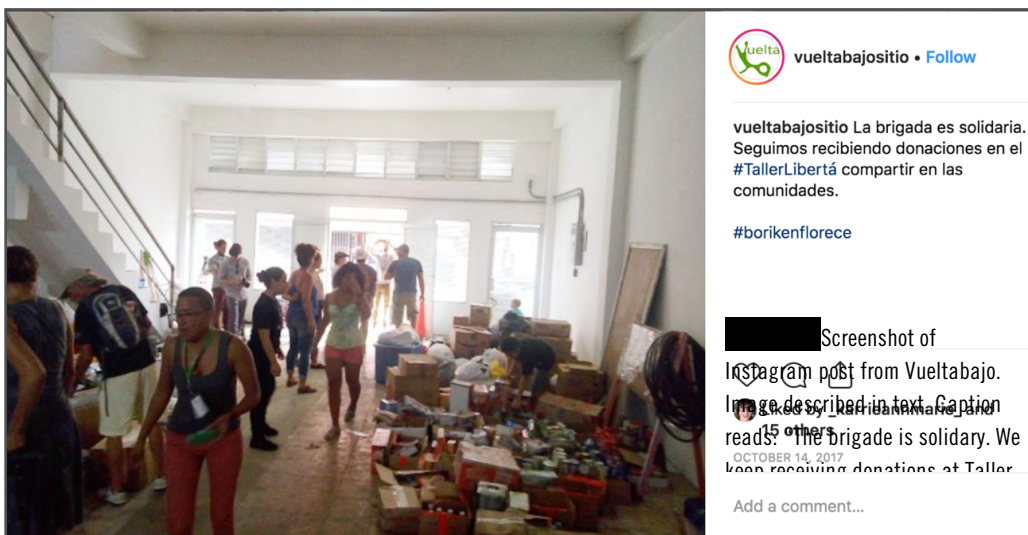




### *Autogestión* in Vueltabajo: A Coalitional Counter-Praxis of Survival

By not counting on state promises, the Vueltabajo collective has taken charge of its situation in spite of the consequences of capital disinvestment. *Autogestión* as a coalitional counter-praxis of survival, via disidentification from the state, works because “it negotiates strategies of resistance within the flux of discourse and power” (Muñoz 1999, 19). Practicing *autogestión*, Vueltabajo created alternative forms of aid and communicative opportunities for Puerto Ricans across diasporas to reach each other after catastrophic events. In hurricane María’s aftermath, the collective shared fliers on social media announcing events to “celebrar la vida y tomar acción para levantar a Borikén,” or celebrate life and take action to uplift Borikén (Vueltabajo, September 30, 2017). References to Borikén gesture toward indigenous Taíno peoples’ name for Puerto Rico and signify an affirmation of resilience in a colonial context. Significantly, using the term also disidentifies from the current state: the institutionalized colonial government that the name “Puerto Rico” embodies. To disavow the name “Puerto Rico” by using Borikén is to disavow the state and emphasize relying on each other, rather than the government.

Other discursive interventions include the name for Vueltabajo’s artistic space, Taller Libertá, which plays with the wording in Spanish for “Freedom Workshop” by omitting the “d” and adding an accent at the end of *libertad*, indicating a Boricuanized freedom. That freedom manifested as people forming a tower of donated goods for residents of western Puerto Rico. In many cases, donations came from Puerto Ricans in different diasporas. Although supplies from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) eventually made it to western towns, they were insufficient. For instance, FEMA delivered 2,000 meals for the 60,000 people needing them per week after hurricane María (CBS 2017). The meals were inconsistent and unhealthy (Dewey 2017). Demonstrating *autogestión* as a coalitional counter-praxis of survival, Vueltabajo and other grassroots groups called on the help of Puerto Ricans, inside and outside of the archipelago, to work towards locals’ survival by organizing donation drives. Repurposing Taller Libertá to collect donations and using social media to communicate immediate needs are place-making practices that constitute Puerto Rico as a nation on the move, which includes those who have left (Duany 2003; see fig.1).



**Figure 1:** Screenshot of Instagram post from Vueltabajo. Image described in text. Caption reads: “The brigade is solidary. We keep receiving donations at Taller Libertá [to] share in the communities. #borikenblooms” (Vueltabajo Teatro @Vueltabajosito, October 14, 2017).



The creation of alternative processes for giving and receiving aid and cross-diasporic communicative opportunities are significant because Vueltabajo is located in western Puerto Rico, not in San Juan, where political and economic power, and therefore most resources are centralized. Unfortunately, contemporary scholarship on Puerto Rico typically conceptualizes all of it as urban (Whiteside 2019) or focuses on the metropolitan center of San Juan (Villanueva et al. 2018). While not devaluing the importance of studying how asset stripping propels the *criollo* bloc in San Juan (Villanueva et al. 2018), it is also vital to examine how the concentration of wealth has left many parts of Puerto Rico without an equal amount of aid and attention, both in practice and in theory.

To be sure, scholars have previously theorized *autogestión* in Puerto Rican rural settings, especially in relation to environmental sustainability. López et al. analyze Casa Pueblo's *autogestión* efforts as performing a counter-hegemonic sense of the commons:

counter-hegemony is performed through everyday practices that rearticulate existing common senses about commons. Commoning is a set of processes/relations enacted to challenge capitalist hegemony and build more just/sustainable societies insofar as it transforms and rearranges common senses in/through praxis. (2017, 88)

Casa Pueblo started in the 1980s as an activist response to government efforts to mine territories in the mountainous towns of Adjuntas, Utuado, Lares, and Jayuya, which are some of the towns most affected by hurricane María. Casa Pueblo was founded as an independent community cultural center to create solar energy, hydroponic gardens, and a self-sustainability ethos that yields a more independent yet communal common sense, rearticulating democracy in direct challenge to colonial governance. Through *autogestión*, groups like Casa Pueblo “engender liberatory spaces that deconstruct old regimes of the nation-state,” avoiding the continuance of the “process of uneven development [of] earlier colonial and neocolonial social formations” (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 9). Casa Pueblo and Vueltabajo's peripheral locations call attention to radical forms of decentralized resistance to state disinvestment *and* resource extraction.

In the case of Vueltabajo's counter-praxis, the collective directs its energies toward initiatives that foster spaces of togetherness and events where coalitions can emerge. Vueltabajo's *autogestión* is a coalitional counter-praxis that aligns with Adela C. Licona's description of critical consciousness in third-space zines as an engagement of “understanding, action, and expressed radical and participatory democracies” (2012, 3). On Vueltabajo Teatro's (n.d.) website, it is described as a collective that aims to inhabit and activate a space for investigation and artistic formation, focusing on theater as the medium. Vueltabajo members' artistic productions are connected to their activism; they see art as a way to build community, with a keen attention to space. For Eury G. Orsini and the other co-founders, *autogestión* is a way to “generar espacios de arte” or generate art spaces because other formal (read: funded) sources do not provide support for emerging artists whose art does not fit normative conventions (pers. comm., April 30, 2018). A trip to the Museum of Art in Ponce illustrates the kind of art sponsored by the state, comprised of many European pieces and minimal inclusion of Puerto Rican artists. By contrast, Vueltabajo creates “redes” or webs with other artistic groups to make their art available to the general public in Mayagüez and surrounding areas. The collective does not want its work to fall under a broader umbrella or organization. Instead,

it unites with groups that share similar visions about creating critical-conscious art and enacting participatory democracies.

Engaging in coalitional artistic activism, Vueltabajo enacts critical consciousness via decolonial performatives “*designed [as] interventionist actions*” (Aldama et al. 2012, 6, emphasis in original), fulfilling “the requisite [of] the human need ‘to be seen and heard’” (5). Notably, Vueltabajo has joined other artistic groups to call out exploitation and violence by P.R. and U.S. governments. In Isla Cancelada, or Canceled Island, a 2018 exhibit put together with another artistic collective, Bemba PR, Vueltabajo artists depicted vultures representing hedge funds reaping the economic benefits of the illegal debt deals that Puerto Rican governors relied upon. The vultures hovered over an aerial view commonly seen in San Juan after hurricane María, particularly the rows of houses with blue tarps for rooftops. A second installation at the exhibit showcased video reproductions of press conferences by Puerto Rico’s governor, Ricardo Roselló, juxtaposed with news reports of his administration’s mishandling of the emergency. A third installation depicted an effigy of Donald Trump with his face resembling an anus, his body surrounded by spray-painted twitter birds, with paper napkins strewn all over the floor (see fig. 2 & 3).



**Figures 2 & 3:** Images taken by the author on December 15, 2018, in Santurce, Puerto Rico.

Given Trump’s response to hurricane María, Isla Cancelada’s political commentary illustrates the expression, and effects, of colonial oppression and state neglect. Several scenes in the exhibit made direct reference to the results of oppression and mismanagement on Puerto





Rico's present and future. One was the depiction of a classroom with empty chairs, lit by candles, and solitary arms with no bodies, which conjured students wanting to hold on to lost classmates due to death or migration in the midst of ongoing disinvestment in public education.

The exhibit makes a powerful statement about Puerto Ricans' vexed presence in the United States. *Autogestión* takes precedence in a moment of mass migration incited by the political, economic, and environmental crises outlined above. If "the exodus" of Puerto Ricans post-María "imperils the island's economic recovery" (Cabán 2018, 162), collectives like Vueltabajo become increasingly vital because they create spaces that promote the well-being of the people who stay. Staying, according to social media campaigns like #YoNoMeQuito, or #IDon'tGiveUp, is cast as a duty and a political choice. In a conversation with Vueltabajo's co-founders, Raúl Reyes Arias remarked that people leaving Puerto Rico was not only a visible phenomenon of loss but also an emptiness felt in daily life (pers. comm., April 30, 2018). Because Taller Libertá is near the Mayagüez plaza, they noticed how businesses and cultural spaces that were once bustling became abandoned and public spaces dwindled. Vueltabajo's enactment of communal resilience manifested post-María when sites, undamaged by the storm, facilitated *autogestión* by creating "comedores" where people could eat and by transforming artistic spaces into sites where donations could be collected. The places in downtown Mayagüez that stayed open enabled people to help each other by "creando lazos de apoyo" or creating bonds of support (pers. comm., April 30, 2018). Through place-making, people came together to survive climate catastrophe and colonial disinvestment. Place-making is therefore a significant component of *autogestión* as a coalitional counter-praxis of survival.

### Countering State Violence through *Autogestión*

As the previous section demonstrates, within a neoliberal colonial context of disinvestment, *autogestión* entails disidentifying from the state through participatory democracy, coalitional artistic activism committed to decolonial performatives, and communal acts of place-making. As a coalitional counter-praxis, *autogestión* also serves a critical role in oppositional responses to state killing. In this section, I detail how state killing operates in Puerto Rico through state reliance on austerity and criminalization measures that create lethal conditions for its population, and how *autogestión* diminishes the damage done by the state at both the local and federal levels. First, U.S. officials racialize Puerto Ricans as colonial subjects unable to govern themselves. Second, Puerto Rican racialization and government approaches that appease the United States result in violence against its own peoples. As delineated above, Puerto Rico's precarious condition of coloniality was compounded by the hurricane, turning a "natural" disaster into a political storm. Due to the connections between state killing and colonial governance in managing climate chaos, I argue that *autogestión* is most vital, and most needed, as a coalitional counter-praxis of survival.

Federal disregard and austerity measures have limited the protections of Puerto Ricans from deadly natural and political circumstances. Referring back to U.S. government responses post-María makes clear how the colonial history I have described continues to influence state responses. As Rosa E. Ficek writes in reference to questions about colonial difference and Puerto Rican identity, during the hurricane María disaster, "federal state actors repeatedly invoked old stereotypes of Puerto Ricans as undeserving and unable to govern themselves while



allowing thousands to die” (2018, 103). Ignoring, or being oblivious to the death count of Puerto Ricans, FEMA administrators shifted their justification from an inability to provide aid based on infrastructural difficulties to a complete halt in aid because people were not going to supermarkets to buy the supposedly accessible water (110). Relatedly, a Congressional stalemate has delayed the passage of an aid package meant to address climate disaster victims like those affected by massive floods in the U.S. Midwest because Republicans and Democrats cannot agree on how much of the money should go to Puerto Rico.

In a series of tweets where Trump justified not extending aid to Puerto Rico, he pitted Midwestern states and a group of U.S. American citizens (white farmers) against Puerto Rico and minoritized citizens (Puerto Ricans). “So much money wasted,” Trump wrote, “Cannot continue to hurt our Farmers and States with these massive payments, and so little appreciation!” (qtd. in Jones 2019). This tweet references different groups who have suffered diverse effects of natural disasters, yet the capitalization of “Farmers” and “States” signals their privileging over the people and place of Puerto Rico. Rhetorical constructions of Puerto Ricans as undeserving and ungrateful serve a white supremacist agenda that prioritizes some peoples’ survival over others. The president and FEMA thus continue to place the responsibility to survive on Puerto Ricans.

The lack of resources to address health crises after the hurricane reveals deteriorating infrastructures, federal inadequacy and, significantly, the strength of *autogestión*. Limited access to clean water, for instance, “led predictably, to outbreaks of infectious disease” (Rodríguez-Díaz 2018, 31). By providing clean water to people in western Puerto Rico, Vueltabajo in conjunction with the Brigada Solidaria del Oeste (Solidary Brigade of the West) offered a vital resource to combat lethal public health problems, such as leptospirosis, to which at least 26 deaths were attributed (Sosa Pascual and Sutter 2018). Vueltabajo, Brigada Solidaria del Oeste, and other mutual aid groups disidentified from the state and relied on each other to offer means for Puerto Rican survival. In Muñoz’ words, “disidentification is about cultural, material, and psychic survival. It is a response to state and global power apparatuses that employ systems of racial, sexual, and national subjugation” (1999, 161). Instead of waiting for the state, mutual aid groups galvanized the Puerto Rican diaspora to acquire the material resources needed to survive.

Besides supporting the physical survival of fellow Puerto Ricans, Vueltabajo focused on mental health and well-being. Many of the collective’s initiatives serve therapeutic purposes, which were important due to mental health crises and suicides after hurricane María (Howard 2018; Varney 2018). Borikén Florece (Borikén Blooms) was an initiative in which Vueltabajo members united with other grassroots groups to entertain the community and lift people’s spirits (pers. comm., April 30, 2018). As mentioned previously, Borikén is the indigenous name for the big island of Puerto Rico, making Borikén Florece a fitting name for a project about resilience and life. Vueltabajo joined musicians from the local *bomba Boricua* musical community to take over the Mayagüez plaza to play and dance *bomba*, a historically Afro-Puerto Rican genre. I should note that my references to indigeneity and blackness here may reinscribe the myth of *la gran familia puertorriqueña*, the great Puerto Rican family, which portrays Puerto Ricans as the result of *mestizaje* or the blend of three races. The Puerto Rican cultural and symbolic celebration of indigeneity and blackness can relegate subjects who embody these racialized scripts to a distant past or geography, particularly in state-sponsored events (Godreau 2002). However, Vueltabajo’s references to these racialized cultural practices



intend to bring people together and recall the histories of struggle throughout intergenerational colonialism.

Grassroots groups making references to Taíno linguistic heritage and Afro-Boricua music attempt a unifying approach that departs from the protectionist rhetoric and actions employed by some Puerto Ricans in response to the potential rise in crime post-María. For example, in a dominant narrative about gated communities in San Juan suburbs, which are commonly raced and classed as white, people would keep watch and beep their car alarms to alert the community about potential crimes if they saw anything strange. This tactic resembles the “see something, say something” racial profiling common in the contiguous United States. As Ficek writes, “the disaster reinforced the racial difference of Puerto Rico in relation to the United States, [but] it also reinforced differences of race and class within Puerto Rico. These differences shape vulnerability, access to resources, and the nature of labor that had to be carried out to live” (2018, 112). In other words, *la gran familia* is estranged through class and racialized difference wherein some privileged families look out only for their own communities’ well-being. Vueltabajo’s enactment of racialized cultural practices works to counter potentially white supremacist and isolationist approaches towards survival, and instead emphasizes coalitional approaches to *autogestión*.

In addition to promoting communal togetherness instead of isolation and fear, dancing *bomba* in the Mayagüez plaza reclaimed spaces patrolled by the U.S. military. As Zuleira Soto Román explains, Borikén Florece endeavored to change the landscape from military intervention and inadequate aid to community-oriented place-making that generated what people need from each other, including in terms of emotional support (pers. comm., April 30, 2018). Even when the military dropped aid, “uniformed men” enacted federal disregard. Videos shared on social media showed how the military “hastily tossed out some boxes without getting out of the helicopters and immediately flew away” (Ficek 2018, 110). Men in uniform also recall the violent history of police brutality deployed to stifle dissent in higher education (Lebrón 2015). In another example of what José Atilés-Osoria calls “colonial state terror” (2016), after hurricane María, police tear-gassed and arrested people demonstrating dissent against both the U.S. and P.R. states, from the May Day 2018 protests over austerity measures imposed on workers (Mazzei 2018) to the Colectiva Feminista en Construcción’s manifestations against femicides in Puerto Rico (Berrios 2018; Caro González 2018). In place of colonial state terror, *autogestión* as a coalitional counter-praxis of survival fosters communal healing to oppose violence.

Countering divisive and oppressive state maneuvers, Vueltabajo members engage in decolonial performativity “as an affirmative process of reversing, releasing, and altering an established coloniality of power” (Aldama et al. 2012, 5). Besides hosting feminist and queer events in Taller Libertá, as mentioned in my introduction, Vueltabajo’s community initiatives, like *el circo de la plaza* (the plaza circus) and *colorea las calles* (paint the streets), create spaces of cultural celebration to improve people’s lives in the face of political and natural disasters. In the seemingly innocuous act of offering free entertainment, Vueltabajo created *el circo de la plaza*, where local artists take over the Mayagüez plaza. Entertaining kids with clowns, mimes, puppets, and painting, the artists use public space to assert the vitality of bringing people together in public affirmations of communal well-being.

Repurposing public space, thereby engaging in place-making, is a way for Vueltabajo to make livable spaces. Moreover, abandoned sites can become spaces where crimes occur. Unlike



“mano dura” or “tough on crime” policies by the Roselló administrations (Lebrón 2018), through the *colorea las calles* initiative Vueltabajo members paint areas surrounding the byways to downtown residential zones, which have been abandoned by residents and underfunded municipal management agencies. Beautifying and repurposing spaces is a way to deter crime and has been part of a general effort to reclaim public spaces for community building and countering top-down punitive tactics. *Autogestión* as a coalitional counter-praxis of survival is thus not solely for individual protection but for communal vitality.

### *Autogestión* and Feminist Decentralization of Power

In this article, I have highlighted how grassroots collectives made ideals of *autogestión* come alive in the (re)construction of Puerto Rico. Tracing the lethal effects of a natural disaster compounded by legacies of coloniality, I explained how neoliberal capitalism and colonialism result in state killing. To counter such moribund practices, grassroots collectives including artist-activist groups like Vueltabajo Teatro turn to *autogestión*. In this context, *autogestión* counters colonial dependence and dominance through a feminist decentralization of power.

Vueltabajo provides a radical blueprint in response to Roberto Vélez-Vélez and Jacqueline Villarubia-Mendoza’s question about how we can “transform the expectations of a people away from assistance [and shift] toward *autogestión*” (2018, 546). They write about the work of Centros de Apoyo Mutuo, or Mutual Aid Centers, which proliferated throughout Puerto Rico after hurricane María. For people working in the centers, Vélez-Vélez and Villarubia-Mendoza note, “La meta es apoyar, crear alianzas, no centralizar,” the goal is to support, create alliances, not centralize (546). Similarly, Vueltabajo’s goal is to create alliances, rather than centralize power, and create communal, not capitalist, bonds of support. Interestingly, in addition to *autogestión*, Vueltabajo’s Instagram hashtag to describe its work is *#descentralizarlasartes*. In its goal to decentralize the arts, it invokes *autogestión* as vital for grassroots artistic efforts that go against the normative frameworks of Puerto Rican elite art institutions. Similarly, art education is one of the initiatives of the Centro de Apoyo Mutuo in the rural barrio of Bucarabones, Las Marías. *Autogestión* is thereby premised on decentralizing power through art, education, and performance.

As feminists, we can find inspiration and opportunities to engage in *autogestión*, but it is also our responsibility to amplify the work that is already being done. Decentralizing power is most urgent in the context of coloniality and mismanagement delineated in this article. Precisely because of the inadequacy of the state to supply basic services, ideals of *autogestión* must be critically and consciously connected to coalitional communal living and to creating spaces where this radical counter-praxis of survival can flourish.

### Notes

1. The Centro de Periodismo Investigativo (CPI), or Investigative Journalism Center in Puerto Rico (2019) received a Philip Meyer Award in 2019 for its work investigating and compiling testimonies regarding the number of deaths that were not officially counted in the initial governmental record of those directly caused by hurricane María.



In consultation with CPI and the University of Puerto Rico's Science of Medicine School, a Harvard study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* reported well over 4,645 deaths (Kishore et al. 2019), but the Puerto Rican government requested another estimate from George Washington University, which indicated the number was closer to 2,975 (Univisión 2018).

2. Like Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2017) I prefer to not capitalize positions like president or governor. Throughout the rest of the text I translate Spanish phrases but only translate names when I consider them rhetorically significant for the development of my argument here. In a way, I am inspired by Gloria Anzaldúa and women of color feminists who incorporate Spanish words in tandem with English, but I also want to maintain some authenticity of my Boricua Spanglish language practices.
3. Besides hurricane María, the fall/winter of 2017 witnessed the catastrophic effects of climate change in the United States with devastating hurricanes that impacted Houston, TX, and the Caribbean Antilles, as well as California wildfires. Notable also is the earthquake that occurred in Mexico at the same time as hurricane María.

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