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The choice to love is a choice to connect, to find ourselves in the other



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Colonial Debts: The Case of Puerto Rico, **by Rocío Zambrana**

During the summer of 2021, I had a conversation with my mother about the importance of maintaining a good credit score. My mother, who instilled in me the centrality of fiscal responsibility when I was an adolescent, highlighted the ways in which one's capacity to move in the world depended on this number. Or to put it differently, one's credit score conditions the temporal schema one is bound to. A suboptimal credit score is to inhabit a fractured time, which means to face the specter of death. In a context such as Puerto Rico, special attention must be paid to the relationship between colonialism and colonality, credit and debt. In *Colonial Debts: The Case of Puerto Rico*, philosopher Rocío Zambrana does exactly that. She offers a poignant analysis of the archipelago's material conditions through a decolonial framework to explore the political-economic, social, and ontological effects of the supposition exposed in the conversation with my mother, namely, that one's ability to live out one's life depends on one's credit score. As Zambrana puts it early on in the text, "Debt functions as a form of colonality [...] It actualizes, adapts, reinscribes race/gender/class posited by the history of colonial violence that produced the modern capitalist world" (2021a, Location 301, 312).

Zambrana, in my estimation one of the most important Puerto Rican philosophers writing today, explores the ways in which debt functions in the colony with erudition, nuance, and conciseness. Foremost, I must state that as an independent scholar living in Puerto Rico where access to texts published by North American presses is at times challenging due to a lack of availability in local bookstores and their unbearably long delivery times via postal service, in addition to a lack of access to research funds of any sort, to have this text made available as an open-access ebook thanks to *Toward an Open Monograph Ecosystem (TOME)* is sincerely appreciated. *Colonial Debts* is a timely contribution to Puerto Rican philosophical and political thought in which Zambrana delves into a sustained reflection in an attempt "to understand the operation of colonality in the colony, centering the political economy that guides their relation in the present" (2021a, Location 323). To be sure, this statement is not a redundancy but rather highlights the reality that Puerto Rico is a space in which colonialism, in a traditional sense, is operational

alongside an acute neoliberal capitalism and what has come to be known as coloniality. In fact, the crux of Zambrana's argument is precisely that coloniality reinvigorates colonialism. Or, in her words, "In the case of Puerto Rico, the afterlife of the colonial world posits the colonial condition, the territorial status, anew. It does so by actualizing the work of race/gender/class evident in the unequal distribution of precariousness, dispossession, and violence in the territory" (2021a, Location 315). Debt, Zambrana tells us, is a technology by which this occurs.

The book is then divided in four chapters. Chapter 1, titled "Neoliberal Coloniality", engages the work of Ariadna Godreau-Aubert, specifically her book *Las propias: apuntes para una pedagogía de las endeudadas* (2018), to reflect on the ways in which "To be in debt is to inhabit a space and time of capture, dispossession, expulsion, exploitation" (2021a, Location 512). In other words, Zambrana delves into a reflection on the ways in which indebtedness constitutes a process of differential subjectivation across race/gender/class lines. The author does this by putting the work of Maurizio Lazzarato in conversation with Godreau-Aubert's, telling us that "Indebtedness, however, is a form of abject subjectivity. The 'indebted man' is a *failed* neoliberal subject, a failed enterprise. He is bound to the fate of capital through his failures" (2021a, Location 536). In addition, Zambrana elaborates Lazzarato's Deleuzian transformation of Foucault's notion of neoliberal governmentality to highlight the ways in which "Debt intensifies core features of the neoliberal project by reterritorializing value creation and the capture of value in apparatuses of power that can be deemed as 'destructive', specifically, the technocratic state's deployment of taxation and austerity along with its modes of subjectivation" (2021b, 24). Zambrana then transforms Lazzarato's account of neoliberal governmentality, which considers the debt economy constitutive of neoliberal capitalism, through an engagement with Verónica Gago and Luci Cavallero's *Una lectura feminista de la deuda* (2019). Gago and Cavallero's work allows Zambrana to highlight the ways in which indebtedness differentially "lands in diverse territories, economies, bodies, and conflicts", to quote Godreau-Aubert (in Zambrana 2021b, 24). Zambrana then moves to an elaboration of Aníbal Quijano's "coloniality of power" and Nelson Maldonado-Torres's "metaphysical catastrophe" to posit

that "the work of debt as an apparatus that actualizes, updates, reinstalls a race/gender/class hierarchy" (2021b, 24). The crux of this chapter is to suggest the ways in which indebtedness produces and reproduces an "abject subjectivity, the failed neoliberal and colonial subject" that "works as an injunction to pay by marking racialized/gendered populations as disposable" (2021b, 24). Finally, the chapter closes with a sustained reflection on Godreau-Aubert's text to map "at least two modalities of gender violence subtended by antiblack violence. The deepening of the racial feminization of poverty and an increase of femicide in the indebted colony", Zambrana tells us, "are exemplary of the necropolitical effects of neoliberal coloniality" (2021b, 24). In other words, Chapter 1 consists of a profound philosophical reflection on the ways in which indebtedness produces an abject subject grounded in the material conditions of those living in the colony, which is to say, that the process of abject subjectivation is differential across race/gender/class lines.

Chapter 2, "Colonial Exceptionality", offers a wonderful reflection which posits that the specter of death in the colony produced by indebtedness and its modes of subjectivation is atmospheric, moving away from an understanding of exceptionality which overemphasizes the role of the sovereign in matters of thanato-politics. In other words, as Zambrana puts it, "the site of colonial exceptionality" is "a state of emergency that is not the exception but the rule" (2021b, 55). This point is crucial, it seems to me, for understanding life in Puerto Rico today. Zambrana does this first by critically engaging the work of José Atilés-Osoria and his conception of "colonial state of exception". Atilés-Osoria's overemphasis on sovereignty obfuscates the operation of coloniality embedded within the Puerto Rican social fabric and subjectivities, and whose effectivity "exceeds a decision by the colonial juridico-political apparatus even if such decision installs its strictures" (2021a, Location 1498). As such, by centering the material conditions and the "effects of the liminal logic of exceptionality" (2021a, Location 1375) as Zambrana urges us to, it becomes clear then that the question of decolonization exceeds matters of jurisprudence, however important they may be, because the task at hand requires fracturing the underlying logics of coloniality at work (which Zambrana rightly points out). Zambrana's position on the deployment of Giorgio Agamben's

conception of the state of exception to reflect on Puerto Rico resonates more with Charles Venator-Santiago's work, who "stresses the production of liminal juridical spaces that create conditions for economic capture" (2021b, 55). Zambrana also engages the work of Miriam Muñiz-Varela and Anayra Santory Jorge to explicate the normalization of spectacular violence in the "no-place of indebted life in the colony" (2021b, 55). Of course, the vectors of violence produced within the colony impacts its inhabitants differentially across race/gender/class lines, and Zambrana's reflection on the production of a racialized masculinity which becomes coterminous with criminality and narco-culture is appreciated. However, the fundamental point which must be properly understood is the fact that "For the oppressed, the state of emergency is the ordinary, the everyday. The no-place of indebted life in the colony is a space-time structured by the destruction of life within the very reproduction of life" (2021a, Location1998). This must be the point of departure for any serious reflection on Puerto Rico's present-day material conditions.

The following chapter, "Historical Reckoning", draws on Marx to explore the ways in which debt itself harbors the very seeds of its own disarticulation. Or, as Zambrana put it, she explores "the logic of reckoning generated within debt itself given its asymmetry and deferral" (2021b, 85). She first does this through an engagement with David Graeber's position that asymmetry and hierarchy are constitutive to debt's operationality. Next, Zambrana moves into a discussion of two critiques of debt that highlights "logics of restitution or reckoning generated by debt itself" (2021b, 85). Finally, she returns to the work of Godreau-Aubert to posit the way in which financial debts can be transformed into historical or colonial debts. In other words, the position of the creditor and the debtor are flipped as financial debts are transformed into historical debts. Zambrana then moves into a discussion of two political interventions by Puerto Rican militants la Colectiva Feminista en Construcción: the 2019 Feminist Embargo and the 2017 campaign against ex-mayor Hector O'Neill. In short, one could think of this chapter as a deep, sustained, nuanced meditation on la Colectiva Feminista en Construcción's assertion, referring to the dictatorial Fiscal Control Board, the local, imperial, and international bourgeois

elite, and US empire, that "nos deben a nosotras" (quoted in Zambrana 2020), a move which may have inspired Zambrana's thoughts on debt as a site of potential subversive interruption.

The final chapter, "Subversive Interruption", consists of a reflection on the "political power of *failure*" (2021b, 111). Zambrana does this by mobilizing the concept of *pasarse políticamente*, to politically "cross the line", proposed by Guillermo Rebollo-Gil, which specifies "failed protest as the power of refusal as well as subversion of norms through which coloniality operates" (2021b, 111). For Zambrana, productivity is crucial to a work ethic and cisheteronormativity which at once links race and gender "in light of the specific economic/political/historical juncture" (2021b, 112). In other words, productivity could be understood as key for a process of subjectivation which in turn renders coloniality operational. For Zambrana, however, and following the reflection in chapter 3, not only is productivity a site for the installation of coloniality but also the site which can render it inoperative. She says,

Protests *que se pasan*, that cross the line, index the violence of such system of social labor, but they also have the potential to capture modalities of hypervisibility. They have the potential to sidestep or invert the power the latter deploy. (2021b, 112)

Zambrana then moves to a reflection on the concept of *echarpalantismo*, coined by Miguel Rodríguez-Casellas, and which she translates as "forward-facing resilience". *Echarpalantismo* denotes a neoliberal work ethic which was mobilized, emphasized, and promoted most saliently in the aftermath of Hurricane María. Zambrana then continues her reflection through an engagement with the work of Mabel Rodríguez-Centeno who extends Rodríguez-Casellas's critique to elaborate what she calls *vagancia queer*, or queer laziness. For Zambrana, what Rodríguez-Centeno does by extending a critique *echarpalantismo* as queer laziness is that she "clarifies the strictures for interrupting productivity" (2021b, 112). Finally, Zambrana ends with a meditation on the summer protests of 2019 in Puerto Rico which led to the resignation of then-governor Ricardo Rosselló. Specifically, she reflects on a precise moment during the protests, referred to as "el perreo intenso", which was

a queer appropriation of perreo which occurred on the steps of San Juan's Cathedral. As Zambrana points out, even amidst the celebration of the creativity of the protests, el perreo on the steps of the cathedral was too much for some. However, "it indexed the history of colonial violence inscribed in the very steps of the cathedral" (2021b, 112).

In the closing of the book, Zambrana offers a brief reflection on the relationship between the subversive interruption possible within the very operation of indebtedness and the question of reparations. By inverting the relations of power constitutive to the operation of financial debt through its transformation into historical debts, thus overturning the creditor/debtor relation, Zambrana sees there "a material praxis that seizes the power to bind" (2021b, 144). This renders inert the operation of private property and the processes of accumulation constitutive of racial capitalism. For Zambrana, this "material praxis can be seen as a form of reparation, shifting the latter from a juridical model to an exercise of power from within disempowerment" (2021b, 144). If the shift from financial debts to historical debts allows for the production of a historical reckoning, it follows then that this provides the space to take what is owed, "subverting or rejecting the public/private distinction that subtends private property" (2021b, 144). Zambrana moves through the work of Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Frantz Fanon, Liliana Cotto-Morales, Érika Fontáñez-Torres, Miriam Muñoz-Varela, and Marina Moscoso to reflect on the longstanding practice in Puerto Rico of land rescues as "modes of addressing the necropolitical operation of neoliberal coloniality" (2021b, 145). The book closes with a wonderful reflection on pessimism in the context of the colony/coloniality. Rather than an understanding of pessimism as existential nihilism, Zambrana draws on Walter Benjamin to discuss the notion of "organizing pessimism", which for Zambrana requires us "to labor from the concrete conditions that compose actuality" (2021b, 165). One could interpret this reflection as a suggestion to abandon an archeo-teleological understanding of social and political change whereby, to draw on Benjamin as well, one thinks one is swimming with the tide, while abandoning utopic visions of political action. However, the crucial point is that rather than allow this realization to produce a sense of anguish or despair, we should allow ourselves to be guided by a radical hope, something la Colectiva Feminista en Construcción reminds us with frequency.

It seems to me that Zambrana has gifted us one of the most thorough philosophical meditations on the material conditions of contemporary Puerto Rico, providing an account of the ways in which debt serves as a technology to reinvigorate the colonial condition through the operation of coloniality. In addition, she explores the processes of subjectivation at play that function to reject our humanity differentially along lines of class/gender/race. Zambrana's nuanced reflection reminds us that oppression produced by coloniality is not monolithic and the work to fracture it, to "turn the present into the past", requires us to "attend to the lives that live modalities of this violence today" (2021b, 141). *Colonial Debts* is one of the few texts that I have come across that draws on Marxist literature and puts it in conversation with decolonial thought, offering a much-needed text to think through our present condition. There is no doubt in my mind that Zambrana's text will become a classic of Puerto Rican studies, decolonial theory, and the broad corpus of Caribbean anti-colonial thought.

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