

**The Commonwealth Exception-  
Puerto Rican Displacement and Marginalization  
Within and Outside the United States**

**By Sarah Zarate**

***Introduction***

Puerto Rico, Spanish for “rich port,” was named by its Spanish colonizers over 500 years ago. Along with its namesake came the reputation of “la isla del encanto,” or the island of enchantment. But for whom has this island turned out to be “rich” and “enchanting?” A common portrayal of this narrative can be seen in a PBS special on Puerto Rico that provides an aerial perspective of the island, showing its beautiful beaches, Spanish colonial architecture, alluring rainforest, enticing food dishes and abundant nightlife. But what would one see and learn if rather than showing the usual tourist attractions, the camera instead captured the average life of a Puerto Rican household?

The lived reality for a large majority of Puerto Ricans, either on the island or in the continental United States, is starkly different from the romantic view portrayed on PBS specials and postcards; it is a reality plagued by violence taking many forms—physical, political, legal, social and economic. Yet everyday our Puerto Rican communities walk past the violence in the streets, the violence in our homes and the violence on television without really seeing it, without critically analyzing its prolonged existence. Puerto Rico’s political and social systems are engineered so that individuals must adapt to the violence, so that blame is placed on the community itself for failing to “progress,” and so that we blame ourselves, communally, for not changing. In fact, the political and social systems are engineered to depoliticize our colonial past and our colonial present by creating a linear history that claims Puerto Rican sovereignty, and in so doing, silencing the Puerto Rican population so that questions about the community’s curious

systemic marginalization never arise. Instead of anger and protest materializing on the streets, one generally only hears arguments on behalf of complacency. In Puerto Rico, we are told we “have it great,” particularly in relation to Cuba and the Dominican Republic. In the United States we are told “we have it so much better than the Mexicans.”

This silencing of the past and present is something that plagues the Puerto Rican community as a whole and is the psychological manifestation of a decentralized system of power (including political, economic, legal, and social infrastructures) administered by the American government, upheld by American popular discourse and maintained by Puerto Ricans themselves. The decentralized system works to marginalize (culturally, legally, politically, socially and economically), demoralize and contain the population. The combination of an overwhelming communal sense among Puerto Ricans that we “don’t have it so bad” with a fear of what the island and the people would be outside of the American shadow, effectively subdues the community and silences resistance to systemic marginalization.

Critical to the marginalization and silencing is the systemic form in which Puerto Ricans live as the exception to the United States. This is true both in spatial terms, as Puerto Rico materially, or geographically, exists detached from the United States, and also in Puerto Rico’s inclusive-exclusive status, which has implications for the country’s politics and economics that directly affect the persons native to the political entity.<sup>i</sup> The inclusive-exclusive status of Puerto Rican persons is of particular interest to me as a Puerto Rican woman, for its effects take multiple forms depending on an individual’s location, whether one finds oneself in Puerto Rico or in the continental United States. Moreover, this exceptional status has explicit and implicit implications for the lived experience of average Puerto Ricans.

Explicitly, persons born in Puerto Rico are legal citizens of the United States. However, Puerto Ricans living on the island are legally excluded from political forms of participation within the United States (such as being unable to vote in U.S. elections or have voting representatives in the U.S. Congress or Senate), as well as from certain social and economic benefits bestowed on Americans.<sup>ii</sup> Similarly, those Puerto Rican persons immigrating to or living in the United States live as internal immigrants—they find themselves somewhere between mainstream Americans and actual immigrants from other sovereign nation states in Latin America.

The multiplicity of Puerto Rican displacement also has implicit implications. It creates a particular negative discourse around Puerto Ricans, one that is perpetuated by Puerto Ricans themselves and which is reproduced in everyday behaviors. Because the majority of Puerto Ricans find themselves in a position of social weakness, located geographically and socioeconomically in marginalized spaces, I believe we consequently and subconsciously internalize that marginalization. That is to say, the material and spatial marginalization is often internalized in a way that conditions our psychological potentiality to the extent that it normalizes the lived actuality, thus constricting hope for change while perpetuating a cyclical acquiescence to marginalization.<sup>iii</sup> This element of psychological marginalization is overlooked or not adequately accounted for in studies analyzing Puerto Rican poverty. Likewise, many Americans, particularly agents of the bureaucratic or administrative social systems, relate to the Puerto Rican community's socioeconomic status as being natural, cultural and consciously maintained.<sup>iv</sup> The interactions that follow have real effects, not necessarily in creating Puerto Rican victims, but in creating particular negative discourses that multiple parties (Puerto Ricans v. Puerto Ricans and Puerto Ricans v. other Americans) respond to and abide by even if they do

not realize it. It is this mutual reproduction of an uncritical linear history and negative stereotypes that simultaneously normalizes the Puerto Rican population's marginalization and silences the population. As such, it works to produce a form of social control.

***Theoretical Context***

My analysis of Puerto Rican displacement and marginalization is based on Judith Butler and Ignacio Martin-Baro's respective theoretical frameworks. In *Frames of War*, Butler describes the importance and the power of framing, arguing that the framing of an issue is critical because framing produces the norms that allow for the "recognizability" of something existing or not existing, which ultimately lead to the recognition or non-recognition of a subject.<sup>v</sup> Similarly, Martin-Baro urges for a social critical consciousness in Latin America that goes beyond positivist and individualistic frameworks.<sup>vi</sup> For when one's attention is narrowly focused on the individual and only on those situations that exist materially, one ignores the social structures that make up the world individuals live in, are active members of and react to.

While my aim is not to discredit or silence a discussion on individual responsibility, I use these theoretical frameworks to call attention to structural/systemic forms of governance that informally work to condition and control a population. I seek to shift the predominant viewpoint, particularly held among Puerto Ricans, that normalizes the Puerto Rican population's marginalization. By re-focusing the debate from Puerto Rican individuals to a meta-frame that incorporates the general Puerto Rican population—both living on the island and in the continental United States—I seek to elucidate how decentralized forms of power, both those controlled by the United States and those created through discourse, work to keep a group subjugated, dispersed, demoralized, defeated and contained. In the end, I am advocating for a broader critical discussion on the Puerto Rican experience; a space that not only goes beyond the

community's internal blame, but that also goes beyond the external institutional and mainstream criticism that focuses on the supposed shortcomings of Puerto Ricans rather than examining how and why the American system is, and has been, failing fellow American citizens—the Puerto Rican community as a whole.

### ***Restructuring the Frame: Dispersed Forms of Power***

In *Discipline and Punishment*, Michel Foucault begins by describing the public spectacles of torture performed on prisoners by the state (political bodies). Over time, he explains, the state's overt public display of power—like that seen in public executions—gave way to a more discrete and dispersed power application. By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, “Death was reduced to a visible, but instantaneous event. Contact between the law, or those who carry it out, and the body of the criminal, [was] reduced to a split second.”<sup>vii</sup> While states (political bodies) generally no longer publicly display brutal domination over individual's bodies in the manner described by Foucault, the concentration of power and its subjection of bodies remain.<sup>viii</sup> The difference is that the state's dominance is so dispersed into micro-powers that go beyond physical, political expression (into every facet of one's social existence, including the social, political, economic, legal, ideological and epistemic branches of power) that it can appear, paradoxically, that the state's physical dominion over the individual no longer exists. As such, an individual's death, or a community's demise, is more easily blamed on those actors themselves, rather than making connections to the overarching power system and those who control it.

When the United States acquired Puerto Rico as one of the spoils of its war with Spain, one could point to overt displays of dominion on the island. As various revolts against the newest occupier occurred sporadically around the island, the United States fiercely exerted its military power. Indeed, the largest massacre in Puerto Rican history, occurring in the city of Ponce in

1937, was carried out by police on an unarmed group of people protesting the illegitimate incarceration by the American government of the Nationalist leader Pedro Albizu Campos. While the insular police fired upon the group, it was an American appointed governor who gave the orders.

Puerto Rico's political environment today is drastically different from that of 1937. Aside from seeing American flags waving side-by-side with those of Puerto Rico, one would hardly notice American authority and sovereignty over the people. Over the last hundred years, the American government has seamlessly transformed an explicitly colonial system of dominion into a political, social and economic system that appears solely governed by Puerto Ricans, and as such, wholly sovereign to the average Puerto Rican. In place of a colonial administrative system, the American government created an insular government with an elected Governor (after 1948) and two legislative chambers, and ratified Puerto Rico's status vis-à-vis the U.S. as being defined as a "Commonwealth." Yet the U.S. also maintained overarching political and economic power over interstate trade, foreign relations and commerce, customs administration, control of air, land and sea, immigration and emigration, nationality and citizenship, currency, maritime laws, military service, military bases, army, navy and air force, declaration of war, constitutionality of laws, jurisdictions and legal procedures, treaties, radio and television communications, agriculture, mining and minerals, highways, postal system, social security and all other American federal related issues affecting the island.<sup>ix</sup> By doing so, the American government created a system where all problems and grievances about the island's sociopolitical and economic standing are directed at the insular government. The system is engineered very effectively to disperse signs of American dominion. However, while the American government has nominally removed itself from overt exercises of power in Puerto Rico so that average Puerto Ricans

cannot directly relate their material experience to American influence, the American government does indeed still possess and maintain its strategic position vis-à-vis Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans—a power that is “not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition...it invests them [i.e. Puerto Ricans], is transmitted by them and through them,” and thus, through dispersed means of power, “it exerts pressure upon them.”<sup>x</sup>

### *Social-Spatial Containment*

The general Puerto Rican population lives in a constant state of geographic and systemic displacement that is caused by its existing in the political, social and economic periphery of the United States. Named the commuter nation, Puerto Rico is known for sending its inhabitants back and forth to the mainland United States. Situated in the Caribbean, Puerto Rico is considered neither truly Latin American nor fully American. In the United States, Americans generally group Puerto Ricans with other “Hispanics,” and are unaware of the island’s commonwealth status or that Puerto Ricans are American citizens. For the same reasons—commonwealth status and American citizenship—Puerto Rico is never quite considered by ‘Hispanics’ to be part of Latin America. Puerto Rican’s are essentially left in a state of limbo with a fractured political identity, belonging to both groups and at the same time to neither.<sup>xi</sup>

In *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning*, David Theo Goldberg describes the social, political and economic consequences of controlling groups spatially<sup>xii</sup>. Spatial dislocation and displacement, he contends, can be achieved by both physical and imagined boundaries.<sup>xiii</sup> When groups are spatially marginalized by race, the negative characteristics and disorders generally attributed to poverty may appear natural or culturally inherent to those racial groups, when in fact they are the causes of the marginalization itself.

Generally, Americans perceive Puerto Ricans as being lazy, as proven by the high percentages of Puerto Ricans on welfare and other social programs, and prone to criminal activity, as demonstrated by the high crime rates in areas where they reside.<sup>xiv</sup> Indeed, these stereotypes are widely held among Puerto Ricans themselves. However, when looked at from Goldberg's theoretical perspective of spatial dislocation and how space is formed by formal political, legal, social and economic structures, there is a curious trend. In both locations, the mainland United States and on the island of Puerto Rico, Puerto Ricans are generally confined to areas stricken by poverty, crime, and social disorder. For those who live on the island, they live in the geographic periphery of the continental United States—a space characterized by poverty. Likewise, the majority of those who live in the United States are similarly pushed to urban peripheries, and thus marginalized.<sup>xv</sup> With poverty so ubiquitous in spaces where Puerto Ricans are found, individual responsibility cannot be solely to blame.

But Puerto Rican marginalization goes beyond the physical space inhabited by Puerto Ricans. As Goldberg points out, “the notion of *periphractic* space is relational,” and not only confined to physical geographic space.<sup>xvi</sup> Marginalization also entails the “circumscription in terms of location and [people's] limitation in terms of access—to power, to (the realization of) rights, and to goods and services.”<sup>xvii</sup> As described earlier, Puerto Ricans live in a political state characterized by an inclusive-exclusive political status and systemic displacement. While the United States maintains the island is sovereign and not a colony—a contention sanctioned by the international community as Puerto Rico is excluded from the United Nations' list of Non-Self Governing Territories<sup>xviii</sup>—Puerto Rico's commonwealth status affords them no Congressional or Senatorial representation, no ability to elect their own presidents or even vote for an American president if they reside on the island. Yet although they are formally excluded from the



American political process (if they reside on the island), they are at the mercy of the American government, its policies and legal structure. Puerto Ricans, for instance, fight in American wars and are vulnerable to any American compulsory military drafts. Moreover, the American President and the U.S. Congress have absolute veto power over any policy passed by the Puerto Rican Governor if they deem it undesirable.

In addition to their exceptional political status, Puerto Rican communities are plagued by the social and economic marginalization that belies their formal status as a “commonwealth” of the United States. In their writings about South Africa, Heidi Grunebaum and Yazir Henri speak about the political economy of privilege that underlies political rhetoric.<sup>xix</sup> Although, for instance, South Africa witnessed the formal political disintegration of the apartheid system, the social and economic structures post apartheid have remained implicitly based on “race,” and as such, on unspoken inequality. Similarly, Puerto Rico’s political “commonwealth” status and Puerto Rican American citizenship are referenced as indicators of the equal opportunity Puerto Ricans have vis-à-vis Americans, and indeed as indicators of the disintegration of American colonialism on the island. Yet nearly 45% of Puerto Ricans live below the poverty level in Puerto Rico, compared to only 15% of Americans in the United States; the 2010 GDP per capita in Puerto Rico was \$16,300 compared to \$47,400 in the United States; the unemployment rate is hovering over 16% in Puerto Rico, while in the United States it is 8.5%.<sup>xx</sup> These economic disparities are not unique to Puerto Ricans on the island. When compared to white Americans, “Puerto Ricans with the same level of education as whites make significantly lower wages.”<sup>xxi</sup> It may be the case that these statistics are merely coincidental, but the reality is that the United States controls Puerto Rico’s interstate trade, foreign relations and commerce and currency.

***Recovery of History, Identity and Space***

In *Silencing the Past*, Michel Trouillot deconstructs the assumption that history is linear and cumulative. Trouillot argues that if one makes such assumptions, then he/she who has the power to produce history has the ability to create a linear collective memory that legitimizes certain acts or ideals while others are perceived as illegitimate and thus silenced.<sup>xxii</sup> In Puerto Rico, one is hard pressed to find conversations about American colonialism among the average citizen, particularly outside of academic circles or those of political elites. Indeed, one is more likely to hear conversations labeling nationalists, or “*independistas*,” as troublemakers jeopardizing Puerto Rico’s good standing with the United States. I believe this silence is directly correlated to the narrative constructed over time by the United States government, which purports to exclude itself from Puerto Rican affairs while simultaneously maintaining indirect systems of control that not only marginalize the population (socially, politically, legally and economically), but also promote fear of what they would be outside of American tutelage.<sup>xxiii</sup>

While one does not see American warships in every harbor, American power is indeed diffused, underlying a façade of Puerto Rican sovereignty. Through my own experience as a Puerto Rican woman living between the island of Puerto Rico and the continental United States, I argue that the average Puerto Rican is disconnected and dissociated from the endemic abuses of administered systems of power that work to oppress the community. Rather than recognizing how the labyrinth of social, political, legal and economic systems administered by the United States work to maintain the status quo of acquiescence and silence, average Puerto Ricans blame themselves as the problem. This denial of recognizing the systemic trends of the community’s persistent marginalization, I believe, is the consequence of psychological low-intensity warfare,<sup>xxiv</sup> resulting from the physical and systemic marginalization of an entire population over

a long period of time; a marginalization that works to construct a linear history positing American colonialism is a thing of the past, that Puerto Ricans have sovereignty over their own affairs, and (by upholding an individualistic and positivist framework) that Puerto Ricans are responsible for their own persistent state of marginalization. Moreover, the cultural, geographic and socioeconomic dislocation is so entrenched in our everyday material experience that we, as Puerto Ricans, subsequently internalize the marginalization in a manner that reproduces the behavior dictated by the discourses that surrounds us.

Although individual responsibility must be accounted for in individual acts, one must also step back and question if other factors are at play when certain behaviors appear characteristic of an entire community and displacement is endemic to the spaces (including physical, socioeconomic and political) they inhabit. A critical analysis that goes beyond positivist and individualistic frameworks is required by multiple parties—primarily by Puerto Ricans themselves, but also by agents of bureaucratic and administrative systems—whose mutual adherence to a particular discourse helps reproduce and perpetuate the normalization of a population's marginalization. Moreover, maintaining a status quo that displaces a whole community should be considered unacceptable in an American political context. If we, as American citizens, purport to value political freedom and political and socioeconomic equality, we should demand systemic changes that fully integrate minority groups into the greater American society—complacency with the idealistic political rhetoric of freedom and equality that dominates popular discourse should be eschewed when the material reality of particular communities contradict the ideal. As Puerto Ricans, we should critically analyze not only where we are located socially, politically and economically, but also the historical processes that communally keep us displaced. Together, Americans and Puerto Ricans must generate the

courage to call for a broader discussion on the multiplicity and complexity of Puerto Rican exceptionalism and marginalization relative to other Americans. American failure in this respect calls into question the basic premise of democratic equality. Puerto Rican failure, on the other hand, will result in the reproduction of our marginalization, materially and internally, and any chance for social transformation will remain silenced.

### End Notes

<sup>i</sup> Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer, Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998. Print.

Chapt 1 and 3. Using inclusive-exclusive paradox. At the moment of definitional exclusion, that which is being excluded is simultaneously being included by the defining power. The act of exclusion sets terms of inclusion.

<sup>ii</sup> The majority of federal programs and funding are intended for U.S. states. Since Puerto Rico is a U.S. territory, not a state, different funding formulas may apply to Puerto Rico. One major example is seen in Medicaid funding for Puerto Rico, which is significantly lower than what states receive. [http://www.doi.gov/oia/Firstpginfo/igiaPDF/14.Medicaid\\_in\\_the\\_Territories-HHS.pdf](http://www.doi.gov/oia/Firstpginfo/igiaPDF/14.Medicaid_in_the_Territories-HHS.pdf), [http://obama.3cdn.net/a4d25897d9b8a6f03c\\_8rainvfo5.pdf](http://obama.3cdn.net/a4d25897d9b8a6f03c_8rainvfo5.pdf), <http://pierluisi.house.gov/english/columns/2010/06.24.2011%20news%20making%20the%20most%20of%20federal%20funding%20opportunities.html>. Retrieved March 9, 2012.

<sup>iii</sup> Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer, Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998. Print.

Chapt 1 and 3. Using idea of potentiality and actuality.

<sup>iv</sup> Lamont, Michèle and Mario Small. "Cultural Diversity and Poverty Eradication." 2007.

<http://www.wjh.harvard.edu/~mlamont/papers/UNESCO.pdf>. Lamont and Small analyze common misconceptions related to the relationship between culture and poverty. They criticize the argument that the former causes the latter. Retrieved March 9, 2012.

<sup>v</sup> Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When is life Grievable?* London: Verso, 2009. Print.

<sup>vi</sup> Martin-Baro, Ignacio. *Writings for a Liberation Psychology*. Cambridge, Mass. And London: Harvard University Press, 1996. Print.

<sup>vii</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punishment*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Penguin Books, 1977. Print.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid. Using Foucault's idea of "political economy" and subjection of the body as well as "micro-powers" of the state.

<sup>ix</sup> [www.topuertorico.org/government](http://www.topuertorico.org/government). Retrieved March 9, 2012.

<sup>x</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punishment*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Penguin Books, 1977. Print.

<sup>xi</sup> Baker, Susan S. *Understanding Mainland Puerto Rican Poverty*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002. Print.

For further information on the "foreign" qualities of Puerto Ricans vs. Americans (both African American and White American) and Puerto Ricans vs. other Hispanic groups in the U.S.

<sup>xii</sup> Goldberg, David Theo. *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning*. London: Blackwell, 1993. Chapter 8. Print.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiv</sup> Baker, Susan S. *Understanding Mainland Puerto Rican Poverty*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002. Print.

56 Figure 4-1, 68 Table 4-6. Baker's statistics show the disproportionate poverty among Puerto Ricans relative to other major Hispanic groups in the U.S. Also, the following articles speak of the increasing crimes rates in Puerto Rico.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/21/us/21crime.html?pagewanted=all>. Retrieved March 9, 2012. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/11/16/puerto-rico-homicide-record\\_n\\_1097261.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/11/16/puerto-rico-homicide-record_n_1097261.html). Retrieved March 9, 2012.

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid. 112-115. Baker provides statistics of Puerto Rican segregation from both Blacks and Whites in the U.S.

<sup>xvi</sup> Goldberg, David Theo. *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning*. London: Blackwell, 1993. Chapter 8. Print. Chapter 8.

<sup>xvii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xviii</sup> <http://www.un.org/en/decolonization/nonselvgovterritories.shtml>. Retrieved March 9, 2012.

<sup>xix</sup> Grunebaum, Heidi and Yazir Henri. "Where the Mountain Meets its Shadow: A Conversation of Memory and Identity and Fragmented Belonging in Present-day South Africa" in Bo Strath and Ron Robins (eds.), *Homelands: The Politics of Space and the Poetics of Power*. Brussels: Peter Lang, 2003. pp 267-283.

<sup>xx</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistic found at [topuertorico.org](http://topuertorico.org)

<sup>xxi</sup> Baker, Susan S. *Understanding Mainland Puerto Rican Poverty*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002. Print.

Baker provides 1990 statistics comparing Puerto Rican mean wages to those of White Americans with same education level.

<sup>xxii</sup> Trioullot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995. Print. Ch 1.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Fisher, John R . "Attention: Vieques". *Sea Power*, 44(3), 7. (2001, March). Retrieved March 9, 2012, from Research Library. (Document ID: 69717315). This is one example of how Puerto Rico is threatened economically by the U.S. In his article, Fisher describes his letter to Governor Calderon that explains the economic consequences of Puerto Rico requesting the Navy/Army's removal from Vieques Island.

<sup>xxiv</sup> *Zapatista!* Big Noise Films 1998: A Zapatista used "psychological low-intensity warfare" to describe the psychological effects of marginalizing a group as means of containment.

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