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A Puerto Rico without Puerto Ricans

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Russe: A Puerto Rico without Puerto Ricans

A Puerto Rico without Puerto Ricans

Adriana Albizu Russe

Layout by Laura Sassi Verzegnassi. Photo by Caleb Oquendo from Pexels: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/scenic-view-of-mountains-during-daytime-3009986/>.

It's a typical Sunday morning in the Albizu-Russe household. The smell of coffee reaches my bedroom, along with the sound of loud laughter and conversation, waking me up, announcing that my *abuelo* is home from *misa* once again. In my family, it is routine every Sunday, after church, for my *abuelo* to stop at each of his five children's houses with *pan y leche* in hand. At the kitchen table sit my dad and my paternal grandma, while my mother, the fourth of his progeny, prepares coffee for everyone. These early-morning conversations are not ones I am necessarily part of, as I usually just come out from my bedroom dragging my half-asleep body, give my *abuelo* a kiss on the cheek, steal a piece of bread, and sneak away but still hear the loud conversations unfold. Despite the fact that the Sunday conversations start off simple, involving things such as complaining about the potholes on the roads, the continuous blackouts on the island, or even new drama going around town about someone's uncle, they always lead to a heated or opinionated debate about politics and Puerto Rico's status.

The conversation surrounding the status of Puerto Rico is one that has always followed me, constantly hovering over me like a black cloud that suddenly appears on a sunny day that the weather app forgot to mention, present in the "Check Your Ethnicity" box when filling out a form at the doctor's office, in the Puerto Rican history books I had to read throughout my school years, and in the uncomfortable questions I frequently get from my mainland peers at Syracuse University such as "Is Puerto Rico a country?" and "So...what part of Mexico is Puerto Rico in again?" along with comments referring to me as an international student. It is a topic I know all too well, one that, as much as I may try to tune it out, still finds its way to me. It falls upon my shoulders, hangs around my identity, and is engraved in my name (literally), leading to experiences from being called "Adriana Albizu Campos" as a joke by my high school history teacher to driving by certain neighborhoods in my small town of Morovis like Sector Los Russe and being automatically recognized around town by old people I don't know when I tell them my name. My two last names

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are rich in history, and both date back to my ancestors, dead and alive: Pedro Albizu Campos, known as the leader and face of the Puerto Rican Independence movement, and my maternal grandfather, Ramon Russe González, the old pro-statehood mayor of my town (and the guy with the *pan y leche* on Sundays).

The colonial status of Puerto Rico is a topic that exhausts many Puerto Ricans who have felt its consequences. Growing up learning about my own island's current status, I vividly remember the three-letter acronym repeated over and over again in my history classes that defines Puerto Rico's official status: ELA (*Estado Libre Asociado*) or free associated state—or, as others like to call it, a commonwealth or U.S. territory. All of these for me are just fancy ways of calling it a colony, which is what Puerto Rico is. In the video documentary by *CBS News* "Fighting for Paradise: Puerto Rico's Future," Puerto Rican journalist and reporter Lilia Luciano explores Puerto Rico's status and future. When interviewed, historian Ángel Collado-Schwarz explains how "Puerto Rico is a colony, a nation, a country, that is governed without the consent of the governed" (4:03-4:10). Known as the oldest colony, Puerto Rico lives under the ruling of an unelected board appointed by the United States in 2016, known as *La Junta de Control Fiscal*, that—surprisingly to many outsiders—has more power than both the governor of Puerto Rico and the Puerto Rican legislature with regard to the decisions that affect the island. As people in a colony, Puerto Ricans don't have total power of self-government. Though colonization has been haunting Puerto Rico for years, it has been felt more significantly since

Hurricane María; the wounds, trauma, and effects of colonization, such as the appointment of and decisions made by *La Junta*, as it is known colloquially on the Island, have been felt further and more deeply by *puertorriqueños* on the island. With public schools closing, displacement of locals driven by tax incentives for wealthy non-Puerto Ricans, an increase in power outages under a recently appointed U.S.-Canadian power company, and pension and government program cuts, "natives fear the island is turning into a fiscal paradise for rich outsiders as more locals leave their land behind" (0:18-0:26).

This land that I love and know so well, where I took my first breath and hope to take my last, with its roosters that wake me up in the morning and the breeze in the plantain trees that refreshes me on the 365 annual hot days and the coquí that sing me to sleep like a lullaby at night, has turned into a land I don't recognize anymore, a place where seeing a future has been made difficult. Many Puerto Ricans agree on wanting to escape the colonial umbrella that covers us and to strive for a decolonized Puerto Rico, but the controversy hinges on what path should be taken to achieve that. It is a controversy that has divided La Isla for decades: Should Puerto Rico decolonize by becoming a state and fully part of the United States, or should Puerto Rico decolonize by completely separating from the United States and becoming its own country? As more and more Puerto Ricans realize that the ELA status is starting to fall short, they ask, *How do we escape colonization? Is becoming a state the solution? Or becoming independent?*

"When at her beaches Columbus arrived / full of awe he exclaimed, / 'Oh!, oh!, oh!...',"
is a part of my national anthem I've sung over

and over. Despite Puerto Rico's having initially been colonized by Spain in 1493, since the Spanish-American War in 1898, it has been in the hands of the United States: a U.S. territory for 126 years but a colony for 531 years. Though Puerto Ricans have had U.S. citizenship since 1917 through the Jones Act, the 3.6 million citizens who live on the island, which encompasses 21 states, despite being ruled by Congress, can't vote for the U.S. president. They have no voting representation in Congress yet have to go to war to defend the United States. In other words, Puerto Rico belongs to but is not part of the U.S. Despite *and* because of this, a great majority of Puerto Ricans feel passionate about ending the colonization status by having their home become the 51st star on the U.S. flag. In the YouTube documentary "Why Isn't Puerto Rico a State?" Bianca Graulau, an independent freelance Puerto Rican journalist who double-majored in broadcast journalism and political science at Syracuse University and produces social media content explaining Puerto Rico's colonial status, presents and explores the side of the controversy that favors statehood by giving an outlet to major figures in the movement as part of a series explaining Puerto Rico's status options. Graulau emphasizes that the reason the U.S. has not made Puerto Rico a state for all these years is "in one word, racism" (0:32-0:34). Many Puerto Ricans believe that Puerto Rico's statehood status is overdue, and "say statehood is about democracy and equality" (1:32-1:36). Melinda Romero, daughter of former pro-statehood Puerto Rican governor Carlos Romero Barceló, emphasizes in the documentary how "our young men and women have spilled all their blood defending the democracy that exists in the

United States.... The day that the United States ceases to be a democratic nation and a free nation...then maybe you will have more people [deciding] to separate instead of get included.... All the territories were abused at one point or another, and that doesn't mean that the nation in itself is a bad thing..." (9:32-10:06). Pro-statehood Puerto Ricans such as my grandfather believe that statehood is the solution to Puerto Rico's colonial status, as finally having permanent relations with the U.S. and representation in Congress would bring political stability, help Puerto Rico overcome the economic challenges that have been overwhelming the island, and allow access to much-needed funding, services, and welfare benefits that as U.S. citizens they feel Puerto Ricans deserve. Pro-statehood sentiment is driven by a desire for inclusion and to end the years of Puerto Ricans' being treated as second-class U.S. citizens. They believe that as José Bernardo Marquez, a pro-statehood legislator in the House of Representatives, said in Graulau's documentary, "the best way to fight that [colonialism] is [by] participating" (9:24-9:28).

The old colonial district of Old San Juan has become a second home I visit almost every weekend, with its colorful cobblestone streets and historic building walls with graffiti reading "Gringo go home," where the last resting place of my ancestor Pedro Albizu Campos, who ignited the fire of the independence movement in Puerto Rico, can be found. Though its flame has been blown out like that of a birthday candle over and over again since Spanish colonial times—especially over the past 104 years by the U.S. government, which has continually criminalized the movement—it always finds a way to

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get ignited again. Puerto Rico's history offers constant reminders that it has been the United States' punching bag. These include "La Operación" and "the pill" through which poor Puerto Rican women were forcibly sterilized and used for testing contraceptives in the 1930s; the 1948 Gag Law whereby the simple act of flying the Puerto Rican flag (even in private) and singing the national anthem was made illegal; the beaches' having been used for bombing practice by the U.S. Navy from 1940 to 2003; the electrical grid's having recently been privatized by an American-Canadian company, since which Puerto Ricans have suffered almost daily outages and been charged high rates; hundreds of public schools' closing, funding cuts having been made to the University of Puerto Rico, and pension funds' having been slashed by unelected American officials; and the use of the island as a tax haven, leading it to be plagued by rich Americans while Puerto Ricans are displaced. All this has led what was once a minority of Puerto Ricans to become a growing chorus of support for independence as the solution for decolonizing the island. In the essay "Let Puerto Rico Be Free" in *The Atlantic*, Jaquira Díaz, a fiction writer, essayist, journalist, and cultural critic born in Puerto Rico, expresses and explores the side of the controversy that favors independence, the history behind the movement, and the desire for a free, independent Puerto Rico for which a growing majority of Puerto Ricans, she among them, long. Díaz says, "[E]very day, it becomes more and more obvious that the current government structure—Puerto Rico as a de facto colony of the United States... is a failure. There is no benevolent American savior coming to help Puerto Rico...Every

day, more of them come to understand that Puerto Rico has always stood on its own. This is why I believe that independence, not statehood, is the path we must pursue" (Díaz). Pro-independence Puerto Ricans, from my ancestor Pedro Albizu Campos to Jaquira Díaz, believe that the only true way out of colonization is by completely cutting ties with the U.S. and setting Puerto Rico free; they believe this is the only way for Puerto Ricans to truly maintain their national identity and for Puerto Rico to finally be able to grow as its own country, as many Puerto Ricans are exhausted by feeling like guests in their own home. Yet many hesitate because of the challenges Puerto Rico might face as an independent nation and wonder what a free Puerto Rico could look like and whether it would survive: *Is it even viable? Will our U.S. citizenship be revoked? Will Puerto Rico become the next Venezuela?* While the journey to a free, independent Puerto Rico would be *cañon*, as Puerto Ricans would say, "the future of a free Puerto Rico doesn't need to be utopian, or easy, to be just. With independence, the citizens of Puerto Rico would have a government created by and for the benefit of the Puerto Rican people rather than for the benefit of outside interests. The newly recognized nation would be able to align itself and its political and diplomatic systems as it wishes—perhaps joining the growing number of Caribbean nations...that have fully rejected their colonial ties" (Díaz). Puerto Ricans who are exhausted by the colonial burden include Javier A. Hernández, a writer, author, entrepreneur, and pro-sovereignty and decolonization advocate who calls for independence and, in his article "It's Time to Decolonize Puerto Rico" in *Newsweek*, expresses a sentiment many agree with: "From

the U.S. Congress' imposition of the anti-democratic and unelected Junta of PROMESA and the indifferent federal response to natural disasters, to the recent strengthening of the Jones Act that will further stifle our economy during disasters when supplies are needed the most, Puerto Ricans are tired of the proverbial 'we will do better' American narrative. Enough is enough! Puerto Ricans are calling for change and many for freedom itself" (Hernández).

As I was growing up in Puerto Rico, the conversation regarding Puerto Rico's status shone down on me like rays of the hot Caribbean sun, always with the burning question of where I stood. It was almost a responsibility, a duty, that I *had* to have a specific opinion or take a side, especially considering my rich history and lineage. What I do know is that the days of Puerto Rico's colonial status should be over. As a Puerto Rican, I believe we should be able to decide our future status, something we hopefully will be able to do soon with the Puerto Rico Status Act's having been passed by the House in December 2022 whereby "Puerto Ricans living in the U.S. territory would get to choose among three non-territorial status options: statehood, independence and sovereignty in free association with the U.S.—excluding the island's current territorial status as one of the options for the first time" (Acevedo). While I understand both of the ways in which Puerto Ricans want to decolonize the island and acknowledge that both have their pros and cons; I am sick of my land's becoming unrecognizable and plagued with foreigners, destroying my land that to their eyes appears as a theme park. I am sick of feeling as if I am being pushed off my own island. Since I was a kid I've questioned why

the U.S. is seen as and deemed to be a symbol of growth and its lack of presence is seen as a loss. As activist Nicole Álvarez Espada says in the *CBS News* documentary, "Why would I allow...somebody who abused me for 123 years to then consume me?" (25:57-26:05). My biggest fear is a future wherein I will be unable to reside in the land in which I was born, with the singing of the coquí and the nostalgia-provoking smell of the beach. Will I be able to have a future in my own home? Will I be able to continue my life in Puerto Rico? Will Puerto Rico become a Puerto Rico without Puerto Ricans?

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