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Sarah Molinari

## Book Review

### **The Battle for Paradise: Puerto Rico Takes on the Disaster Capitalist (Naomy Klein)**

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It intends to serve as a platform for testing, circulating, and debating new ideas and reflections on these topics, expanding beyond the geographical, cultural and linguistic boundaries of Latin America - Abya Yala. We hope to contribute to connecting ideas, and to provide a space for intellectual exchange and discussion for a nascent academic community of scholars, devoted to counterbalancing mainstream understandings of development.

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A BOOK REVIEW BY SARAH MOLINARI<sup>1</sup>

## The Battle for Paradise: Puerto Rico Takes on the Disaster Capitalists<sup>2</sup>

The one-year anniversary of Hurricane Maria calls into question the temporality of disaster, both in terms of lived experience and analysis. It was difficult for Puerto Ricans to mark the first anniversary while so many still live Maria's daily effects physically, emotionally, and financially. Failing institutions and disaster recovery initiatives have too often deepened vulnerability in the wake of Hurricanes Irma and Maria, thus augmenting the confused sense of pre- and post-disaster. During a September Rutgers University symposium on the "Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico a Year after Maria" anthropologist Yarimar Bonilla suggested that perhaps Hurricane Maria was *the "aftershock"* itself, the culmination of over a century of colonial-capitalist exploitation and layered traumas. If Hurricane Maria was the aftershock, how can we think about disaster and disaster capitalism? Naomi Klein's

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<sup>1</sup> SARAH MOLINARI is a PhD Candidate in Anthropology at the CUNY Graduate Center and a Visiting Researcher at the Institute of Caribbean Studies at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras. She is currently conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Puerto Rico for her dissertation on the politics of debt resistance and hurricane recovery with a National Science Foundation grant. Sarah is a Graduate Student Representative on the Executive Boards of the Puerto Rican Studies Association and the LASA Section on Puerto Rico. Her work appears in a variety of academic and popular venues including *Souls: A Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, *Anthropology Now*, *FocaalBlog*, *Alternautas*, *Social Difference Online*, and *The Platform*. She is also a collaborator on the Puerto Rico Syllabus project (#PRSyllabus), a digital resource for understanding Puerto Rico's intersecting crises.

<sup>2</sup> This article was originally published in <http://www.alternautas.net/blog/2018/11/28/book-review-the-battle-for-paradise-puerto-rico-takes-on-the-disaster-capitalists-by-naomi-klein-haymarket-books-2018> on November 28th, 2018.

*The Battle for Paradise: Puerto Rico Takes on the Disaster Capitalists* (2018) is a helpful starting point.

Klein's analysis is based on her week-long visit to Puerto Rico in early 2018, organized by the university professors' collective PAREs and other coalitions in Puerto Rico and the diaspora. Written accessibly for a wide audience and published in both Spanish and English, Klein highlights grassroots resistance efforts and new political formations across the archipelago. Some of the "post-Maria shock-resistance" (p. 63) she documents emerged in the wake of Hurricane Maria to organize around survival and basic needs like the Mutual Aid Centers (*Centros de Apoyo Mutuo*), while others come from longer activist trajectories like Casa Pueblo's work on energy transformation and democratization, the agro-ecology movement's work on food sovereignty, and the movement to audit Puerto Rico's public debt<sup>3</sup>. Klein grounds her analysis in conversations and observations among her interlocutors, including activists, intellectuals, teachers, politicians, and real estate and crypto-currency investors. In the post-Maria landscape during the particular moment Klein observes, she defines the central struggle as a "battle of utopias" (p. 78) between visions of collective sovereignties<sup>4</sup> for the many versus visions of profit and privatization for the few. In other words, how recovery is defined and by whom.

The book extends Klein's classic analysis of the "shock doctrine"—the political strategy defined by "the deliberate exploitation of states of emergency to push through a radical pro-corporate agenda" (p. 45)<sup>5</sup>. Klein argues that Puerto Rico has experienced the "shock-after-shock doctrine" (p. 53). From this perspective, Hurricane Maria is not a singular event, but rather a catastrophic not-so-natural disaster that exposes and deepens the already-existing layered shocks and traumas—from the racist colonial history of "unending experiment" (p. 28) to the economic,

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<sup>3</sup> See the campaign Auditoría Ya, led by the Citizens' Front for the Debt Audit (Frente Ciudadano por al Auditoría de la Deuda)

<sup>4</sup> Collective sovereignties refer to the practices and possibilities of self-determination and deepening democracy in which the people, rather than capital, define their own goals and visions for a collective future.

<sup>5</sup> See also Klein, Naomi. (2007). *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

debt, and migration crises of today. The “shock” exploited particularly in Puerto Rico, she argues, is fueled by desperation (the inept recovery efforts provoke a feeling that nothing could be worse than the status quo, making privatization more attractive to some); distraction (“the mechanics of survival take up every waking hour” (p. 55) such that political engagement becomes more challenging); despair (created by the cumulative effects of trauma); and disappearance (exodus and stateside evacuation fuel a government narrative of Puerto Rico as a “blank canvas” to welcome new investors while residents leave and conditions are not provided for their return). Klein argues that the storms’ impact “disassembled life” (p. 54) for millions, complicating the reactivation of anti-austerity coalitions, many of which were met with state repression like the University of Puerto Rico student movement and the mass coalitions that came out in protest on May Day 2017.

Klein examines the vision of Puerto Rico as a “for-profit utopia” (p. 15) through the “invasion” of “Puertopians,” crypto-currency investors and Blockchain enthusiasts taking advantage of tax incentives called Acts 20 and 22. After Hurricane Maria, these incentives were made even more attractive for U.S. “high net-worth individuals” (p. 19) moving mobile and financial industries to Puerto Rico with the government’s warm welcome to be part of the economic recovery plan. Particularly troubling, as Klein notes, are the crypto investors’ benevolent philanthropic promises for disaster recovery and visions to build a “Crypto Land” facilitated by post-Maria land grab opportunities. Capitalists’ plunder of paradise is not new. It would be helpful to historicize these latest (crypto) capitalists taking advantage of the colonial arrangement’s tax and labor incentives within a longer trajectory going back to U.S. sugar corporations. In this sense, Hurricane Maria marks a shift in, rather than the emergence of, the “blank canvas” narrative (p. 25) because throughout its history Puerto Rico has figured as a blank canvas for U.S. capitalist, imperialist, and white supremacist projects.

The book leaves a number of issues open to debate and further analysis. First, how to contend with disaster capitalism as an analytical tool in relation to complex temporalities of disaster. This requires specificity and historicization to avoid the theoretical limitations of labeling *everything* as disaster capitalism or addressing only

the recent past or the aftermath rather than the historical process (Schuller and Maldonado, 2016). Second, the question of the state and how grassroots organizing and discourses around *autogestión*<sup>6</sup> may be co-opted by the state—in its various colonial manifestations—or even by “(non)profiteering,” another pillar of disaster capitalism (Schuller and Maldonado, 2016). Klein documents extraordinary organizing efforts and alternative future imaginaries before and after Maria. However, the narrative tends to homogenize these efforts, treating them as a coherent whole positioned within a binary of two opposing visions. Further analysis and insight from protagonists in people’s movements over time could bring out the nuances and complexities among the “islands of sovereignty” and the fields of power in which they struggle.

*The Battle for Paradise* does important political work in supporting activist initiatives and internationalizing a critical narrative accessible for wide publics about post-Maria Puerto Rico and the colonial legacies that shape it. All proceeds from the book go to JunteGente (The People Together), a collective that brings together organizations struggling against neoliberal capitalism and for a more just future for Puerto Rico. Groups comprising JunteGente converged at a January summit in Barrio Mariana, Humacao to discuss forms of collective response to both the disaster and its underlying causes. Klein observes this summit as marking a shift from despair to possibility—the initial coalescence among “islands of sovereignty” to expand definitions of freedom and work towards a decentralized “parallel political archipelago” (p. 77). But as Klein notes in the final chapter, defining Puerto Rico’s future is a “race against time” between the interests and the speed of capital versus people’s movements. Within the complex temporalities of disaster and disaster capitalism, we cannot lose the sense of radical hope and possibility that Klein elaborates in the book.

## References

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<sup>6</sup> Self-organization, or bottom-up organization

Klein, Naomi. (2018). *The Battle for Paradise: Puerto Rico Takes on the Disaster Capitalists*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.

Schuller, Mark and Julie Maldonado. (2016). "Disaster Capitalism." *Annals of Anthropological Practice*, Vol. 40, No. 1, pp. 61-72.