The Isle is Full of Noises: *Puerto Rico Strong*, Hurricane María, and the Role of Memory in the Reimagination of a Boricua Nation[1]

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Abstract

The text discusses the case of *Puerto Rico Strong*, a 2018 comics anthology by United Way of Puerto Rico (Fondos Unidos de PR) and St. Louis comics publisher Lion Forge. Profits from the sale of the volume went to a number of relief efforts following the disaster of Hurricane María. The article discusses some of the main narrative lines of the volume, in particular, stories that are representative of what is called the *prosthetic nation*, an experience proper of the Latinx community across the US. The prosthetic nation is a notion based on ideas suggested by Allison Landsberg and Celia Lury on prosthetic memory and culture, respectively, which show how identity can be reconstituted by deliberate transformation. It is a community imagined with the memories of others—specifically, a community imagined as nation, yet a nation unlived or not experienced materially firsthand. A prosthetic nation is one in which the sense of allegiance to an imagined community

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results from memories experienced and lived by someone close to you, who has taken the effort and time to share and nurture them industriously. For this reason, it focuses mostly not on immigration, but on what *preceded* immigration. In some cases, these fabricated involvements may be triggered through associations with events and/or occurrences parents or relatives have mentioned repeatedly with more than a touch of nostalgia, to the point of generating a sense of familiarity with unexperienced involuntary memories, echoing deceitfully the spirit of the Proust phenomenon, based on emotional sensorial connection. In this sense, the prosthetic nation is the result of a process involving affect—or, at the very least, the consequences of affect resulting from imaginary or highly theorized contact. It does not speak merely of a longing for a homeland—as experienced by many immigrants—but rather of the manufacture of a remembrance for/by a generation of people who never really experienced life in this point of family origin, given they were born or raised in another place, the heart of a colonial experience. Thus, it is a fabrication used to cultivate and preserve a critical discourse involving resistance.

Keywords: Puerto Rico; hurricane María; comics; prosthetic nation; memory.

Resumen

El texto analiza el caso de *Puerto Rico Strong*, una antología de cómics de 2018 de United Way of Puerto Rico (Fondos Unidos de PR) y Lion Forge, la editorial de cómics de San Luis. Las ganancias de la venta del volumen se destinaron a una serie de esfuerzos de socorro tras el desastre del huracán María. El artículo analiza algunas de las principales líneas narrativas del volumen, en particular, historias representativas de lo que se ha dado por llamar la nación protésica, una experiencia propia de la comunidad latinx en los EE. UU. La nación protésica es una noción basada en las ideas de Allison Landsberg y Celia Lury sobre la memoria y la cultura protésicas, respectivamente, que muestran cómo la identidad puede reconstituirse mediante una transformación intencional. Es una comunidad imaginada con los recuerdos de otros —de manera específica, una comunidad imaginada como nación, pero una nación no vivida o no experimentada materialmente de primera mano—. Una nación protésica es aquella en la que el sentido de lealtad a una comunidad imaginada resulta de los recuerdos experimentados y vividos por alguien cercano, que se ha tomado el esfuerzo y el tiempo para compartirlos y nutrirlos laboriosamente. Por esta razón, se centra principalmente no en la inmigración, sino en lo que precedió a la inmigración. En algunos casos, estas implicaciones fabricadas pueden desencadenarse a través de asociaciones con eventos y/o sucesos que los padres o familiares han mencionado repetidamente con más que un toque de nostalgia, hasta el punto de generar una sensación de familiaridad con recuerdos involuntarios sin experiencia personal, haciendo eco engañosamente del espíritu del fenómeno de Proust, basado en la conexión sensorial emocional. En este sentido, la nación protésica es el resultado de un proceso que involucra el afecto

—o, al menos, las consecuencias del afecto resultantes de un contacto imaginario o altamente teorizado—. No habla simplemente de un anhelo de patria —según lo experimentan muchos inmigrantes— sino de la fabricación de un recuerdo para/por una generación de personas que nunca experimentaron realmente la vida en este punto de origen familiar, dado que nacieron o fueron criados en otro lugar, el corazón de una experiencia colonial. Por lo tanto, es una fabricación utilizada para cultivar y preservar un discurso crítico que involucra resistencia.

Palabras clave: Puerto Rico; huracán María; cómics; nación protésica; memoria.

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On Wednesday September 20, 2017, at 10:15 UTC (6:15am local time), Hurricane María made landfall with winds of 155 mph (250 km/h) as a high-end Category 4 storm near Yabucoa, Puerto Rico. Its winds were the most intense to strike the island since 1928. In the aftermath, once María emerged over the Atlantic on its way to the island of Hispaniola with lessened winds of 125 mph (205 km/h), the impact of the storm became blatantly clear. Much of Puerto Rico's infrastructure, already lagging in maintenance as the result of a prolonged economic crisis, was severely affected. 95% of the island lacked power and cell phone service, while less than half of the population had access to tap water. Flooding, storm surges, and strong winds wreaked havoc on the island's agriculture. Initial estimates suggested over 8 billion in damages. Though FEMA reported 60,000 damaged homes, subsequent response from the federal government was dismal. In the end, help arrived through a variety of efforts.[2]

Among them was *Puerto Rico Strong*, a 2018 comics anthology jointly published by United Way of Puerto Rico (Fondos Unidos de PR) and Lion Forge, the comics publisher founded in 2011 by David Steward II and Carl Reed and headquartered in St. Louis, Missouri (Terror). Profits from the sale of the volume went to the Early Childhood Relief Program, leading to the promotion of reading programs, psychological support for the stress resulting from natural disaster, the re-establishment of child facilities, and support of community schools and health-care centers. Lion Forge offered to match 25K of all profits generated while Diamond Comics Distributors donated 5 percent of retail sales. Co-edited by Lion Forge's own Desiree Rodriguez and Hazel Newlevant, alongside

Marco Lopez, Neil Schwartz, and Derek Ruiz, the volume features art and writing by Rosa Colón (*Soda Pop Comics*), Vita Ayala (*Bitch Planet*), Naomi Franquiz (*Misfit City*), Javier Cruz Winnik (*A Reason to Smile!*), Sabrina Cintron (*La Borinqueña*), Tristan Tarwater (*Hen & Chick*), Fabian Nicieza (co-creator of *Deadpool*), Joamette Gil (*Power & Magic*), etc.

In the following pages, I will discuss some of the main narrative lines of the volume, in particular, stories that I find representative of what I have chosen to call the *prosthetic nation*, an experience proper of the Latinx community across the US. It is a notion based on ideas suggested by Allison Landsberg and Celia Lury on prosthetic memory and culture, respectively, which show how identity can

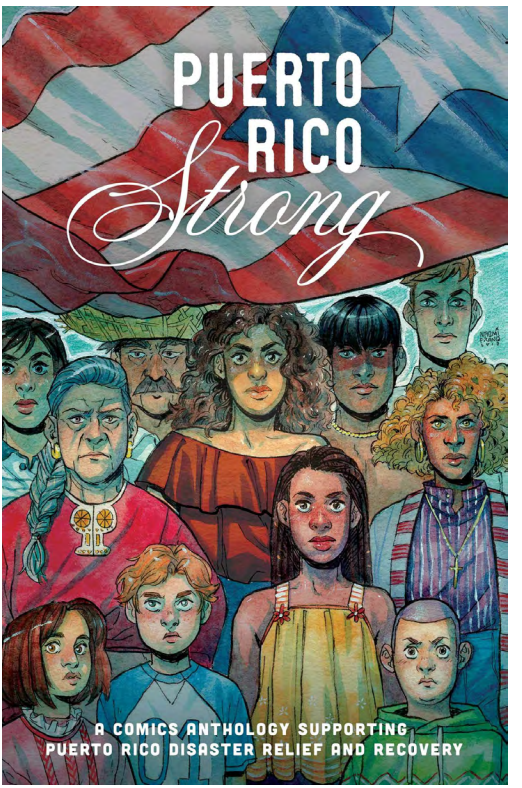

Figure 1. *Puerto Rico Strong* Cover.
Source: López, Rodríguez, Newlevant, Ruiz & Schwartz, editors. *Puerto Rico Strong*. Lion Forge, 2018. © 2018 Lion Forge.

be reconstituted by deliberate transformation. The prosthetic nation is a community imagined with the memories of others—in particular, a community imagined as nation, yet a nation unlived or not experienced materially firsthand. It does not speak merely of a longing for a homeland—as experienced by many immigrants—but rather of the manufacture of a remembrance for/by a generation of people who never really experienced life in this point of family origin, given they were born or raised in another place, the heart of a colonial experience. Thus, it is a fabrication used to cultivate and preserve a critical discourse involving resistance.

A prosthetic nation is one in which the sense of allegiance to an imagined community results from memories experienced and lived by someone close to you, who has taken the effort and time to share and nurture them industriously. For this reason, it focuses mostly not on immigration, but on what *preceded* immigration. In some cases, these fabricated involvements may be triggered through associations with events and/or occurrences parents or relatives have mentioned repeatedly with more than a touch of nostalgia, to the point of generating a sense of familiarity with unexperienced involuntary memories, echoing deceitfully the spirit of the Proust phenomenon, based on emotional sensorial connection. In this sense, the prosthetic nation is the result of a process involving affect—or, at the very least, the consequences of affect resulting from imaginary or highly theorized contact. In general, the prosthetic nation is a common occurrence in the lives of many Latinxs, particularly those who, like Dreamers, cannot travel back and forth to Latin America.[3] If anything, the current crisis resulting from the world pandemic will only exacerbate this phenomenon, given that many families used to habitual travel to Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central or South America will find it more difficult to accomplish. And so, while I'm embracing the case of the impact of Hurricane María in Puerto Rico to propose the notion, I clarify that it applies equally well to Latinxs of many descents and ancestries throughout the US.

In her book, Landsberg clarifies prosthetic memory enables the transmission of recollections beyond "natural' or biological claims (18). This consideration is strongly rooted in the notion that prosthetic memory questions how specific remembrances may be the exclusive property of certain groups (22). In addition, she ratifies that flow of

memories and other practices isn't just from one generation to the next, as in homeland to diaspora, but in both directions, providing an alternative to social construction and essentialism (10)—in fact, Landsberg seems enthused by how prosthetic memory may challenge the essentialist leanings of identity politics. While my view of the flow of memory emphasizes generational shift, I wish to make clear it's not the only way in which I understand the process. Correspondingly, as Landsberg demonstrates in the third chapter of her book, the fact that mnemonic prosthetics is unlimited by ethnic claims of ownership certainly doesn't mean it cannot be embraced by an ethnic community. To Landsberg, the interest in prosthetic memory is justified by its potential to alter subjectivity—as the foundation for counterhegemonic collective identification in which naturalized structures of oppression are rendered visible, given the way in which recollection may change our understanding of the present (21–22). At the end of her book, she introduces the notion of transferential spaces, locations that invite people to relate experientially to events they themselves did not live (113). These are sites in which prosthetic memories propound ethical thinking by fostering empathy (149). In this text, I propose the narratives resulting from the coverage of María in *Puerto Rico Strong* as precisely this kind of space.

In *National Identity*, Anthony D. Smith uses the French term *ethnie*, which designates an ethnic community, to speak of the ethnic basis of national identity. Among the main attributes of this kind of community he includes, in addition to common ancestry and a collective proper name, the sharing of historical memories (21). Now, what happens when the object of mnemonic exercise is the promotion of an ethnic community past the point of migration? When a new generation, one charged with the preservation of a sense of *ethnie*, is born and/or raised with new experiences and historical memories in an altogether different territory? How is it possible to recreate in them memories akin to the ones of those who first migrated, feeding a longing for something unexperienced? Migration is not an uncommon topic in comics. Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, a pioneering graphic novel, is to a fair extent a narrative of immigration; as Landsberg points out, it is a key example of the socially responsible, empathetic potential of prosthetic memories (115–121). Theoretically and/or graphically driven approaches, like Brian Caplan and Zach Weinersmith's *Open*

Borders and Shan Taun's *The Arrival*, represent tours de force. From Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* to Malaka Gharib's *I Was Their American Dream*, graphic narratives on immigration abound. In Latinx terms, Lila Quintero Weaver's *Darkroom*, dutifully covered by Jorge J. Santos Jr.'s *Graphic Memories*, is one sophisticated stab. On the other hand, Lalo Alcaraz's entire oeuvre is bent on discussing immigration. However, unlike *Maus*, most of them focus on what happens after arrival. Yet in the case of the prosthetic nation, I must make clear, texts converge on what came before migration. Few narratives engage the fabrication of memories of this nature in a following generation—using a storm as an excuse—as openly and unwaveringly as *Puerto Rico Strong*.

Growing in a place is not the same as visiting it occasionally or even regularly—as any immigrant knows well—despite an increased feeling of familiarity with distant locations thanks to technology. As noted by Turkish-British novelist Elif Shafak, today's technology—the readily available access to imagery and sounds from far away, distant locations—supports the impression of immediate familiarity and mastery of certain topics, failing to distinguish between information (exposure to data), knowledge (in-depth acquaintance with a topic), and wisdom (emotional connection with a topic).[4] To Shafak, empathy is crucial in the formation of wisdom, a notion consistent with Landsberg's argument, which identifies empathy as a key element in the formation of prosthetic memories (19). Nonetheless, modern technology tends bypass the connection between data and emotion, skipping knowledge while generating a false sense of wisdom. As a result, many times we tend to believe we know more about a place than we actually do. This includes visiting a country and noticing only what we are aware of and that which contributes to ratify our previous impression of events, while simultaneously failing to notice unknown unknowns, quite simply, because we are unaware of their existence and relevance and they are not easily translatable with our cultural codes. After all, these are the makings of ethnocentrism.

Our cultural repertoire tends to limit what we notice because, in the case of most people, even when we notice difference, we only notice difference that can be broken down and explained with elements of our own culture. More radical forms of difference, which are harder to explain in the limited context of our home culture, escape

our awareness and, unknowingly, boost ethnocentrism. In most cases, more radical forms of difference contribute to otherization. This is where technology comes in. Plain and simple, technology generates feelings of assistance and support, but it also mediates and deceives, creating a superficial sense of familiarity that, in the end, contributes to an equally superficial understanding of the cultural fabric of a nation in a far away, remote place. Thus, while we are increasingly unaware of unknown unknowns, technology makes us feel like we are ever closer to truly engaging and understanding a target culture on its own terms, even though, for all practical purposes, we may be even setting ourselves more and more apart from its context and nature, generating a misleading sense of familiarity that toys with appropriation and commodification. Consequently, it is necessary to become acutely aware of the workings of this operation if Latinxs—or anyone in the process of engaging a separate culture—are ever going to develop a more grounded awareness of their family circumstances, rather than some romanticized notion of origin. Pride in identity—cultural/ethnic essentialism—can be a treacherous foundation for the concoction of a family history. After all, if someone migrated, it surely must have been because, at the very least, the conditions at the new place were better than those at the point of origin. In this sense, the prosthetic nation plays and will continue to play a significant role in the Latinx imaginary.

Some of the stories in *Puerto Rico Strong* hint at the strong role memory plays in the construction of Puerto Rican identity, especially now, when there are more Puerto Ricans living in the continental USA than on the island. In this sense, the case of Boricuas may be more critical than those of Latinxs of mainland origin, for whom numbers still remain far superior in the place of origin. However, the overall dynamics of the process by which the prosthetic nation comes into being behave in an analogous fashion regardless of nationality of origin and/or ancestry. With a Latinx turning 18 every 30 seconds, the implications of the prosthetic nation upon variants of US identity become everyday more discerning, fostering a relationship with the past that may sustain a more expanded construct of Latinidad, one not based on the recurrently idealized memories of many an immigrant—"*como en* (fill in the blank) *no había igual*"—but on the curiosity of a generation bent on exploring its background and,

hopefully, the nature of the exclusion that brought forebears to the point of departure (Fernández Campbell & National Journal). In this way, a more constructive, critical interpretation—and not just some glorified memory—could contribute to an expanded sense of US identity, according to which contemporary Latinxs would play a more enlightened role as US citizens of the world than previous generations, deeply cognizant of the many implicit responsibilities in the act of embodying a world hegemon.[5]

Allegiance to nation works in mysterious ways. Very seldom do the descendants of immigrant parents contemplate how the flag or colors they proudly wave revealing their descent speak more about an exclusion by a state of origin—i.e., the fact that their parents, though members of the nation, were invisible to a corresponding state, thus being forced to migrate—rather than of inclusion within a nation. When immigrants celebrate colors of origin, very seldom are they aware they're celebrating the colors of a state that failed to recognize/visualize their parents. After all, a flag is more a symbol of the state than of a nation. People only read it as of the nation because the state may have claimed custody of nationality in such a manner that many fail to notice the difference between both constructs. In principle, when there is yet to be a state, the flag does intend to represent the nation (or at least an aspiring project of state). Yet, as the idea of nation is implemented, eventually materializing in the form of a state through written documents, infrastructure, borders, and a geomaterial reality, the flag becomes more and more representative of the state (while remaining associated with the nation). Ideas can live without geometric arrangements of color. The states, on the other hand, beseech them. As material embodiments of certain ideas of nation, states do tend to favor these colorful enactments. Flags work best for the nation when people feel included in the state and the symbol is thus validated by actions (yet this is not usually the case for many populations of the world, thus global migration). This is why many people fail to distinguish between nation and state, given the state may be doing such a cohesive job that both constructs overlap, failing to reveal disparity. On the other hand, if one has experienced life in an emerging economy, the gaps between nation and state are usually palpably visible in the peripheral zones of any large metropolitan area or in the countryside.

In the case of Puerto Rico, given its problematic, oxymoronic status as an *Estado Libre Asociado*, the implications are even more troubling. Displayed in the continental USA, a Puerto Rican flag speaks of a project of nation that never came to be, thanks to imperialist repression. It can also attest to the fact that its bearers are here because, in one or another manner, the Puerto Rican state failed to provide them with the means necessary to implement a successful project of life on the island (never mind the fact that this failure of project of life on the island could be in itself the result of imperialist schemes, hence a vicious cycle). This is typical of US dynamics in terms of immigration. In many cases, people migrate to the US because the US has contributed to the conditions that make it necessary for them to leave their place of origin, never mind the fact that some US citizens reject immigration while failing to notice how the US government is propitiating migratory trends. Think for example of how, thanks to NAFTA, subsidized US corn from the Great Plains effectively killed many *ejidos* in Mexico, eventually leading to migration to the north.[6] What is particularly relevant is that, in one or another way, these circumstances may be replicated in the contact with the US of many other countries throughout the Americas.

And so, the makings of the prosthetic nation say much about how the ideas of nationality and origin have been processed by a Latinx population, impacting upon how it will think of itself as part of the US. After all, though processed by others and in a different fashion, most of the notions pertaining to the construct of an ancestral nation tend to come from the generation that experienced migration. The codes with which this collection of notions will be assessed and interpreted, though, will be US-centered. Objects and practices emanating from the alien national repertoire—history, gastronomy, geography, music, weather, etc.—may belong to the vast assortment of constructs supportive of unlived experiences. It all depends on how well the place of origin's conditions are replicated in the US. As I suggested previously, today the internet excels at fostering a phony sense of familiarity, since the cultural connection with the place of origin is not severed as radically as in the times of the melting pot—when acculturation ruled supreme. The interpretive schemes through which these objects and practices will eventually gain significance will be eminently US-centric and contemporary, tinting things in a different light and with a thoroughly internalized—

and aptly denied—imperial condition. In other words, like many other Latinxs, Boricuas will imagine themselves in the role of "minority," yet, just as many other US inhabitants, may fail to think of themselves as the accomplices of an imperial project (with respect to other countries, rather than Puerto Rico, in which they tend to see themselves, rightly so, as the objects of imperialist momentum).

This brings us to the main examples of prosthetic memory in *Puerto Rico Strong*. In the book, memories are construed around two main axes: in the first case, it will be a matter of the triggering of involuntary memories, trying to establish a bond that mimics the recollections of earlier generations; in the second, it will be through a more formal association with history, willing to establish a common ground in terms of heritage and tradition. Let's start with the initial alignment. In "Stories from My Father" (52–57), the story authored by Adam Lance Garcia and illustrated by Heidi Black, we witness the story of a Boricua whose imagination has been nourished by her father's memories; a father who has shared with his daughter recollections of walking barefoot till his soles turned into leather, wearing lizards for earrings, climbing up coconut trees and eating a fruit called "cat shit," etc.

Coloring plays a key role in this account, as it hints repeatedly at the state of mind of the main character. There are four coloring schemes in the story: 1) bright colors, which represent contemporary reality; 2) sepia tones, which embodies mixed feelings and confusion; 3) diffuse coloring, very similar to the photographic effect, in which color appears glistening and soft; and 4) a mixture of the previous two styles of coloring, hinting at acceptance and resolution. In particular, when the protagonist reaches for a can of Florecitas, the container appears colored amid a background of sepia tones. Once she swallows the cookie, however, things turn colorful, suggesting the power of the experience in evoking distant, pleasant memories. These are memories about Puerto Rico, a world of magic that, according to the narrator, she never saw. While she visited her grandmother on the island and went the beach at Poza del Obispo (diffuse coloring); visited the Parque de las Botellas in Arecibo, where recycled beer bottles and mortar gain the shape of dinosaurs (more diffuse coloring); and ate Florecitas cookies and rice soup (yet more diffuse lighting), her memories do not equate to the world of magic

described by her father. It is assumed that her world, the world of her childhood, is that of a Puerto Rican growing in the US. Fifteen years later, she returns to the island (sepia tones), proud of her heritage. Yet, in the hotel (more sepia tones), just after she speaks over the phone with her dad, she questions herself, "How can I be proud of a heritage that does not feel like my own?" (54). Immediately, she rushes to a grocery store and purchases a can of Florecitas, the iced gem cookies by Royal Borinquen, which melt in her mouth, bringing forth the memory of the flavor (and associated events). In this context, Florecitas play the role that the madeleine plays for the narrator in *Swann's Way*, the first volume of *Remembrance of Things Past*, by French novelist Marcel Proust.

In Proust's masterpiece, when the narrator eats a madeleine dipped in tea, it reminds him so much of childhood afternoons at his aunt's home in Combray that his mind summons endless images and stories from decades earlier in life, resulting in the lengthy volumes authored by the French author. The episode is well known as a primary example of involuntary memory, in marked contrast to voluntary memory, exactly the type of mnemonic exercise shared by the father in "Stories from My Father." Yet, what the main character in "Stories" refuses to notice is that, even when she consumes the cookies, it is not in the context experienced by her father. The main character in Proust's classic is indeed remembering something he experienced, triggering involuntarily a longing for a specific context. In the Puerto Rican case, even if the main character shares the love of the cookies, she never consumed them in the way her progenitor did. Like many other things, memories of food are deeply influenced by the context in which the food was consumed. So, within this devious setting, the recreation of an act rooted in a memory, is a matter of prosthetics, even if it works jarringly. At the end of the story, once the main character decides she will keep searching till one day Puerto Rico feels like home, her world turns colorful and real.

This is not the only case of involuntary memory evident in *Puerto Rico Strong*. Two other stories, "Breaking Bread" (106–113), by Tara Martínez, and "Cocinar" (126–129), by Vito Delsante, attempt a similar strategy. In the first case, it's arepas that will trigger the mnemonic association. In the second, it's *empanadillas* with *sazón* (seasoning). Once again, the food, while reminding characters of their

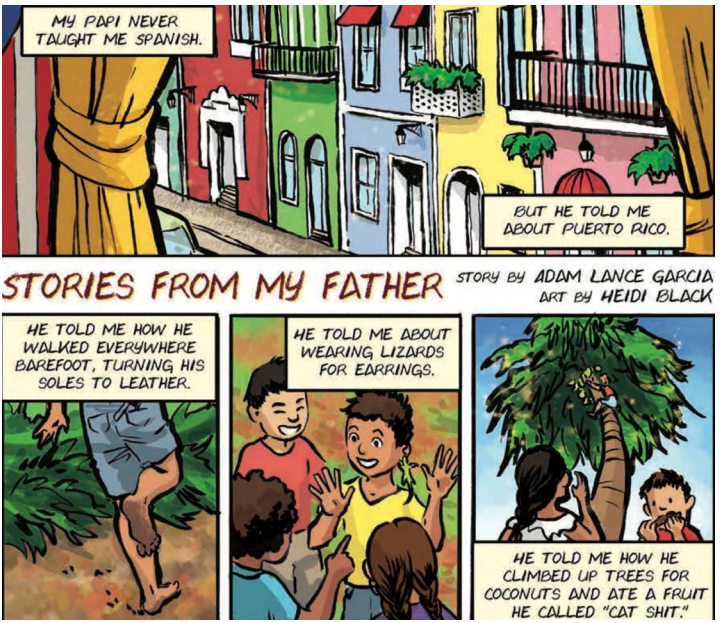

Figure 2. ***Stories from My Father.***
Source: López, Rodríguez, Newlevant, Ruiz & Schwartz, editors. ***Puerto Rico Strong.*** **Lion Forge, 2018, p. 52. © 2018 Lion Forge.**

Boricua quality, may acquire a new meaning in a different context. In "Breaking Bread," we learn the story of a young Boricua who migrates at early age to New York City, landing in the Bronx, like many fellow Puerto Ricans. The story also narrates the plight of her single mother, who gives birth and nurtures the protagonist despite being shunned by other women in her town. The story contrasts the mother's fertility with the low birth rate in Puerto Rico at that point in history, the result of aggressive sterilization campaigns (a topic covered in another story in the volume, "La Operación" [The Operation], by cartoonist Ally Shwed). Once the child faces discrimination at school in the US, to comfort her, the mother cooks arepas, reminding the child not to mind the mean spirit of some people, just like she had ignored the critical looks by other women on the island. When the child grows, becoming an empowered Boricua, and suffers a head-front collision, the mother brings arepas to the hospital, replicating the sense of care and warmth that she used to foster during their early years in New York and embodying a connection with Puerto Rico as a safe haven. Thus,

Figure 3. ***Stories from My Father*****.**
Source: López, Rodríguez, Newlevant, Ruiz & Schwartz, editors. ***Puerto Rico Strong*****. Lion Forge, 2018, p. 55. © 2018 Lion Forge.**

by way of arepas, the narrator is transported to a state of well-being, where she can feel protected and connect with an origin experienced, to all intents and purposes, during a very short period of her life, yet extremely important in terms of identity. In this respect, Puerto Rico is not so much an experienced reality, but a sentiment that is recalled each time life poses a challenge. The sentiment is the result of the mother's actions—her cooking of arepas, her association with the will to ignore ostracism (which would not have been as apparent to the child were it not for the mother's underscoring an instance of fortitude)—but it is perpetuated through the narrator's memory, in a classic example of prosthetics.

In "Cocinar," Ramón, a young Puerto Rican sous chef, arrives to a restaurant for his interview. Marnie, the owner, is quite clear about what he must bring to the restaurant and insists on watching him while he cooks something with *sazón* (seasoning), seeking to

Figure 4. ***Breaking Bread.***
Source: López, Rodríguez, Newlevant, Ruiz & Schwartz, editors. ***Puerto Rico Strong.*** **Lion Forge, 2018, p. 107. © 2018 Lion Forge.**

know whether he can deliver under pressure. Little by little, Ramón starts cooking small *empanadas—empanadillas*, he likes to clarify—finding refuge in his recollection of a grandmother's cooking and his large family—the only one a Puerto Rican knows, he claims. "Smell," the young sous chef argues, "is everything; it permeates Nuyorican culture" (127). Now, the use of the demonym "Nuyorican" ratifies Ramón's awareness that he is the product of migration, having grown in the US. He does not claim allegiance to the island, yet his sense of identity seems rooted in a distant mythical notion connected to the practice of cooking. It is his grandmother, who most surely left the island, who has instilled in him this sense of identity associated with the aromas of the kitchen; in particular, with whipping something out of nothing, as the spices hit the butter or oil. It is the art of mixing things up well what makes Puerto Rican families so big, he explains, alluding to the fact that his Nuyorican family has grown

to include African Americans, Irish, Italians, and Japanese. Even today, when his mother cooks *pasteles*—which habitually confused the protagonist, never convinced about the smell—and announces that she's making them on Facebook, family from all over comes to the house. In this respect, it becomes clear that the kitchen is a place through which one may echo and evoke the culture of the island, unacknowledging the distinction between a US setting and the island's *cocina*. Cooking, Ramón appears to ratify, is a strategic way of enacting *puertorriqueñidad*, regardless of location, while the kitchen, any well-tended-to Boricua kitchen, is the mythical time-travel portal through which one may immediately connect with ancestors and traditions, past oceans of difference and miles of misapprehensions. In the end, when he offers some empanadillas to Marnie, she succumbs to their flavor, asking, "How many of these can you make an hour?" (129).

This is pretty much the same umbilical relationship that brings the narrator of "Stories of My Father" back to the island, willing to see if anything she remembered remained after María. She returns to the island to find out whether things feel like home. Much to her chagrin, she discovers they do not. The fruit seller by the side of the road reminds her of her grandmother, but she is not her. The waves still crash beyond the Poza, but they don't feel like home. They never did. After the storm, she is expecting something different, almost like a catharsis. At this point, she understands that to her, thanks to her father, Puerto Rico is a story, an account she wishes to believe. So she chooses to keep searching for the story, for the memory, hoping one day Puerto Rico will feel like home. In other words, it is not by way of Puerto Rico itself that the island will come to feel like home, but through a memory, a remembrance created and nurtured by others, which, once inside, once internalized, will not be allowed to die, almost in a manner analogous to the main argument in Pixar's *Coco* (2017). As long as people manage to pass on a memory to their family, even if the other members of the family have never experienced certain events and realities—just their mnemonic re-creation—they will be able to keep the notion alive. This is, most certainly, the case of this type of nation as an imagined community, which, thanks to the illusory encouragements of technology, does not entail actual contact with the physical geomaterial reality of a location, but merely

an affective bond with its context and circumstances, beyond the unstable topography of ethnocentrism.

Then again, gastronomy is not the only refuge of memory. In a more formal way, history, a discipline empirically founded on the notion of the study of the past, is an ideal turf for this task. A prosthetic nation has many pillars; the acceptance of a common history by generations lacking an actual bond with the island experience is a major contributing factor to the consolidation of an imagined community, given its promotion of a sentiment of belonging, in stark opposition to the sense of disenfranchisement usually following a migratory experience. Yet, as Smith reminds us, when it comes to shared historical memories, it is not facts of ancestry that are crucial, so much as myths of common ancestry (22). In *Puerto Rico Strong*, there are all sorts of references to a "shared" past, starting with the initial story of the compilation by Ronnie Garcia, aptly named "Here" (10–15), which, in the matter of a few pages, glosses over centuries of history, speaking of a "common" pre-Columbian, African, colonial, and calamitous past.

The panels chronicle the trip back and forth to the island, across dark oceans, with people in the mainland caring for the ones left at home. The title makes clear that the place of choice is not the actual place of residence or physical presence of readers, but the island, hinting at the space's place in the heart of many—there is no other option. Within this framework, perhaps because it is just a myth—the actual culture was decimated within fifty years of the arrival of the Spaniards to the Americas, as attested by colonial census numbers—Taíno culture reigns unmatched. Since a functioning Taíno culture disappeared centuries ago, its recollection is equally prosthetic to islanders and mainlanders. Thus, as a device for extensive mnemonic prosthetics, the recalling of Taíno culture and history is ideal. While modern genetic analysis is able to retrace the presence of heritage in people from centuries ago, as an operational culture rooted in indigenous practices of pre-Columbian nature, Taínos ceased to exist around the sixteenth century, given economic exploitation, rampant diseases, and widespread genocide resulting from the Spanish conquest.

Recent controversies on genetic heritage, flirting with nationalism and populism, fail to take in consideration the fact that, while genetic

makeup survives in small percentages, links to a functional culture cease to exist (Yong). Or, if it does exist, it signifies something different. My own genetic heritage is a virtual retracing of history, from the Bering Strait to Al-Andalus, passing through Ashkenazi Jews, and Southern East and West-African slaves; however, this does not mean that Asian, Moorish, Jewish, or Southern East or West-African culture is alive in me. Thus, when it comes to resurrecting Taíno culture—despite the efforts of almost ten thousand people identifying themselves as Taíno in the 2010 US Census—for the most part, it is possible to say that it is a matter of a prosthetic exercise. This is certainly evident in the contents of *Puerto Rico Strong*: the sheer effort made by many cartoonists and scriptwriters set on educating their audiences about and establishing an emotional link with Taíno culture. I've written about this elsewhere, but one of the main reasons for the importance of Taíno culture is the work of the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, occasionally emulating the idealization of pre-Columbian cultures in other Latin American countries (e.g., Mexico) for purposes of modern nationalism and populism (Fernández L'Hoeste).[7]

The first story to propose a mnemonic connection with Taínos is "Areytos" (41–50), written by Vita Ayala and illustrated by Jamie Jones. Graphically, the style of the narrative is ominous; the coloring is dark and the graphics intimidating, setting the tone for a tragic account. The areyto or areíto was a type of religious song or dance performed by Taínos. In this case, an areyto opens the story, supposedly the night before a crucial clash between natives and invaders, in which thousands of Taínos and Caribs faced about one hundred Spaniards. The story chronicles the historic event, a battle set in 1511, almost two decades after the arrival of the invaders in 1493 (Amador de los Ríos & Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés). During the initial years after the coming of the Spaniards, Taínos experienced a short-lived peace as the result of a *guaytiao*, a ritual in which two people accepted each other as friends and exchanged names, as the cacique Agüeybaná did with Spanish invader Juan Ponce de León. However, the Spaniards started imposing the payment of tributes upon the natives (in the form of gold or cotton), generating sweeping resentment.

Once Agüeybaná passed away, his brother Agüeybaná the Brave came to power. Agüeybaná the Brave harbored doubts about the invaders' godly status—just like in the case of Mexico, a cacique from

Figure 5. ***Here.***
Source: López, Rodríguez, Newlevant, Ruiz & Schwartz, editors.
Puerto Rico Strong. **Lion Forge, 2018, p. 10. © 2018 Lion Forge.**

nearby Hispaniola, Guacanagarix, from Marién, had prophesied the arrival of the Guakimena (the fair-skinned, divine strangers)—so, together with Urayoán, another cacique from the western side of the island, he ordered the drowning of a Spaniard called Diego Salcedo. After the drowning, the body was watched closely, to make sure it wouldn't come back to life (in Mexico, the Spaniards even hid when they got off their horses, since the Aztecs construed horsemen as divine entities). Once it became clear Spaniards were not gods, Agüeybaná the Brave organized a revolt against the invaders, the 1511 rebellion. This is the main event of "Areytos."

In the story, we witness the dialogue between Agüeybaná the Brave and Karaya (Moon), his religious advisor, who claims to have seen the field of battle in her dreams and warns the cacique numerical advantage will not be enough and that he will most likely perish in battle. Agüeybaná's response is lucid: if he doesn't battle, the devils will consume Taínos one by one, destroying everything they love; if he does, some may live and one day Taínos will become strong again.

Figure 6. Areytos.
Source: López, Rodríguez, Newlevant, Ruiz & Schwartz, editors.
***Puerto Rico Strong*. Lion Forge, 2018, p. 47. © 2018 Lion Forge.**

The call to become strong again is meant to resonate in the heart of the modern-day audience, reading a narrative in which readers are framed as the contemporary descendants of an indigenous race, in spirit, if not biologically, culturally, or socially. In short, the narrative is a call to identify as Taíno.

The conflict between Taínos, Caribs, and Spaniards culminated with the battle of Yagüecas, in which Agüeybaná the Brave died—as suggested by Karaya, a fictional character—supposedly from the shot of an arquebus. As caciques usually wore golden pendants as a sign of distinction, Agüeybaná the Brave must have represented an easy target. Following the cacique's death, the Taínos disbanded and settled for a guerrilla warfare that lasted two decades. According to the story, a 1530 government census claimed there were less than 2,000 Taínos left on the island, from an earlier estimated population of between 500,000 to one million at the time of the arrival of the Spaniards, a precipitous demographic drop in the matter of less than forty years and genocide by any standards. Ultimately, Taíno culture dissolved by way of exclusion and miscegenation, like many other indigenous communities throughout

the Americas. Nonetheless, as the story evinces, it is by way of memory that Taíno identity, ideally cohesive for the Puerto Rican nation, is meant to be resurrected, regardless of an actual cultural connection (in terms of practices) between the indigenous tribe and the current inhabitants of the island or those who have migrated to the mainland.

The next story to draw on this connection, "A Taíno's Tale" (80–85), by Shariff Musallam, and art by Alejandro Rosado, is certainly more picturesque. The narrative is framed like an elementary class—in fact, the audience within the narrative is a group of elementary students listening to their teacher's lesson on Taínos and their culture, based on a book titled as the comic strip. From the beginning, it is apparent that the target audience for this account may be of a younger age. The art of the story, reminiscent of children's drawings, embraces playful, uncomplicated strokes, with clear delineation, multihued backgrounds, and lots of iconic facial imagery. Then again, in the manner of prescriptive knowledge that is to be assimilated with little questioning, the lecture includes an entire catalog of deities: Yúcahu, the creator of humankind; Atabey, the earth spirit, the supreme goddess who created the heavens; Maboyas, lord of the dead; Opiyelguabirán, a half-human, half-dog who guards the entrance to the land of the dead, like Cerberus; Guabancex, the goddess of winds and storms; and Jurakán (yes, his name is the origin of the word "hurricane," just like many other English words come from Taíno), the storm god and one of Guabancex's mightiest warriors. Now, the way in which all these deities are portrayed visually, with dramatic poses and fashionable costumes, echoes more a catalog of superheroes than a religious creed. Rosado is quite skillful at employing a palette of very bright colors and delineating figures that, while looking indigenous and pre-Columbian, embrace some of the aesthetic codes of characters like Hasbro's Transformers; they're menacing yet playful at the same time, a thoughtful combination for any collection of immortals.

Along the same lines, the comic strip describes Taínos in an ethnographic vein—emphasizing the importance of the family unit compellingly—as farmers, excellent fishermen and sailors, skilled hunters, very family and community-oriented, and as very happy people who loved to celebrate, favoring bright attires and ritual dancing, with an almost toy-like artistic appeal, as though an action-hero family set were about to sprout in the market. This is definitely no

accidental coincidence. Both the gods and the humans are modeled after figures familiar to children. On the other hand, at the formal level, the contents also cater to a younger audience. The descriptions of the divinities and the actions of the humans are more coded as a popular culture mythology, with the gods exhibiting superpowers and the humans engaged in regular adventure. Thus, from its title up to its conclusion—the children can't wait to learn more about the superpowers of the gods (already embracing a code from the culture of comics) or about the awesome Taíno women—"A Taíno's Tale" is more geared at children than any other narrative in the volume. Certainly, its object is to appeal to a younger audience, educating them about Borinquen's earlier inhabitants while simultaneously striving to support the notion of a direct connection between Taínos and present-day Boricuas via the language of comics, in some way negating the demise of the culture, not to mention the people.

Following in the footsteps of "A Taíno's Tale," there is "Of Myth & Monsters" (86–94), written by Marco Lopez and Derek Ruiz, and illustrated again by Jamie Jones. A playful take on the topic of the Chupacabra, the story mixes rural folklore with cultural mythology, transgressing the boundaries between them. Though sightings have been reported all over Latin America, the Chupacabra is allegedly of Puerto Rican origin. Benjamin Radford's *Tracking the Chupacabra* (2011) chronicles the first reported attack in March of 1995 in Puerto Rico, where eight sheep were found with three punctures in their chests and completely drained of blood (Gabatiss). Some months later, there was a witness, a woman called Madelyne Tolentino, who reported seeing what was purportedly the Chupacabra in Canóvanas, to the east of San Juan, where around 150 animals were reportedly found dead. As word of the creature spread out, aided by sensationalist media, soon there were sightings or related events recorded all over the Americas.

In the story by Lopez and Ruiz, a family is at the El Yunque National Forest, in the vicinity of Canóvanas, checking that an archaeological site has been secured properly. While checking the site, the father finds a symbol that looks like a *vejigante*, the folkloric character from Puerto Rican festival celebrations. At the same time, the children discover a big-eyed, toothy creature that looks like an emaciated rabbit and decide to nickname it Chupacabra. Suddenly,

a huge *vejigante*-like creature appears out of nowhere and attacks the father, yelling "Spaniard" and "murderer" in Taíno language. The small Chupacabra leaps into action and faces the *vejigante* while the mother stands with a stick, trying to protect her kids and the now unconscious father. As the Chupacabra bites the creature, the family members take the opportunity to hit back, pounding on the monster's hind. The *vejigante* then transforms into a multicolored spirit that apologizes quickly, presenting himself as the ghost of a Taíno. The apparition explains that, following the arrival of the Spaniards and subsequent conflicts, it turned to a zemi, an ancestral spirit of the Taínos, for help.

As a result, the zemi sent magical guardians to protect the Amerindians from the Spaniards, but the invaders were relentless. Despite the help of the spirits, the Spaniards prevailed and the Taíno found himself angry and frustrated, thinking the zemi had failed him. As a consequence, he was punished and trapped as a spirit till someone would release him. Until then, he would have to witness the pain and anguish of his people. Once released, he shares, he will be able to return to his people. The lesson, he reiterates, is to believe in yourself, to rely on each other and understand that what is lost and sacrificed can be again (94). As it dissipates, the father wakes up only to ask what in the world is the smiling, big-eyed and sharp-toothed creature playfully standing next to them.

The story conflates centuries of history in just a few pages, mixing a formal sense of time with pop-culture sensibility. The Chupacabra, the monster, becomes a roguishly aggressive Disneyesque creature, with droopy ears and a large-toothed smile (as though Stitch had gone on a diet while his ears had fallen), that sides with the humans—in fact protecting them. The zemi, personified by an enormous *vejigante*, treats the family as though they were the authentic descendants of Taínos, ratifying a link between its people—the Amerindians—and the current inhabitants of Puerto Rico. The entire demise of the people and culture seems to go unnoticed. While it has attacked a local mistaking him for a Spaniard, it soon realizes its error, and moves on to offer advice. In fact, the otherization of the father as a "Spaniard" represents just a distraction, as the true object of the story is the legitimation of Taíno ancestry as an agglutinating element of the Boricua nation; past the demise of the Spanish Empire, the most effective other remaining for

Figure 7. ***Of Myth & Monsters.***
Source: López, Rodríguez, Newlevant, Ruiz & Schwartz, editors. ***Puerto Rico Strong.*** **Lion Forge, 2018, p. 87. © 2018 Lion Forge.**

this story is the Anglo colonizer, standing in opposition to the Boricua imagined community.

The thread of the narrative is, quite literally, the unbroken connection the spirit seems to make between the Taíno and current Puerto Ricans, most surely a narrative device meant to condone the acceptance of Taíno ancestry as the favored strategy of cultural resistance, not only before the Spaniards—after all, that conflict is long over—but against the cultural onslaught represented by US pop culture. In sum, the story employs the tools of the new colonizer (on this particular occasion, the pop-culture sensibility and love of comics of US culture) to defend its own version of Boricua identity and fight back, if only for a moment. The images by Jones are, by far, some of the most adventurous in the volume, combining dashes of color with goofy characters that seem out of a young-adult graphic novel. Even the Taíno's physical profile, with chiseled cheeks; long, angular features; and a hawk-like nose, seems more at home in a story from the Far West than as a representation of Caribbean physicality. In the end, the story accomplishes its object. Readers will be so dazzled by the graphic display that they will forget to question how is it that the spirit of an almost 500-year old native draws an immediate connection between twenty-first century Puerto Ricans and his kind. Must surely be because it is evident and unquestionable, benefitting the politics of populist nationalism.

The final story bent on drawing a nexus with the Taínos at a more formal level is "Taíno Online" (140–142), authored by Joamette Gil and colored by Christopher Sotomayor. The story opens with the author learning her grandmother was of Amerindian descent. This opening mechanism is especially pertinent, as it proposes circumstances with which many readers may identify, having "discovered" their roots recently thanks to modern genetic analysis. Next, there is an image depicting the Arawaks' influx into the Caribbean, populating the islands Columbus claims to have "discovered." Once again, the image provides an easy graphic equivalent for the understanding of the populational flows of the West Indies prior to the arrival of the Europeans (British, Dutch, French, etc.). As a result of the revelation, the author decides to search for more information online, which she promptly shares with readers: the food the Taíno ate (cassava root, aka *yuca* [not to be confused with yucca]); how they wore their hair in bangs, with

occasional headbands and face paint; how they associated bats with the dead; and the art they practiced honoring the sun (glyphs).

Then comes the discovery of the number of words in English that come from Taíno language: hammock, canoe, hurricane, guava, tobacco, and even barbecue. Among them stands out Borikén or Borinquen, the indigenous name for the land that today is Puerto Rico, thus leading to Boricua, the alternate demonym for Puerto Ricans. Finally, the story shares what I have discussed previously in this text: Taíno genes live on. Modern technology allows genetic analysis to go back centuries, so uncovering lineage that goes back 500 years becomes almost child's play, so to speak.[8] According to the comic strip, DNA studies show that roughly 60% of all mothers since the beginning of Puerto Rico have been of Taíno descent. In Cuba, in comparison, the number is only 34%, leading to conjectures about the annihilation and lack of miscegenation of the Ciboney, the native people of the island, and the greater influence of African descent, i.e., the slaves imported to the island as soon as the Amerindian population dwindled. In any case, the fact that genetic studies confirm a small portion of Taíno descent in many Puerto Ricans provides physical linkage to an imagined communitarian bond. The minimal percentage of DNA may not amount to much and the culture of the people that it represents may have disappeared long ago, but nonetheless it still serves to justify a collective sentiment of identification liable to ideological manipulation. Witness the many times the colors of the Puerto Rican flag are displayed in *Puerto Rico Strong*, from the cover to no less than fourteen other instances, effectively conveying a sentiment of allegiance to readers.

There are more stories in the book that combine in one or another manner many of the aspects I have attempted to describe. "On Traditions & Being Homesick" (120–124), by Jesenia Santana, merges both approaches: the love for a common palate with the power of folklore, basing part of the account on the character Juan Bobo and the power of a folk tale. "Knowledge of Self" (143–147), with art by Javier Cruz Wuznik and a script by Taylor Esposito, reimagines the moment of discovery of Taíno culture between two high school friends, feeding a sense of curiosity toward the island, much like many of the accounts shared previously. My intention with this text has been to prove that, aside from generating a wide variety

of actions seeking to address calamities and misfortunes, mostly from the economic or infrastructural perspective, a natural disaster instigates the creation of cultural products that may be employed to advance an identity-driven agenda, perhaps flirting with nationalism and/or even populism—though this may not be necessarily the case, depending on the orientation of the cultural product. In the case of *Puerto Rico Strong*, most of the argument revolves around feelings of nostalgia and tradition, both key ingredients of national memory. However, how is it possible to create a feeling of solidarity—a sense of the need of support—when many of the potential advocates/benefactors lack a cohesive bond to the geomaterial reality of the island despite their family relations? This is where prosthetic memory comes in to play a critical role.

To the extent that these memories have been absent and, in many cases, are even a recreation of something that has ceased to exist and lost any relationship to the living conditions of populations that departed decades ago, lacking a recurrent physical connection with the place of origin, prosthetic memory does play a role in the configuration of a national memory in the minds of new generations of immigrants, be it Puerto Ricans or Latinxs of other affiliations. Current linguistic research shows the native language of the first generation of immigrants disappears within two to three generations (Escobar & Potowski). Research by the Pew Research Center shows the majority of Latinos no longer deem speaking Spanish necessary to be considered Latino (Krogstad). Thus, new approaches must be implemented if Latinxs are to move on as a collective body, not to mention the multiple nationalities associated and the vast diversity of cultural practices. Imagining a prosthetic nation may be one of the best underhanded alternatives to remain cohesive.

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NOTES

1 The title is a verse from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, a text commonly viewed as a retelling of the colonial experience. In his homonymous play, Aimé Césaire sets it in Haiti. Roberto Fernández Retamar, who passed on in 2019, sets it in Cuba. I embrace it modestly to draw an analogy with the current situation of Puerto Rico, reimagining the tension between a theoretically barbaric aboriginal past (Caliban) and a purportedly learned colonial invader (Prospero/Ariel).
2 For a detailed account of the impact of Hurricane Maria, see Padilla & Rosado.
3 It is important to note that, among the children of undocumented parents, years go by without a visit to their family's home countries, given risks associated with border crossings. Thus, one of the favored ways of supporting identity constructs in children is the nurturing of unlived memories.
4 An author of 17 books, 11 of which are novels, and women's rights activist, Shafak is one of the most distinctive writers in contemporary world literature. Her work combines the local and the global, bringing the margin to the center and vice versa, while instilling meditations on identity politics, feminism, and memory. For a look at her words on this particular subject, see her video on the distinction between knowledge, information, and wisdom on YouTube, dated July 12, 2019 and available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9OMqDBsjdQ. For a wider explanation on this topic, see "A Conversation with Elif Shafak," an interview by Vikas Shah MBE, available at https://thoughteconomics.com/elif-shafak/.

5 This is the familiar case of US citizens from disadvantaged backgrounds initially traveling abroad to Latin American countries or other international locations: while they become increasingly aware of their Americanness, a process that may be challenging at best and distressing at worst, many find it problematic coming to terms with their embodiment of hegemony, accustomed as they may be to not necessarily experiencing entitlement or privilege at home (hence making it more difficult for an individual to imagine her/himself as hegemon).

6 News of a corn-flooded Mexican market were available as early as 2013. (See Robbins).

7 By 1550, roughly 60 years after Spanish arrival, the island's native population had been thoroughly decimated. According to Salvador Brau's canonical text on the history of Puerto Rico (edited by the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña in 1966), in the figures from the 1531 census, 14 out of 71 married Spaniards claimed wives of native descent. The island's population claimed a total of 1,148 Amerindians. Yet, by 1542, when Sevillian clergyman Rodrigo de Bastidas was appointed to enact the freedom of natives, as mandated by Spanish king Charles V, only 60 Amerindians were left in Puerto Rico. In 13 years, the group's mortality rate had soared, effectively annihilating the race. By the early nineteenth century, in 1808, governor Toribio Montes eliminated the group altogether as a census category, given widespread miscegenation had diffused its presence among *pardos libres*. Hence, to speak of Indian descent in Puerto Rico is truly a matter of genetic archaeology. Modern technology can claim genetic descent because it can reach far into the past, but, for practical purposes, Taínos and their culture lost viability centuries ago. Whatever is now called Taíno is a thoroughly modern construct (Fernández L'Hoeste).

8 My own genetic analysis goes back more than eight generations, using 1690 as chronological marker at the farther end while combining Eastern Asian, North African and Arabian, Ashkenazi Jewish, and even Southern East and West African descent past that point, with these distant lineages representing small percentages of my makeup. Like many Latin Americans, I share some European (66.7%) and Amerindian (20.4%) descent.