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Debt Fair Panel, El Museo del Barrio

October 14, 2017

Greetings and gratitude to all those who made this conversation possible. Especially to Occupy Museums for involving Puerto Rico in its projects, and to the curators of the 2017 Whitney Biennial for remaining open to a critical analysis on the role of art museums, the commodification of art and the ironic debt that it leaves artists in. Thank you Arlene Davila for passionately advocating for this project and its artists. Thank you to El Museo del Barrio for exhibiting Debt Fair's Puerto Rico bundle and for hosting this dialogue.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, my flight out of Puerto Rico was canceled. As a result, I missed a long anticipated meeting with the legendary bell hooks in Kentucky and lost my place at a healing justice retreat for artists and activists in Tennessee, to which I had received a scholarship. I have now canceled my rescheduled relief flight to NYC where I was to spend time with my mom in Brooklyn, help with hurricane relief and be present at this panel.

Having been born and raised in Brooklyn, in 2014, I answered a soul call to repatriate my ancestral homeland of *Borikén*. My Queens-born and raised Colombian husband and I, and our two small boys made our home in *Moca* in the northwestern part of *la Isla Grande*. On Wednesday, September 20th, 2017, still recovering from loss of power and water from Hurricane Irma, her sister hurricane Maria took an unexpected turn at the point it had been predicted to exit the island. Its center passed right above us, and its eye wall, with wind gusts of over 200 miles per hour, thrashed us twice. Our beloved Moca looks more like winter in Brooklyn. Trees left standing were seemingly punished for weathering the storm, stripped bare of their leaves, flowers and fruit. They stand brown, broken and brittle revealing homes, rivers, and roads once hidden within lush tropical landscapes. Our view of the green Jaicoa range of hills bares the brown earth lacerations

carved by landslides.

I spare you the details of our experience during the storm, its effect on our home, our family and community in an effort to focus on the topic at hand and because with limited access to news and communication, there is much we have heard but have not been able to confirm. A seldom communication with the outside world brings atrocious accounts that might be true though I haven't seen any of these first hand. Since we have chosen to stay here through whatever this brings, we prefer to focus on the gestures of solidarity and love that we have witnessed. It seems the human tendency is to most speak of tragedies while acts of heroic survival, the sharing of resources and community building go uncelebrated for the most part. For example, the morning after the storm our neighbors provided us with an extension to their generator which they turn on a just a few hours each day. This has allowed us to provide fresh food and cold drinks for our children since the storm. It is the reason that I am able to charge a computer and type this statement, though I must still figure out an internet connection to send it. Another neighbor gave us her telephone when Claro was the first and only company with cell signal. She sent us out to an antenna in Aguadilla with her phone and that is how after 10 days I was finally able to call my mother and family in New York. Afterwards she had us drop the phone off at her Moca home where she waited for the *municipio* to install a tarp since she had lost half of her roof. These are the accounts we must circulate. These are my heroic, generous people whose selflessness fuels our commitment to stay.

Since arriving in Puerto Rico, my work explores nebulae to transcend the abyss of colonialism and oppression, to claim ancestral connection and to affirm our spiritual space in the cosmos. Moreover painting our ancestors in transparent layers of nebulae is how I combat the invisibility imposed by colonialism. In the spirit of the latter, I send this statement in my absence, having been rendered invisible yet again, this time by the (un)natural disaster of hurricanes unheard of, compounded by the complexities and contradictions of colonialism.

The difficult decision to not have boarded my flight this morning is testament to the often impossible intersection at which artists work--the intersection between inspiration, sustainability, struggle and survival. To have escaped to NYC a few days, unable to secure new tickets for my family until November, would have meant leaving them behind with no running water, no power, no communication. 8 years ago, I left my teaching artist positions with El Museo del Barrio and the Studio Museum in Harlem after birthing my first son. This fall, I was celebrating my return to a full time artist practice, having recently resigned from a teaching position and having both boys in school now. I began the fall with a commission that funded these trips that would mark that return to my full artist self. These two hurricanes have cost me my trips, these opportunities and my studio, dark for three weeks and counting, houses a commission unpainted. Our children attended school 4 days in the last month and a half. Classes were canceled for hurricane preparations or for lack of water and power in the aftermath of the storms. Semi-rural and rural communities like mine, already accustomed to losing light and water periodically, are threatened with the possibility of living without these services for months.

Instead of packing for this trip, I divided and packed 6 boxes of rations and 3 cases of water that arrived at our home yesterday from various sources. The boys look forward to packing these in the car and delivering them to folks we know need them. The last two boxes and a gallon of water were delivered by the mayor of Moca himself going door to door. It was a wonderful gesture except it arrived 3 weeks after the storm, consequently the day after US military planes circled above our home repeatedly before finally landing in *el pueblo*. What does 3 weeks mean to those with no access to a car or gas, no access to cash, no water, no food? Especially considering that parts of Puerto Rico had already been without water or light for two weeks after Hurricane Irma.

To say this has been an eventful year for Puerto Rico is an understatement. It opened up with *las promesas a los Reyes*, much like El Museo del Barrio's Three Kings Day Parade. Some of these, like in the town of Hormigueros were dedicated to Oscar Lopez Rivera, Puerto Rican Freedom Fighter held as a political prisoner of the United States for 35

years. On Three Kings Day, which is also Oscar Lopez' birthday, I received an email from Occupy Museums inviting me to participate in the Puerto Rico bundle of their Debt Fair installation at the 2017 Whitney Biennial. I set out to create a nebula piece in honor of this goddess island, this *verde luz* as described by Moca's own Antonio Cabán Vale, el Topo. I included the words "De-Debt/ Decolonize," along with an image of Oscar Lopez Rivera. The following week, it was announced that Obama had commuted his sentence. His release was scheduled for May 17. It is possible that as the exhibit opened up at the Whitney, no one had an idea of the face floating on the Puerto Rico nebula. Not until he was listed as an honoree at the NY Puerto Rican Day Parade and corporate sponsors began to pull out was Oscar Lopez Rivera discussed throughout the media. There had also been US media blocks in the previous weeks surrounding the *paro nacional* or national strike fighting the austerity measures of PROMESA as well as a months-long mass student strike protesting obscene budget cuts to the University of Puerto Rico system. Occupy Museums however made sure to include the UPR strike in an action they held around student debt at the Whitney Museum.

In the weeks leading to Oscar's release, as I closed my final school year teaching at the school his sister founded in Aguadilla, I managed to complete a mural in his hometown of San Sebastian. His image appears alongside a rendering of a *Santos de Palo* carving of the Three Kings. This is my first outdoor mural since Soldaderas, my 2011 East Harlem mural of Frida Kahlo and Julia de Burgos. I call it *el Regalo de los Reyes* after the Julia de Burgos poem of the same title. An excerpt of this poem is included in the mural and is also featured in my Soldaderas mural in the shared red stripe of the Mexican and Puerto Rican flags. With all our two nations share in our cultural and artistic history, and our conflicted political tie to the US, today we share more in the solidarity of struggle, survival and strength post-earthquake and post-hurricane.

No one is ever prepared for a natural disaster, but a natural disaster within an economy crippled by colonialism, an odious debt and weak infrastructure is beyond disastrous. Employees already threatened with furloughs, days of no work to compensate for a failing economy, were left homeless by the storm. The Jones Act or *la ley de cabotaje*

regulating all imported goods to arrive through US ports on US ships, reveals now more than ever the economic strangulation suffered by a colony. My *abuelo* used to say, *no hay mal que por bien no venga* (there is no misfortune that does not come with good reason). It seems like the warrior winds of change of the Yoruba orisha Oya, these sister hurricanes came to turn, change and reveal things that no longer serve us, things kept hidden that must be overturned. Folks who cared not about Puerto Rico, its people or its political status are being made aware of what is happening, are outraged and are demanding justice. The colonial theater crumbles under its own absurdity.

De-Debt: Decolonize. We cannot speak of art and debt in Puerto Rico without addressing colonialism. We cannot speak of what Puerto Rico owes and who they owe it to without considering the paralyzing changes imposed on Puerto Rico's economy and unfolding since the US occupation in 1898. The introduction of an industrial economy is a moot point when it entirely replaces an agricultural economy, denying Puerto Rico its own capacity for self-sustenance, imposing the importation of 80% of its food products at inflated prices. Colonialism constructs failing economies because its existence relies on the dependency of its subjects. Colonies are designed to build wealth for the colonizers while maintaining the colonial order among the colonized. To speak of healthy economies and self-sufficiency in a colony is a contradiction unless it is tied to a dialogue on political self-determination and self-rule. Our approach must be a decolonial one that also extends to post colonial and neo colonial structures. That said, we cannot address these recent hurricanes' crippling of the Caribbean without addressing the US militarism and business interests that have meddled in Caribbean affairs for over a century and the US consumerism that has rendered this region a mere playground for the privileged. We must eradicate the ignorant, pompous gaze that so many direct at the Caribbean, especially by those incapable of naming the islands, the languages they speak, or locating them on a map.

We cannot address the creative capabilities of artists in debt without addressing the lack of basic amenities available to enable inspiration to flow and manifest. We must first address an artist's means of daily survival. Access to a roof over their heads literally as

these storms turn the common, corrugated metal roof into flying shreds of aluminum foil. Despite the abundant rains of this season's skies providing ample water for bathing, laundry and bathroom needs, drinking water remains scarce. Access to power, a cold fridge to keep food fresh, the internet, telephone service, light to work with in the absence of daylight, to power tools and equipment are all basic necessities for an artist's daily studio practice. These are also important to the survival and functionality of any person in today's world. Access to childcare when schools have literally been closed for almost a month is another issue standing in the way of a person's ability to work and earn a living. I remember how a snow storm and a one-day shut down of the NYC subway system could paralyze the city. Imagine the sustained, perpetual reality of life without power or water. Consider this next time you flush the toilet, send a text or email, flip on the light switch, grab a cold drink out the fridge. Consider driving one hour through rush hour with no traffic lights.

It becomes necessary to reverse the gaze, turning an eye away from Puerto Rico and the Caribbean and back at the US, even to Puerto Ricans and other communities of color based in the US. As participants of a US privileged economy, built on the exploitation of less privileged, marginalized communities, how might one be complicit in the current situation? How much effort is being invested daily in challenging for example *la ley de cabotaje* which catastrophically effects the Puerto Rican economy daily, prices and access to food daily beyond the storm. How are funds earned from working in the US being funneled back into Puerto Rico beyond an annual vacation? How can dollars of the American dream, some of that wealth built on tax free incentives for US corporations and the US wealthy in Puerto Rico be invested in Puerto Rico-based businesses, organizations, real estate? How is the Puerto Rican community participating in the art market, supporting their artists, purchasing their work? Are Puerto Rican and allied professionals and academics based in privileged institutions providing ample opportunities to Puerto Rican entrepreneurs and artists to provide talks, presentations and residencies? How do we fight the commodification of water from Detroit to Standing Rock to Puerto Rico? How do we restore its status back to that of sacred survival versus a political weapon in a bottle? Prior to the hurricanes there were two other disasters in

Puerto Rico, the repeated dumping of tons of toxic ashes in Peñuelas, as well as the infrastructure disaster that resulted in Puerto Rico's island-wide power outage last year. The Puerto Rican left and allies who have always spoken out against colonialism and injustice cannot be the only ones to carry the torch of peace, justice and humanity. By turning a blind eye to the dehumanization and exploitation of our community in order to buy into the financial gains, we become complicit in said dehumanization and exploitation and sell our souls in the process. Holistically we can learn to refocus all of our organizing, our programming, our activism, our art, our thinking to be decolonial, to reject the supremacy of one group over another and to reject the internalizing of inferiority complexes that plagues many of our people even long after political independence has been secured. In closing, I offer the words of James Baldwin, "We cannot be free until they are free." Anyone's enslavement, or oppression, equals the enslavement and oppression of us all.

In solidarity, love, light and liberation,

Yasmin Hernandez

October 12, 2017

Moca, Puerto Rico