THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Resentful Humanitarianism

MARÍA DEL PILAR BLANCO

[I]

Donald E. Pease's conclusion to *The New American Exceptionalism* (2009) feels a bit like a scene from a film we keep watching, out of nostalgia or exhaustion, despite knowing every twist of its disappointing plotline. To the reader who has lived through, among other things, four years of Donald Trump's presidency and a devastating global pandemic, Pease's description of Barack Obama's Democratic Convention speech in August 2008 as full of "audacious hope for an alternative future" is a dispatch from another world (213). Reading this conclusion took me back to my own (naive) optimism in 2008: I was so hopeful on the night of Obama's presidential victory in November that I convinced myself the fireworks going off above me were intended to honor this new chapter in US and world history. (As a newcomer to London, where I saw this display, I was quickly reminded by my English companions that it was, in fact, Guy Fawkes night.) My relief that the Bush years were coming to an end was so boundless that, even if for a moment, I believed a future of world peace and racial equality was being pyrotechnically summoned across international skies. I recognize now that such reminiscences about 2008 are sites of acute cruel optimism. Pease's conclusion is a now-gone present of critique caught between trepidation and expectation. Reading it today engenders the affective register Lauren Berlant identified as the "splitting of attachment and expectation," which is part and parcel of political optimism (228). The recollection of that moment, swept in the disillusions of the period from 2009 to 2021, reveals the extent to which we return, despite their evanescence, to hopes for the collective.

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Pease's final interventions in this book about the undoing of post–Cold War, Homeland Security exceptionalism also take us back to Obama's masterful rhetorical handling of the Hurricane Katrina disaster, which arrived at a time when a new "state of fantasy" was undone and "supplanted by antagonistic state fantasies" (Pease 205). Katrina appears in *The New American Exceptionalism* as a nail-in-coffin moment for that phenomenal fantasy of a unique, pioneering nation built on the principles of protecting freedom and equality at all costs. Katrina undid the fantasy: while the nation navigated images of a city in the United States that resembled postinvasion Baghdad, it became clear that "the state had indeed produced the traumatic site against which it purported to defend the Homeland" (203). The abjection that had been so repeatedly situated in a global elsewhere came to describe the mainland United States itself. How and where could new fantasies emerge despite such overwhelming proof of difference, disunity, and abandonment? Identifying with the domestic dispossessed of Hurricane Katrina—those outside the racially and socially homogeneous state fantasy—Obama "became the originative lack out of which our individual desires arise, as well as the object cause of the missing America through which we grasp our desires" (210). In Pease's formulation of this erotics, the reconciliation of lack and object travels through a dialectical process that—to individuals who have been indoctrinated into thinking that they live in an exceptional state—identifies destitution as foreign but simultaneously and uncannily at home inside the perimeters of the nation. Such a process of Benjaminian shock is what leads to the wish for and reactivation of future desires.

The tired exceptionalism that dreams of its redemption resonates with a particular dynamic of political wishing—what Berlant described just a couple of years after Pease's own intervention as the "political optimism against the political depression of the historically disappointed" (228). In reading Pease and Berlant together, I am interested in how they both saw the same historical moment as signifying a shift in American culture (Hurricane Katrina, Obama's role in that history) and how they read the cataclysmic arrival of disaster and catastrophe in the homeland at moments of ideological fatigue. I am especially keen to think through different forms of "political depression of the historically disappointed" in the evolution of a state's fantasy about itself and about its place in the world. It is worth repeating, however stale the argument, that over the course of the twentieth century the ideology of US exceptionalism has relied as much on the proliferation of definitions of *us* and *them* as on the recurrent establishment of uncertain states of belonging that lead to insurmountable political and affective crises. As our understanding of geopolitical hegemonies continues to be shaken by a host of disaster scenarios, it has become ever more urgent to study the diverse places and moments that detail the story of historical disappointment in the United States.

In their interpretation of Liza Johnson's film *South of Ten* (2006), Berlant notes the contours of a "disaster-shaped present" within which "[c]risis turns out not to be fast, but stretched and slow" (258). Pease, taking a broader geopolitical view, reads that crisis thus: "the utter emptiness of this space [New Orleans] produced representations of peoples of the Global Homeland included but with no part to play in the existing order yet empowered to demand an alternative to it" (203). Through these visions of a post-Katrina landscape, Berlant and Pease observe the endpoint of an ideology of privilege and the disappointment that comes in the recognition of that conclusion. As both critics speak in differently poignant ways about the contours of that "disaster-shaped present," they highlight the implications of the disappointment felt by those humbled to admit a state of comparability rather than one of exceptionality. If that was the critique of US exceptionalism a decade ago, how do we interpret the ongoing expansions—through climate and biological crisis—of our "disaster-shaped" landscapes? If such disasters constitute a privileged trigger point that allows the US critic to grasp the brokenness of a domestic welfare state, what William V. Spanos identifies as the urgency to read US exceptionalism "contrapuntally" (293), how then do we recalibrate our sense of "historical

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disappointment" so that it always and already includes the shape of the other?

[II]

> It will disappear. One day it's like a miracle, it will disappear.
> —Donald Trump on COVID-19, 27 February 2020

Pease and Berlant are observers of the unfolding story of a domestic fantasy's undoing. A decade on, it is difficult to think of disaster as something we can study from without. It has become especially tempting, in our viral present, to think of the story of exceptionalism as a multifarious historical fantasy of immunity. This is because, in its many iterations, exceptionalism harbors a dream of untouchability; it is a wish for continued liberty of growth and movement that relies on stasis and the elimination of outside threats. Trump's delusional remarks about the COVID crisis as it unfolded in early 2020 mark the recurrence of exceptionalist thinking in a viral age: the agent that was killing thousands everywhere could here be providentially wished away, and life could continue undeterred. It is an ideology reanimated especially when the material and organic conditions of survival are themselves threatened.

If the exceptional imagines itself untouchable to the point of forcibly pursuing its untouchability, what happens to those it has reached and affected in its strategic pursuit of immunity? How does it imagine and sustain a drama of strength versus weakness, justified for the sake of perpetuating the myth of exception? In pondering these questions, it is impossible to overlook the convergences of US exceptionalism with the nation's histories of (neo)colonialism, expansionism, and racism that accompany such movements. These trajectories converge with the development of US humanitarianism in the liberal age—a moral process that, as Katharyne Mitchell observes, is informed by attitudes to race, and especially Black lives, at home: "the inherited beliefs about a perceived deficiency in the moral and educational capacity of African Americans" that "brought new forms of liberal development into operation" become evident in the deployment of morality and compassion across the empire (351). Thus, the country's divergent aspirations of expansion and protection, exclusivity and inclusivity, have announced the limits of US exceptionalism for well over a century. Those aspirations are central to our understanding of that "historical disappointment" that has become our situation.

As Katrina demonstrated, natural disasters can trigger new understandings about the effectiveness of a geopolitical ideology. Given their propensity to interrupt or even cancel the easy flow of progress narratives, rendering time "stretched and slow," such disasters have had a way of revealing most powerfully the limitations of these accounts. The narrative of how disasters are owned or disowned in the history of the United States' expansion through exceptionalism takes on ever-greater significance in our present moment. In the second volume of his multivolume series *Our New Possessions: A Graphic Account, Descriptive and Historical, of the Tropic Islands of the Sea Which Have Fallen under Our Sway* (1898), Trumbull White writes that the island of Puerto Rico is "the healthiest of the Antilles": "If its natural wholesomeness be fortified by such scientific sanitation as may be expected under American dominance, all the more will this characterization be a correct one" (309). White's travelogue reports that Puerto Rico was not only the "healthiest" (in comparison, say, to the starving Cuban nation featured in war propaganda) but also "known as 'the whitest of the Antilles'" (365)—a dubious selling point that reflected the perception of the island's criollo elites. In addition, major hurricanes had mercifully skirted the island for decades. This portrayal changed dramatically with Hurricane San Ciriaco's landfall on 8 August 1899, just over a year after the US invasion, when the island was still under military rule. It exemplifies how disaster restyles US exceptionalist ideology as it steps outside the immediate homeland. At such moments, the fantasy is forced to define itself against those it has incorporated for strategic gain, and the semantics of invasion and incorporation allow so-called exceptionality to roll out a catalog of domestic exceptions. The storm destroyed much of the island's agricultural

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infrastructure, leaving it dependent on aid from the new imperial power. Stuart B. Schwartz argues that San Ciriaco rendered Puerto Rico extremely vulnerable within this new colonial relation, thwarting the possibility of independence. While the hurricane "presented an excellent opportunity for the United States to demonstrate its efficiency and supposed benevolence," it did so "within the ideological constraints of its leaders and its representatives on the island" (334). As much as these biases and constraints need to be understood in their historical specificity, they disclose a continuum in attitudes to race at home and abroad while solidifying a particular mode of US ethical superiority on the world stage that has come to define US exceptionalism.

Such "constraints" were clearly visible in the reports of the military governor, where we read that the so-called healthiest new possession had now become overwhelmed by its precarity. The concluding statement in the "Preliminary Report of the Board of Charities of Porto Rico," compiled in the *Report of the Military Governor of Porto Rico (1898–1900) on Civil Affairs*, makes this shift abundantly clear. As John Van R. Hoff, the chief surgeon of the Third Army Corps in Puerto Rico, wrote to George W. Davis, the American military governor of the island,

> There is not a single point in common between ourselves and the Porto Ricans. Language, customs, morals, and business standards all differ so radically that it is quite as impossible for us to understand them as they us. Consequently what we do for these people is done not from sympathy, but largely from a sense of duty, and is received by them not as the outpouring of a charitable nation, but as a right for which no equivalent should be expected.
>
> We have accepted these people as our share of the burden that the strong must bear for the weak; we will keep them alive; we will lead them slowly, gently toward the light, and finally in half a hundred years they will catch the first glimmering ray which will show them what our standards are and what we wish theirs to be. (qtd. in Davis et al. 781–82)

The radical absence of commonality and "sympathy"—in essence a racialized lack of common ground—is reiterated across discursive spaces in which US subjects grapple with the matter of Puerto Rico's relation to the exceptional state. Almost two years after San Ciriaco (when Puerto Rico was under civil, not military, rule), the United States Supreme Court famously declared in *Downes v. Bidwell* that the island was "foreign to the United States in a domestic sense."

Hoff's clinical view, expressed in the context of postdisaster charity management, legitimizes at this point in the colonial relation a form of resentful humanitarianism, which the imperial power wields while "slowly" escorting its new, barely living (barely human) charges through the education in the doctrine of the exceptionalism of the powerful. Resentful humanitarianism recalls the etymology of "precarious lives" in Didier Fassin's description: lives "not guaranteed but bestowed in answer to prayer," or "defined not in the absolute of a condition, but in the relation to those who have power over them" (4). In this disaster-shaped opening of Puerto Rico's new colonial chapter, San Ciriaco collapsed disaster management with the process of inculcating the twin concepts of US moral superiority and manifest destiny. The resulting situation laid bare how the fantasy of exceptionalism legitimizes a finite humanitarianism, at once racist and reluctant, that presupposes the enfeebled, limited humanness of others while consolidating an equally powerful idea of North American immunity from catastrophe.

One hundred eighteen years after San Ciriaco, the United States deployed a similar response toward the incorporated territory in the wake of Hurricane María in 2017, despite the many reminders that Puerto Ricans were US citizens in need of help (Puerto Rican US citizenship continues to be news to many on the mainland).[1] On this rhetorical rapprochement, Frances Negrón-Muntaner rightly argues that "the liberal appeal of [the phrase] 'our fellow Americans' is no match for a racist, colonial logic designed to keep resources away from racialized 'minorities' deemed undeserving" (120). As Pease and Berlant recount in their interventions, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina brought home, in dramatic fashion, the precarity of Black lives in

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the United States, despite decades of civil rights struggles. Trump's allegation after Hurricane María that the New Orleans disaster was the "real catastrophe" of the two evinces the skewed practice of comparison within a state of exception, where the domestic tragedy is always deemed to be more relevant and more real. (It is worth remembering that, in a tweet from 13 September 2018, Trump dismissed the revised death toll of nearly three thousand, calling it a fabrication by the Democrats to "make him look bad" [qtd. in Levitz].)

Indeed, the saga of United States–Puerto Rico relations has played out like a "stretched and slow" crisis over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The endpoint for Hoff's "first glimmering ray" of indoctrination rather prophetically coincides with the year 1952 and the drafting of Puerto Rico's constitution, which defined the island as free yet associated with the United States. At that early point in the Cold War, when exceptionalism was resignified as opposition to Soviet communism, Puerto Rico represented what Ramón Grosfoguel has called a "'symbolic showcase' of the capitalist model of development" (46). As Mitchell reminds us, this was also the time in which "humanitarian reason and race," both at home and abroad, were "deeply connected" with matters of "national security" and foreign policy (357). After US military bases were set up across its archipelago in the 1950s, Puerto Rico also became an industrialized society under the auspices of Operation Bootstrap; during this time, Puerto Ricans provided cheap labor for US industry on the island and the mainland (this was the period of increased migration to the continental United States). Though "poor by United States standards" (Trías Monge 120), the island's government made significant improvements to public sectors, especially health and education, in large part to tackle the shift in labor models.[2] At this pivotal historical juncture in United States–Puerto Rico relations, the United States imposed limits on Puerto Rican officials' attempts to define their own humanitarianism—pointing to how exceptionalism operates by taking exception.[3] We can look, for example, to the tense negotiations in the early 1950s around the drafting of the Puerto Rican constitution, which the United States intended to resemble its own constitution without any enhancements. Notably, the United States Congress demanded the removal of section 20 from the draft presented by the autonomous Puerto Rican government—a proposal that took much from the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, as well as Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" speech from 1941—"on the grounds that it conferred 'human rights' on Puerto Ricans" (Venator-Santiago 434). Such rights included "social protection in the event of unemployment, sickness, old age, or disability; the right to obtain work; the right to an adequate standard of living; and the rights of mothers to special care and assistance" (Trías Monge 116–17). The United States, then, "opposed the Puerto Rican effort to create a constitution that would provide the residents of the island with more rights than the residents of the United States" (Venator-Santiago 434).

There are countless reasons to fault that generation of Puerto Rican politicians for indulging interventions by the United States dressed in developmental goodwill. Section 20 is just one rhetorical example in the complex history of the island's David-and-Goliath quest for local development in the face of the United States' pursuit of geopolitical hegemony. In those mid-century decades, the island became for the United States a "'laboratory' in which development—foreign aid, industrialization (a.k.a. the 'global assembly line'), import substitution and population control—was being tested as a global policy" (Briggs 110). The hollowing of humanitarian validation in the rhetorical space of the constitution is immensely telling of how the many modalities of US exceptionalist self-protection hide behind justifications of fairness and beneficence. Such objections to difference or divergence serve only to enhance the United States' own claim to its privileged position.

Obama's signing of the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act in 2016, Hurricanes Irma and María in 2017, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have extended and intensified the sense of historical disappointment that has overwhelmed Puerto Rico's trajectory since 1898. The crises that punctuate this history

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shape a body of rhetoric through which US exceptionalism survives by means of defining, controlling, and ultimately immobilizing those it excepts. The slippery slope of domestic foreignness and foreign domesticity has allowed the United States to carve out an island-shaped space where racialized reason can continue to go unchecked, even while such discriminations are called out and condemned on the mainland. The incorporation of Puerto Rico into the United States fold has thus been far from an exercise in contrapuntal recognition and acceptance of the other. It is more accurately described as the evolution of what I have called "resentful humanitarianism." For this is a form of humanitarianism with edges, which perceives the crisis or disaster not as a reason to practice empathy in order to strive toward equity through aid, but as a way to reconfirm limits and restate hierarchies. The exceptional state, founded on its mythological freedoms, has relied on a self-portrayal and projection of beneficent power and bountiful strength. While domestic disasters may have momentarily shaken this self-image, we now need to attend to the vanishing points—the places in the build-out of that nation that are easily, miraculously wished away—whose histories can educate the United States and the world about the boundaries of its shape-shifting exceptionalism.

Notes

1. In the aftermath of Hurricane María, a number of US media outlets turned their attention to the challenges of the island's postdisaster recovery in the face of its crippling debt crisis—a situation that had been exacerbated by the phaseout, in 1996, of section 936 of the Internal Revenue Code, a provision that offered tax incentives to US companies on the island, and more recently President Obama's signing into law of the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act in 2016. Given Puerto Rico's status as neither a state nor an independent nation, which would allow for debt forgiveness or restructuring, this law instead allowed Congress to appoint a board to watch over the island's financial portfolio, in a bid to continue making it attractive to investors. The board's first step, as Bonilla and LeBrón have pointed out, was to decimate public education, pensions, and wages (7). See also Morales. For an example of US media coverage of the Puerto Rican debt crisis, see Schoen.

2. A *New York Times* article from 1956 hails the island's industrial development and the establishment of rehabilitation centers, which helped with the treatment of workers as they moved from agricultural to industrial labor: "Whereas a high percentage of the injuries formerly seen were machete wounds and other accidents related to sugar cane cutting, new heavy industry coming to Puerto Rico has increased the variety and types of industrial accidents" (Rusk).

3. This refusal of another's exceptionalism must be read in the face of what Parikh calls the "duality" in the United States' relation to human rights. While on the one hand "the subject of human rights has largely been imagined as a latently American one," on the other hand these are "imagined to be that which *others*—other people in other places—need" (3).

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