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## Petromobility and Energy Coloniality in Puerto Rico: Reading Luis Rafael Sánchez's *La Guaracha Del Macho Camacho*

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### ABSTRACT

Since the mid nineteenth century, oil has powered a new phase of global capitalist relations in a world-system that might be appropriately called petro-capitalist. This paper focuses on Puerto Rico, an island which imports all of its oil and occupies a specific position in the petro-capitalist world-system, given its entanglement in several interconnected, inextricable dynamics. I examine the relationship between what Catalina M. de Onís calls 'energy coloniality', U.S. imperialism and petro-capitalism in 1970s-80s Puerto Rico. The primary lens through which I analyse these issues is Luis Rafael Sánchez's novel *La Guaracha del Macho Camacho*, which critiques and resists the orthodoxy of energy coloniality and socio-economic imperialism.

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It is hard to imagine an energy system more vulnerable to climate change amplified shocks than Puerto Rico's. The island receives an astonishing 98% of its electricity from fossil fuels. But since it has no domestic supply of oil, gas or coal, all of these fuels are imported by ship. They are then transported to a handful of hulking power plants by truck and pipeline. Next, the electricity those plants generate is transmitted across huge distances through above-ground wires and an underwater cable that connects the island of Vieques to the main island [...] resulting in energy prices that are nearly twice the U.S. average.

~ Naomi Klein. (2018, 6)

### Navigating el tapón

Naomi Klein's words in the epigraph acknowledge the entanglement of Puerto Rico in several complicated, interconnected dynamics. These include its colonial relationship to the United States (and yoked to this relationship, the inextricable issue of its geopolitical position as an energy dependent in the matrix of North America's hydro-carbon hegemony, a concern that Catalina M de Onís dubs Puerto Rico's situation of 'energy coloniality'); its vulnerable socio-spatial location in the wider global network of the contemporary petro-capitalist world-system; and its particular geographical and

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ecological vulnerability to what Klein calls the ‘amplified shocks’ of climate change (de Onís 2018b; Klein 2018, 6). This paper highlights the way in which one cultural iteration of Puerto Rico’s ‘energy coloniality’ – automobility – is related to North American (petro)imperialism, and examines the literary registration of this in the work of Luis Rafael Sánchez.

The term ‘automobility’ can be provisionally defined as a conceptual framework, developed by critics such as John Urry and Mimi Sheller, to understand the numerous systems (social, political, cultural, geographical) that are shaped by and shape the use of the automobile. This paper will examine critical representations of automobility to understand it as a facet of energy coloniality in Luis Rafael Sánchez’s novel *La Guaracha del Macho Camacho*, or *Macho Camacho’s Beat* (1976).

My main argument is that Puerto Rico’s imbrication in North American (petro) imperialism has created a situation of energy coloniality, registered in national and diasporic literature. The orthodoxy of North American petroculture in Puerto Rico (and the bedrock of imperialism on which it is founded) has shaped its culture in multitudinous ways. For example, North American imperialism has fuelled a (petro)dependency in Puerto Rico, locking it into unsustainable energy relations and ways of life-making (including a dependency on imported foodstuffs) given the island’s vulnerability under the 1920 Jones Act (which restricts waterborne transport within the United States to vessels that are U.S. flagged, U.S. built, and mostly U.S. crewed and owned) (Grabow and Carrillo Obregon 2021). Another example of this petro-dependency is the unsustainable fact of mass car ownership in Puerto Rico, which fosters energy privilege and entrenches unequal social relations demarcated by race and gender. These unequal social relations, and the untenable (petro)imperialism that engenders them, are criticised by Rafael Sánchez, in whose novel a very clear social hierarchy is consolidated by access to automobility, which (amongst other things) represents a cultural proximity to the United States.

I examine the ways in which Rafael Sánchez binds together the reality of Puerto Rico’s ‘energy coloniality’ with the island’s efforts to become, in the words of Stephanie LeMenager, a ‘petrotopia’ modelled on North American infrastructure and consumer habits (de Onís 2018b; LeMenager 2014, 12). The novel makes clear that, for some Puerto Ricans (read: the elite), energy privilege (access to personal automobiles instead of reliance on a limited public transport system, amongst other factors) is part and parcel of everyday life, allowing for social mobility and an overidentification with North American ways of life-making. However, for the majority of Puerto Ricans, this energy privilege aggravates other systemic inequalities and is one piece in the puzzle of the United States’s petro-empire and Puerto Rico’s place within it. As I will make clear, many of these concepts and issues (energy privilege, energy coloniality and petro-imperialism) are bound up in the commodity of the car.

This paper unfolds in four main sections to discuss these issues. Firstly, it begins by laying some theoretical and historical groundwork. I offer a brief synopsis of the essential notion of ‘coloniality’ and consider what de Onís means by the useful terms ‘energy coloniality’, and ‘energy privilege’, before examining the ways in which Puerto Rico remains imbricated in this energy coloniality (2018). This imbrication is both geopolitical (given the island’s status as an unincorporated territory of the United States) and cultural (given its nature as a locus where North American socio-cultural influence is ubiquitous).

Secondly, I think about how the importation of a certain North American oil-based cultural politics of life, the corollary to Puerto Rico's energy dependency, manifests itself in specific ways, channelled through objects such as the automobile. Thirdly, I will consider automobility more specifically in relation to racial and gendered inequality, drawing on the work of critics such as Mimi Sheller, Frantz Fanon, and Cecily Devereux. The car is a critically important locus in Rafael Sánchez's novel and represents not only the island's situation of energy coloniality and the unequal distribution of energy privilege, but it also makes manifest the ways in which the unequal privileges offered by petromobility are demarcated by ethnic and gendered hierarchies.

In the fourth section of the paper, I will turn to consider *Macho Camacho* in some critical depth. I will consider how, in Rafael Sánchez's novel, the central image of the car stuck in el tapón (the traffic jam) embodies the situation of Puerto Rico's inability to divest from hydrocarbons, of its inability to move forward and away from the U.S.'s petro-empire. Finally, I think about the way in which the compound crises of fossil fuel dependency, of imperialism, and of misplaced oil ontologies were, for a moment, brought to the world's attention in 2017 with the arrival of Hurricane María.

It is my hope that this paper will contribute to the burgeoning field of Caribbean petroculture, and more specifically, the study of Caribbean petrofiction, at a time when a critical consideration of humanity's disastrous dependency on hydrocarbons is more necessary than ever, in the academy and beyond. Indeed, to end the gridlock of energy coloniality, we must first creatively and intellectually navigate the traffic jam that this coloniality presents.

### The road to petro-dependency: definitions, inequalities and contexts

The concept of coloniality seeks to account for what Ramon Grosfoguel calls the 'entangled and mutually constitutive relations between the international division of labour, global racial/ethnic hierarchy and hegemonic Eurocentric epistemologies in the modern/colonial world system' (2007, 95). There is, as Grosfoguel argues, a 'crucial structuring process' at play in the modern/colonial world-system, that 'articulates peripheral locations into the international division of labour' (2007, 95). In the contemporary moment, the 'structuring process' of control that Grosfoguel refers to has as much to do with epistemological and discursive control as it once had to do with territorial control (Shome 1996). In the case of Puerto Rico, territorial and discursive colonialism intersect, marking out both human and extra-human natures as sites of extraction and domination. This discussion of control is, of course, inextricably connected to power.

'Energy coloniality' develops this idea (that current capitalist modalities are inflected by the ideological, discursive and territorial legacies of colonialism) by allowing expression of the fact that in the (neo)colonial matrix of petro-powered relations, who is 'developed' and who is 'developing' is decided (in part) by who gets to use fossil fuels and how they do so. Petroleum underlies 'all forms of subjectivity, culture and knowledge production', and petro-powered relations are inextricably connected to the 'structuring processes' of contemporary coloniality (Grosfoguel 2007, 95; Kingsbury 2017, 370). In tandem with the system of coloniality, the ways in which the oil-commodity 'distributes costs and benefits and the degree to which a relation to oil is seen as positive or negative' is unevenly patterned across the core and peripheries of the world-system (Kingsbury 2017, 370).

'Energy coloniality', then, is part of a contemporary system of capitalism that is predicated on geopolitical inequality, racialised systems of control and categorisation, but also, crucially, on the domination and use of energy.

Catalina M. de Onís's conceptualisation of 'energy coloniality' is premised on the theoretical foundations of environmental racism and environmental privilege.<sup>1</sup> In her essay 'Fueling and Delinking from Energy Coloniality', she pithily defines energy coloniality as:

[the] colonial desires to invade, exploit, and export function to control different energy forms (e.g. human labor, migration, and fossil fuels) in intertwined material and cultural systems of power. Our global carbon frenzy is energized by pro-fossil fuel discourses that make delinking from the colonial system of plunder and pollute incredibly difficult and increasingly urgent. Logics of domination, extractivism, and conquest persistently colonize ever deeper subterranean environments, while proposing universal energy solutions that trivialize and ignore geographic, cultural, and other differences, as well as local community efforts to imagine and implement their own alternatives. (2018)

Energy coloniality, she goes on to write, is a 'discourse and system that marks certain places and people as disposable by importing and exporting logics and materials to dominate various energy forms, ranging from humans to hydrocarbons' (2018). I am interested, then, in the ways in which this key concept speaks to Rafael Sánchez's representation of contemporary Puerto Rican petroculture, and the underlying energy dependency from which it suffers. But why choose Puerto Rico specifically? What is the nature of Puerto Rico's energy coloniality, and what is the relationship between energy privilege, imperialism and automobility?

### **Gas-guzzlers: North American imperialism and the importation of the petrotopian dream**

When examining the incursion of oil-capitalism across the Caribbean, and the economic, cultural and political consequences of this irruption, Puerto Rico is a key site to examine. Located in the northeast Caribbean Sea, Puerto Rico is itself an archipelago; composed of the eponymous main island (the focus of this paper), and several smaller islands (such as Culebra, Mona and Vieques), it is marked by its status as an unincorporated territory of the United States, which makes it a somewhat unique locus of socio-economic interest in the Hispanophone Caribbean. It is also an ecological weathervane. Its precarious environmental situation denotes the potentiality of a burgeoning dystopian future, engendered by the continued use of fossil fuels within a heavily carbonised global economy. Of course, in peripheral sites of the world-system, such as Puerto Rico (and other Caribbean nation-states), this kind of potential, imminent dystopian future (replete with tsunamis, hurricanes, famines, and floods) is already an ongoing reality. The study of Puerto Rico in the energy humanities (as well as in energy democracy scholarship more generally) is crucial because:

[...] the archipelago's energy challenges and its related, disproportionate experiences with environmental degradation and climate disruption make Puerto Rico an apt location for examining the precarity and consequences of carbon-based economies. Detailed study of Puerto Rico's energy exigencies helps make the need to transition justly and sustainably from

high carbon to low carbon energy sources feel pressing and vital. In other words, critically engaging Puerto Rico's frontline experiences brings an urgency to the imperative of keeping fossil fuels in the ground and unsettles pervasive complacency by those currently privileged enough to look the other way. (de Onís 2018a)

Another essential component of the island's importance to any study of Caribbean oil-culture is, as I have already made clear, its imbrication within North America's (petro) empire, and this empire's imperialist ambitions. The Puerto Rican archipelago has long been the site of North American imperialist intrusion and socio-economic experimentation, from its colonisation by the United States in 1898 to its current, 'second-class citizen' status. Throughout the course of this relationship, the archipelago has 'continuously served as a living laboratory for prototypes that would later be exported around the globe' (Klein 2018, 25–6). The United States' exploitation of Puerto Rico has ranged from the sterilisation of more than one third of Puerto Rican women in the sixties to control population, to the testing of dangerous drugs and the use of Vieques as a 'testing ground for everything from Agent Orange to depleted uranium to napalm' (Klein 2018, 25–6). Throughout its history, the island and its people have been 'exploited as a sacrifice zone for empire building [. . .] [for] corporate greed and toxic energy projects' (Bullard 1993, 13). Some economists have also made the case that it was Puerto Rico which invented the 'whole model of the special economic zone' (Klein 2018, 26). This 'intense penetration of American capital, commodities, laws [. . .] and customs', as well as the resultant violence caused by economic and ecological trauma in Puerto Rico is thoroughly entangled with the cultural, social, ecological and political ways of life-making which are engendered by oil and its multiple uses (Duany 2006, 51). Of course, Puerto Rico's energy dependency relates to the U.S.'s own special relationship with oil.

As Peter Hitchcock writes, the oil dependency of the United States is 'not just an economic attachment but [. . .] a kind of cognitive compulsion that mightily prohibits alternatives to its utility as a commodity and as an array of cultural signifiers' (2007, 82). In the aftermath of World War Two, oil came to power vast swathes of socio-cultural life in the States, fundamentally transforming patterns of (auto) mobility, suburbanisation and commodity consumption. Today, the oil-commodity continues to act as a 'cognitive compulsion' in a nation which is home to less than 5% of the global population, yet where 22% of global petroleum consumption occurs, more than all the BRIC countries combined (Huber 2013, 73). Despite the oil shocks of the 1970s and the debates over peak oil, problems of scarcity, and the environmental damage wrought by carbon-dependent economies, the United States continues to paint itself as what LeMenager calls a 'petrotopia', a term which describes the idealised, romanticised landscape of 'modern infrastructures' (highways, suburbs, malls and so on) that supposedly make life faster, more convenient and more technologically advanced (2014, 12). There has developed not only the notion (encouraged by governments and corporations) that petrotopias are the ideal end state, but also that there is an inalienable right for all North Americans in particular to use copious amounts of oil within the paradigm of this petrotopian existence. Indeed, an oil-guzzling lifestyle has come to represent 'American-ness' in many ways. As Huber points out, 'cheap gasoline has become a basic aspect of everyday survival in an era of eroding economic security' for North American families and communities (2013, xv).

However, behind this façade of progressive, modern petrotopian life and its many accoutrements lies the repression of certain communities, areas, and indeed, even nation-states, which cannot partake of petrotopian existence in the same way; petrotopias are not actually constructed for these communities (LeMenager 2014, 12). This underbelly of repression includes the externalised violence committed by the U.S. in the form of imperialist interventions into oil-producing countries such as Iraq. Importantly, though, it also includes the repression of (and the violence done to) certain demographics within North America's own internal borders. By replacing and displacing local communities, new petrotopian spaces are created which 'function in the service of capital' and, naturally, in the service of specific and selective demographics (LeMenager 2014, 12). This relentless creation of petrotopian spaces includes, for example, the violence enacted on South Bronx neighbourhoods flattened to be replaced by freeway developments, or the erosion of the wetlands below New Orleans to build canals and dams (LeMenager 2014, 12). To these examples we can add the liminal one of Puerto Rico, which has experienced what LeMenager calls the 'repressed consequences' and 'irreversible damage' caused by the relentless production of petrotopian spaces at the expense of non-white, working class communities and natural landscapes (2014, 12).

The petrocultural landscapes of the global North – which depict oil and its innumerable by-products as cheaply and readily accessible to the masses, with oil as the panacea which facilitates widespread wealth and personal liberty – when imported to nations of the global South, is, as Roberto Schwarz pointed out in a slightly different context, profoundly 'misplaced' (1992, 182). In other words, oil-as-wealth/wealth-through-oil, which gives the (illusory) appearance of a developed reality in core nations, is not manifested in the same way in nations such as Puerto Rico. The misplacement of what Imre Szeman calls 'oil ontologies' in peripheral nations and regions is reflected in the literatures of these locations because the manifestations of oil's supposedly modernising, liberating tendencies, which are often prevalent in the core nations, cannot be actualised in the same way in these (semi-)peripheries (2007, 806). The fact and reality of oil's coloniality in Puerto Rico, in other words, undercuts the triumphal narratives which declare oil to be the harbinger of modernity, equality, progress and opportunity. The Puerto Rican author in turn must recognise the social realities that the oil industry brings as being connected to Puerto Rico's position in the world-system and, in Schwarz's terms, turn this mismatch into formal principles which manifest an authentically Boricuan social reality, rather than merely importing and unsuccessfully imitating the oil ontologies of the core nations.

### Let's get this thing on the road!: reading the automobile

At this juncture, I want to take a moment to consider the car itself – the ultimate symbol of oil's capacity to shape privatised space and embody ideologies of freedom – in a little more detail before considering the ways in which it has shaped Puerto Rican life specifically, as well as the way it is registered in *Macho Camacho's Beat*.

The automobile is what John Urry and Mimi Sheller call the 'quintessential manufactured object' of Western capitalism (2000, 737). The car symbolises and embodies the 'dominant culture that sustains major discourses of what constitutes the good life' (Huber 2013, 74). The automobile's creation of a cultural politics of life based on an 'individuated

sense of freedom and power over space in comfort' has become, as Matthew Huber writes:

[...] constitutive of American conceptions of freedom, the open road and the crafting of what Cotton Seiler calls 'autonomous objects' even as the social relations of production that made the production of the car possible were underemphasised in favor of the individual's own entrepreneurial capacities which were constructed as the real force, behind the power of the automobile and the oil that fueled it. In other words, then, the automobile stands as perhaps one of the most forceful symbols of the individual's work ethic and life choices [...] an increasing expression of life as capital, life as a series of investment choices and debt financing to make a life for yourself. (2013, 74–6)

But the car embodies more than a series of investment choices and economic decisions; the automobile also creates in humans a variety of 'aesthetic, emotional and sensory responses' (Sheller 2004, 221). What Urry calls a 'dominant culture of automobility' is embedded in a deeply normalised, habitualised context of 'affective and embodied relations between people, machines and spaces of mobility', as Mimi Sheller puts it, 'in which emotions and the senses play a key part' (Sheller 2004, 221; Urry 2000, 3). The many emotional responses that human beings have towards the physical object of the car (and towards the act of driving) are essential in the personal investments made in the purchase and use of cars. The feelings generated around the object of the car, and its relation to social relationships, have been called 'automotive emotions' by Sheller (2004, 222). 'automotive emotions', an obvious product of petro-capitalist ways of life-making, are 'powerful indicators of the emotional currents and [the] submerged moral economies of car cultures' (Sheller 2004, 222–224). They range from the positive to the negative, from the sensations of pleasure-seeking, exhilaration and satisfaction to deep anxiety, frustration, horror and terror. These various feelings contribute to the overwhelming dominance of contemporary car culture in most human societies, a culture which is, of course, reinforced by advertising, mass media, and so on. The ideologies embodied by the car and by the act of driving create, in other words, structures of feeling which are constantly strengthened and reaffirmed by our inhabitation of various 'petrotopian' paradigms, particularly in the core nations.

Puerto Rico, like many peripheral nations of the world-system, imitates North American petrotopian ways of life-making. The island's capital, San Juan, possesses an underused, underfunded and geographically inefficient public transit system, which only 5% of the total island's population have access to (Acosta Cruz 2014, 111). Perhaps in part because of this, Puerto Rico possesses a staggeringly high car-use rate, despite its small size. Indeed, a topographical map of the country displays to the viewer an 'astonishing density of roads' – in one statistical comparison that put visual value to data, it was shown that 'Puerto Rico now has 25,647 km of road [...] if all the roads in Puerto Rico were placed in a straight line one could get to Australia, China or India and still have more than 14,000 km left over' (Acosta Cruz 2014, 111). As well as being a determinant of specific 'automotive emotions' and constructing a certain politics of life, the automobile is a key cog in the larger mechanics of energy coloniality on the island. This is partly due to the essential fact that car-owners are dependent on imported petroleum for fuel, and dependent on the imported object of the car itself to power specific ways of life-making. The car is one fundamental part of a network of the cultural politics of life in Puerto Rico which renders many Boricuas more Americanised than their diasporic compatriots. Ramon Grosfoguel



explains that ‘many middle-class Spanish speaking Puerto Ricans on the island are more assimilated to North American “white” middle-class practices with their suburban houses, cable television, racist representations of Puerto Rican identity and mass consumption [...] than many non-Spanish-speaking Puerto Ricans in the U.S. living segregated in urban ghettos’ (2013, 142). As in the United States, the Puerto Rican metropolis has been converted, through processes of industrialisation and neoliberalisation, into what Jack Furness calls an ‘autopolis’ (Furness, quoted in Sheller 2018, 54). This in turn has facilitated mass suburbanisation, urbanisation but also a type of cognitive compulsion, wherein car-ownership is an act of common sense and lauded as a symbol of upward mobility. The emotional culture of driving, when combined with its material infrastructures and technologies, becomes a powerful symbol of contemporary petroculture.

In ‘Driving While Black’, Paul Gilroy describes the car as ‘the ur commodity’: as such, he writes, the car not only helps us to ‘periodise our encounters with capitalism as it moves into and leaves its industrial phase, [it] also politicise[s] and moralise[s] everyday life in unprecedented configurations’ (2001, 89). In Puerto Rico, narratives featuring the car-road assemblage are often flavoured by the island’s paradoxical situation of energy coloniality and Americanised automobile-culture. Part of the politicisation and moralisation of life in novel ways that Gilroy discusses involves a cultural yoking together of women and cars, a theme particularly pertinent for my consideration of *La Guaracha del Macho Camacho*. Before I turn to Rafael Sánchez’s novel, it is to this notion of what Cecily Devereux calls the ‘petrocultural feminine’ that I will examine first.

### **Ain’t she a beauty: cars, bodies and commodities (or, rereading the automobile)**

There runs throughout twenty-first-century petroculture what Devereux calls a ‘familiar [...] impulse to represent both cars as women and women as cars and thus, equally and interchangeably, as commodities’ (2017, 163). Both cars and women are, as Jean Baudrillard puts it, ‘objects [...] to be bought’ (1996, 69). Indeed, as Baudrillard goes on to write, all objects, ‘cars included, become women in order to be bought’, this in of itself being a normalised ‘function of the cultural system’ in which we all exist (1996, 69).

The patriarchal impulse to represent women as cars and cars as women delineates both as objects which are ‘constituted from, sustained by, and dependent on oil industries’ (Devereux 2017, 163). This does not just mean the repeated association of women with cars here (as is the case in so many car advertisements and in masculinist car culture), but also of the equal constitution of both as *products*, catered to satisfy the desires of a specifically male consumer. Mass media and advertising in particular have created a ‘foundational symbolic interchangeability between women and cars’ (Devereux 2017, 163). This interchangeability emphasises how petroculture has been fundamental in propelling the ‘[...] representation and performance of femininity in the twenty-first century’ (Devereux 2017, 163).

In this regard, petroculture maintains what Devereux calls ‘a symbolic economy’, one which depends on women not having the ‘capacity to be self-propelling or self-determining: not to be driving but to be driven, not to be subject but object’ (2017, 164). Moreover, ‘through an obfuscatory exchange of value, they – like cars – are not or cannot be “automobile”’ (Devereux 2017, 164–5). It follows, then, that ‘if the business of

selling cars depends on the constitution of an idea of femininity that is symbolically aligned with cars and thus rendered immobile, subordinate, and infinitely exchangeable (the petrocultural feminine), then the business of constituting masculinity in this cultural system arguably depends on the affirmation of car culture's representations' (2017, 169). If we recall again the words of Gilroy, who deemed the car to be the 'ur commodity' of capitalism (2001, 89), then we can understand the car as possessive of a dual referentiality: 'not only to itself but to the women and the traffic in women it represents, and [it is] therefore a crucial index of the operation of the "cultural system" as a whole' (Devereux 2017, 165).

Understanding the conceptual framework of automobility, then, means understanding the ways in which the automobile shapes, and is shaped by, personal, social, cultural, political and economic systems. In the context of Puerto Rico, the access to automobility, as I have shown, is unequally patterned, and intersects with unequal energy privileges which co-exist with racial and gendered hierarchies. The situation of energy coloniality on the island, from which this divisive energy privilege springs, has been registered and critiqued by numerous Puerto Rican authors.

### **'The traffic jam nation': energy coloniality and automobility in *La Guaracha del Macho Camacho***

Rafael Sánchez's *La Guaracha Del Macho Camacho* has emerged as one of the nation's quintessential oil novels. The narrative centres on a 'traffic jam nation that cannot move forward despite – in fact ironically, because of – the many roads laid out over the landscape' (Rabassa 2001, x). *Macho Camacho's Beat* underlines to the reader the cultural importance of oil to Puerto Rican society and the way this cultural dependency is underpinned by North American imperialism (Oloff 2019, 73). The text has been regarded as symptomatic of the crisis of Operation Bootstrap and what Cruz-Malavé calls (Bootstrap's) 'heteronormative tropes of narrating the nation' (1995, 139). Rafael Sánchez depicts a country plagued by (amongst others) three new 'national traits: a calcified class system, a corrupt government and a stomach-turning culture of trashy mass-media', as Gregory Rabassa calls it in the preface to the novel (2001, x). A fourth trait, we might add, that is wholly entwined with the other three, is a complete dependency on oil and its by-products. As Kerstin Oloff explains, 'while [it was] profoundly and completely reshaped by oil-powered U.S. imperialism, Puerto Rico never had any direct access to oil production, and oil's impact was largely mediated through industrialisation, electrification, de-ruralisation, automobilization, and consumerism. While Rafael Sánchez's text features no oil derricks, oil suffuses the entire island, its infrastructure, and its culture' (2019, 73).

Rafael Sánchez examines not only the range of automotive emotions engendered by the car and what this means in a Puerto Rican context, but he also uses the car to reflect on the nation's energy dependency and its imbrication in colonial relations with the United States. Showcasing a lifeworld predicated on offshore energy sources, Rafael Sánchez illustrates to the reader both the cultural politics of life created by oil dependency in a peripheral context, and the structures of feeling that result from this manner of life-making, across the class spectrum. Two of the most significant and intertwined themes of *Macho Camacho's Beat* are the depiction of the automobile as a fetishised, hypersexualised entity (that becomes a subject according to Marx's logics of commodity

fetishism) and the simultaneous depiction of the female body (particularly the dark-skinned, working-class Puerto Rican female) as a dehumanised, commodified object.

*Macho Camacho's Beat* repeatedly utilises a gendered 'petrocultural impulse' – continually making connections between cars and women and the 'auto-immobility' (to borrow Devereux's phrase) of working-class, dark-skinned Puerto Rican women under the gaze of automobile-owning, mobile upper-class Puerto Rican men (2017, 165). The novel is particularly interesting because its focus on the exploitation and hypersexualisation of dark-skinned, working-class Boricua women complicates the work of theorists such as Devereux, whose focus arguably leans more towards the Euro-American-core rather than a colonial Latin American and Caribbean context. Rafael Sánchez depicts the manner in which the automobile has, as Carol Sanger puts it, 'come to serve women – as drivers, as passengers, as purchasers – less well than men' (Sanger 1995–1996, 705). The automobile and the Puerto Rican female become interchangeable, sexualised commodities throughout the text, and both exist in order to serve and satisfy the male gaze and appetite.

Take, for example, the Old Man, one of the novel's elite protagonists. The Old Man has a mistress named The Mother, whose self-description as a 'sweet dark girl of my native land' is indicative of her ethnicity, marking her out in the eyes of Puerto Rico's elites as socially inferior (Rafael Sánchez 2001, 8). Notably, the Mother is not only dark-skinned, but also of a lower class than Graciela (the Old Man's aristocratic, neurotic wife) and this palpable power dynamic in their socio-sexual relations is repeatedly referenced by Rafael Sánchez. As Sanger notes, 'the car has reinforced women's subordinated status in ways that make the subordination seem ordinary, even logical' (1995–6). There are two 'predictable, but subtle mechanisms' that normalise this reinforcement: the first 'permits' women to drive but does so by 'increasing [their] domestic obligations' and as such makes the car 'an extension of the domestic space of the home and the job of the maternal caregiver' (Sanger 1995–1996, 705). The second mechanism is one which the reader observes in the opening scenes of *Macho Camacho's Beat*, where the relationship between women and cars is explicitly sexualised in the dalliances between the Old Man and the Mother. The car becomes a space and index for 'the sexual subordination of women [. . .] an extension of the home, a location for sexual danger' (Devereux 2017, 165). The Mother's description of the sexual act emphasises the fact of her sexual vulnerability and gendered subordination. She relates to the reader that:

[. . .] after we do what we do, laboris fornicato, he climbs into his car and nice as you please he goes off in his car of cars: the superlative refers to a Mercedes-Benz with all the grillwork and novelties of the moment with the outstanding additive of a front seat that tilts back until its on the same level as the back seat: an emergency bed for emergency coitus. (Rafael Sánchez 2001, 7)

While he 'goes off in his car' after the act, the Mother bemoans the fact that she is the one who has to 'get on the bus, and not him [. . .] who's got to put up with the pawing [. . .] on the bus and not him [. . .] who has to get home at all hours and not him' (Rafael Sánchez 2001, 7–8). She shrugs off this instance of what Mimi Sheller calls gendered 'inequal mobilities' with the perceived advantage of her female sexuality (Sheller 2018, 5).<sup>2</sup> 'I've got fucking to spare', she boasts to the reader. 'I've got more than enough types who want to grab me as soon as I hit the street. I've got enough studs who want to mount me for myself [. . .] if I set out accepting lifts I wouldn't know what it was like

to ride the bus for the rest of my days' (Rafael Sánchez 2001, 9). Nevertheless, the reader is cognisant of the combination of unequal power-dynamics and gendered transport poverty at work in the encounter, all of which renders the Mother socio-economically immobile. The car becomes a sexualised space of privatised freedom (for the Old Man) where the body of his mistress can be utilised for a quick, taboo sexual encounter. The Mother, meanwhile, becomes further entrenched in her position of immobility by these encounters. The Old Man's hasty tumbles with the Mother epitomise the social gulf between the classes; after he ensures his sexual needs (which are important enough to be deemed an 'emergency') have been satisfied, the automobile enables him to return to his 'real life', to his upper-class nuclear family and to all the material accoutrements of his wealthy lifestyle. However, for the Mother, the car embodies a space of sexual exchange, an exchange which highlights the sexual vulnerability afforded to her by her gender, her lack of social mobility and the profound difference between the two classes.

The presentation of women and cars as interchangeable, sexualised commodities that exist to pleasure the male gaze is a theme that runs throughout Rafael Sánchez's text, alongside his critique of other aspects of contemporary Puerto Rican life. These critiques are most powerfully voiced through Sánchez's depictions of his highly flawed protagonists. Senator Vicente Reinoso, for example, is (as Gregory Rabassa notes) the exemplification of the crooked Politician: venal, selfish and shallow, but holding power all the same. He is the striver moving up through the bourgeoisie as his ilk comes to dominate so many aspects of life on the island. He also represents those who will sell out Puerto Rico to the Americans (Rabassa 2001, v). He is one of many guilty parties in the inexorable 'Yankeefication of the island's culture and manners' (Rabassa 2001, v). The author uses repetitive slogans for him throughout *Macho Camacho's Beat* in a Homeric style: 'Vince is a prince, no accident, clean rinse', 'Vince is a prince and his ideas convince', 'Vince is a prince for the poor long since' (Rafael Sánchez 2001, 18, 20, 23). The catchphrases are based on hollow political slogans, which are starkly contrasted to his lewd behaviour.

For example, in one vignette, the reader encounters Reinoso stuck in a traffic jam, where he ogles the 'magnificent Olympian asses of some magnificent females who form a pretty pair fucking around on top of a blue Mustang' (Rafael Sánchez 2001, 124). They are 'scatterbrained people the little females, dancing about in the hope that two nervy dudes would organise some fun and games for them [...] One chasing the other, leaping across car tops, lifting up their skirts, giving off sweat at the joints, challenging the sun, playing, dancing, shouting, making flags with their asses as rags' while Reinoso '[...] feels a heighdy-ho between his legs' even as he is 'contented with [his] task of meeting the mistress of the moment' (Rafael Sánchez 2001, 124). Here again, the car and the attractive female body become conjoined objects of desire under the male gaze. The hypersexualised relationship between women and cars (as Devereux puts it, 'women = cars = pussy') in advertising and popular culture (a trope that Rafael Sánchez borrows in this scene) reinforces the subordinated status of women, emphasising the sense of male automobility and female immobility. As Devereux outlines:

Across the web, in magazines, on television, in music videos, women's bodies are represented alongside, with, and as cars. These images are so pervasive and so familiar that they have arguably been internalized in North America as 'ordinary' – at least, as 'ordinary' as cars

themselves. While 'ordinary', however, these images of women and cars are far from neutral, functionalized as they are as affirmation of a contractual relationship between a male buyer and his prospective automobile: what is promised is his automobility and his control over both 'objects'. As they are represented in so much advertising, women in their not-going-anywhere bodywear (bikinis, heels), invoked, literally, as hood adornment, attached to cars synecdochally but constellated with them as 'objects' in relation to the male buyer, signify their own immobility while affirming an ideology of femininity subordinated in the making of masculinity. (2017, 167)

While stuck in the traffic jam, Reinosa fantasises about having sex with 'great big women like the Amazons of California [...] [with] hundreds of hairy, cavernous sexes' while waiting in the 'abundance of heat and many, very many guarachomaniac drivers and passengers' (Rafael Sánchez 2001, 21–23). Reinosa's lewd fantasies highlight the misogyny and patriarchal tendencies of the Puerto Rican governing elite. Reinosa is not the only high-ranking official whose sexual proclivities suggest an uneasy power dynamic in terms of class and race: while he admits that 'coloured females heat me up: the worst kept secret' is 'in the Senate: Senator Guzmán, peer of a pair of motels, with jibes and jabber accuses him of black-woman trade' (Rafael Sánchez 2001, 73).

Like his peers, Reinosa is a corrupt and insatiable womaniser, for with 'his neatly hidden love affairs and mistresses he could form a stable: how many fillies: puffing up his cheeks like the fabled frog' (Rafael Sánchez 2001, 25). The reader witnesses him in another instance attempting to seduce a minor in his car, a schoolgirl 'who must be round about fifteen when she gets home and washes the pound of makeup down the drain' (Rafael Sánchez 2001, 77). While he feels a momentary 'shame that wraps around his soul like a strip of crepe paper' at the encounter, Reinosa nevertheless enjoys the role he plays, that of a 'fine and refined [...] gentleman' engaged in a 'game of cat and mouse' (Rafael Sánchez 2001, 76–77). Rafael Sánchez makes it evident that the commodification and hypersexualisation of working-class, black or mixed-race (and underage) Puerto Rican girls and women is a widespread problem. The connections between automobility and sexuality – whether this be the vignettes of sexual encounters had in the male-dominated space of the car, or images of scantily clad, 'immobile' women writhing on automobiles – emphasise both the commodification of automobiles and women, but most importantly the lack of agency possessed by these women, who become objects of desire under a controlling, lustful male gaze. However, the connections between automobility and working-class Puerto Rican women may also be read as an allegorical examination – a potentially problematic one, nevertheless – of Puerto Rico's position (that is to say, its coloniality, and more specifically its energy coloniality) vis-à-vis the U.S. The women of the text allegorise Puerto Rico's own subordinated, objectified status in relation to the States, as well as the country's dependency on North American energy systems.

Of course, this interchangeable relationship (of women as cars) works both ways in the text. Cars also become women; they become objects of affection or desire, coddled and anthropomorphised. Reinosa's son, Benny, (whom Gregory Rabassa calls a 'superficial cipher') is an embodiment of Puerto Rico's hyper-privileged elites, who exist within the upper echelons of a deeply divided society (Rabassa 2001, v). Benny's fixation with the 'ferruled Ferrari' that he is given on his eighteenth birthday exemplifies the interchangeable relation between cars and women in the symbolic economy of Puerto Rican petroculture. His reaction to the gift is to immediately 'swoon'; being given a car is a 'frenum to frenzy' – a sexual, orgasmic, romantic reaction which seems rather disproportionate to being given

a vehicle as a birthday present (Rafael Sánchez 2001, 52–3). His father informs both Benny and the reader that ‘the important thing is for him to have his car or his jalopy or his heap or his shell on four wheels [...] no teenager can get along without the friendship of his car’, while Benny himself ‘confesses to the Ferrari: you’re the only one who understands me, only you and me’ (Rafael Sánchez 2001, 153, 206). Energy privilege amongst the upper classes has created a disturbing material and psychological dependency on the car, to the extent that automobile ownership comes to replace social relations. Benny’s relationship with the car is a romantic, lustful one, which dovetails with the idea of cars as inherently feminised and sexualised within the social paradigms of petroculture.

The reader repeatedly witnesses Benny devoting disproportionate amounts of time and attention to the car, lavishing on it the tenderness and affection that he does not bother to offer his female lovers. The connections between automobility, lust (both the lust for speed and sexual desire) and the pleasure of physical sensation are made explicit by Rafael Sánchez in Benny’s bond with his car. The object of the car is not only feminised but comes to quite literally stand in for a woman. This not only exemplifies the arguments put forward by critics such as Devereux (car = woman = pussy), but highlights the nature of Benny’s commodity fetishism, which is entangled with a libidinal attachment to an imported ideology from the North American petrocultural paradigm, which has become commonplace on the island. He spends his mornings in the meticulous polishing of his Ferrari. A detailed care with attent attention to the fenders, the windshields, the horns, the hubcaps, the hood: attent attention with ammonia for the chrome, wax for the body, vacuum cleaner for the seats, spends lunchtime eating next to his car because, as he explains, ‘I like my Ferrari to see me eat, what I mean is that I like to offer spoonfuls of food to my Ferrari’, and then ‘spends his afternoons taking the Ferrari from San Juan to Caguas and from Caguas to San Juan’ (Rafael Sánchez 2001, 107). Benny’s fetishistic treatment of the Ferrari verges on objectophilia, or even religious worship:

[...] at night after a warm shower and saudade for the Ferrari [he ponders that] it’s probably thinking about me just the way I’m thinking about it. After the bye-bye he bids the carport where the Ferrari is alone and waiting, Benny heads for his room, after walking around the Ferrari four times, giving it looks that could be translated as have a good night’s sleep, looks that are sighs, honey-sweet with tender words, cooing and assorted whorey terms. At night, after the above-mentioned ritual, Benny gets into bed, pulls up the covers, and says: ugly, Catholic and sentimental: Our Ferrari which art in the carport, hallowed be Thy Name, I mean thy kingdom of motor and chassis. And man, forgive us the sin of driving like you were a tortoise, amen. (Rafael Sánchez 2001, 151–153)

Even his masturbation uses the automobile as a reference point, a mildly disturbing textual detail which suggests the extent of his hyper-fetishisation of the car (and suggests his violent tendencies or desires when having sex with real women):

[...] his hand attains the automotive speed denied the Ferrari: Ferrari all chrome, Ferrari all wax, Ferrari all nickel, Ferrari all intercepted by Benny’s confused kisses, Ferrari pierced, Ferrari penetrated by Benny’s desire, the gas tank torn by Benny’s desire, by Benny’s officiant, Ferrari gorged by Benny’s semen (Rafael Sánchez 2001, 151–153).

Benny’s autoerotic fixation is a displaced expression of a wholehearted investment in a particular cultural politics of life shaped by North American influence. Characters such as Benny, who embody the Puerto Rican elite’s imitation of North American petrotopian

lifestyles, are Rafael Sánchez's vessel by which to critique the real-life bourgeoisie of Puerto Rican society. Benny's erotic fixation on his Ferrari, then, calls attention to the ways in which U.S. imperialism manifests as energy colonialism, mediated through a local elite who fetishise the objects which symbolise petrotopian lifestyles of the global North. It is this kind of fetishisation which, the author seems to suggest, maintains Puerto Rico's energy dependency on the States, but also propagates a set of patriarchal cultural norms which equate cars to women and women to cars, a toxic admixture of misogyny and commercial exchange that serves both the male gaze and male interest.

However, there is another important link to be made here between Benny's erotic fixation, imitation of the coloniser, and energy coloniality. In his book *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*, Dominique O. Mannoni writes of his '[...] central idea [...] that the confrontation of "civilised" and "primitive" men creates a special situation – the colonial situation – and brings about the emergence of a mass of illusions and misunderstandings that only a psychological analysis can place and define' (1964, 40). In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon elucidates some of these 'illusions and misunderstandings', by considering the notion of colonial imitation and identification with the coloniser. Fanon writes that the 'Antillean' child begins to identify with the 'white man who carries truth to all savages' due to the ingestion of the socio-cultural norms that surround him. This, Fanon writes, is the phenomenon of '[...] identification – that is, the young Negro subjectively adopts a white man's attitude [...] Little by little, one can observe in the young Antillean the formation and crystallisation of an attitude and a way of thinking and seeing that are essentially white' (Fanon 2008, 114). Projection through representation ensures that the Antillean has the same collective unconscious as the European, because the cultural unconscious is the consequence of the 'unreflected imposition of a culture', and so the Antillean himself becomes 'negrophobic' (Fanon 2008). This 'Negrophobia' is centred on the belief, replayed countless times in white culture, that 'the black man is the symbol of Evil' (Fanon 2008, 136). However, Fanon also points out that fearful fantasies of black men's supposed heightened sexual powers, forged by the white world, mean that the 'Negro represents the sexual instinct (in its raw state)' and the belief that black men are sexually superior (2008, 136). As a result, Fanon writes:

When the Negro makes contact with the white world, a certain sensitizing action takes place [...] the black man stops behaving as an actional person. The goal of his behaviour will be The Other (in the guise of the white man), for The Other alone can give him worth. That is on the ethical level: self-esteem [...] This esteem is clothed by white fantasies. (2008, 131)

The crucial point here is that European notions of the black subject as Other also become internalised by the subject himself, a crucial and insidious element of the identification complex that results from physical and psychological colonisation. Fanon's discussion of the black male subject's psychosexual identification with the coloniser is a useful idea that can be productively applied to Rafael Sánchez's text. Benny's erotic fixation with the car is a consequence of what Fanon calls the 'unreflected imposition of a culture', that is, of North American petroculture in Puerto Rico (2008, 131). The car (a potent, fetishised, sexualised symbol of energy colonialism in Puerto Rico) becomes a simultaneous symbol of the imposition of a petrocultural set of expectations and ways of life-making, while Benny, the non-white Other, embodies the colonial notion of the sexually voracious non-

white male, and his eroticised obsession with the car becomes a reproduction of North American attitudes to automobility. Benny's 'reidentification' with North American petroculture, which has become a universalised cultural norm, leads him to construct a kind of psychosexual identification with the coloniser's (petro-)culture that is mediated through the automobile. Benny's relationship to his car expresses his desire to imbibe North American ways of lifemaking and to identify with Fanon calls a 'white collective unconscious' (2008, 131). Benny's desire to emulate North American petrotopian life, so out of touch with the island's situation of energy dependency and widespread poverty, highlights the class divisions at work in the novel. Rafael Sánchez makes clear that there is a deep rift between the elites and the working-classes in Puerto Rican society, and it is the latter that suffer under the illusions produced by the oil-economy and the petro-ideologies imported to Puerto Rico by a universalised North American petroculture.

The counterpart of upper-class Benny is El Nene (the Child), the son of the Mother, who represents the popular classes (Rafael Sánchez 2001, 64). Both of these families, the upper-class and the low, parody the trope of *la gran familia puertorriqueña*, or the Great Puerto Rican Family. In *Macho Camacho's Beat*, Rafael Sánchez not only illustrates what Kerstin Oloff calls the 'racialised hetero-patriarchal exclusions and biases' of the *gran familia* but also shows this hegemonic trope to be 'deeply embedded in uneven petro-modernity' (Oloff, 2001, 73–4). El Nene is the counterpoint to Benny, in all senses of the word. He is described by Rafael Sánchez as being severely mentally impaired, or as Rabassa puts it in the preface, a 'cretin' (Rabassa 2001, x). As Luis Felipe Díaz points out, El Nene may be read as a reflection on the condition of Puerto Rican socio-economic reality within the paradigms of petro-modernity (2013, 140). Meanwhile, Juan Gelpí has read the character of El Nene within the context of Rafael Sánchez's references to Antonio S. Pedreira's famous (and problematic) essay 'Insularismo', published in 1934. 'Insularismo' analysed cultural and socio-economic imperialism in Puerto Rico by utilising a series of metaphors which revolved around that of sickness, cultural immaturity, miscegenation, and the influence of Borinquen's extra-human natures. Gelpí argues that we can read 'Insularismo' as 'an account of a sick country-child', and Puerto Rico as a childlike 'sick body' (2005, 65). In his essay, Pedreira mourned the transformation of the island, as it became increasingly de-ruralised, urbanised and dependent on North American food imports. El Nene, then, 'literalises Pedreira's metaphors' of the sick, infantilised body, but updates his vision to that of a contemporary petro-based context (Oloff, 2001, 73–4). El Nene embodies the rift between Puerto Rican nature and society in the contemporary petro-modern economy, while parodying Pedreira's vision of an immature Puerto Rico through the character's infantilized and often repulsive behaviours. His bodily excretions, for example, 'bind together anxieties around [the deterioration of] landscapes, industrialisation, and food-getting' in the Puerto Rican context, as Kerstin Oloff explains (2001, 73–4). All of these issues are the consequence of the island's imbrication in petro-modernity. Indeed, if read in this way, Rafael Sánchez's characterisation of El Nene – and the cast of socially divided characters that surround him – suggests to the reader that Puerto Rico, in its emulation of U.S. lifestyles, exists in a petro-dystopian lifeworld, exploited and marginalised by the mainland which it nevertheless seeks to emulate. This point is emphasised when El Nene becomes the victim of the novel's events, run over by Benny's Ferrari in the final scene, misplaced and destructive in Puerto Rico. If El Nene



embodies the rift between Puerto Rican nature and society, as well as the class divisions within that society, in a petromodern context, then his killing by the son of a local elite epitomises not only the rift between the classes, but the extent to which U.S. petroculture in Puerto Rico (the progeny of North American oil-imperialism) is destroying more traditional Puerto Rican ways of life-making. El Nene's death at the hands of Benny is also an act which encodes the ways in which the imported, 'misplaced' dream of petrotopia is a lie. Rafael Sánchez instead alludes to a petro-dystopian existence, where petrotopian development exists as a reality only for the local elite whose total desocialisation from their native land is premised on their personal, offshore energy dependencies and their mimicry of U.S. energy-guzzling lifestyles, both of which are completely unaligned with the lives of the majority of the island's inhabitants and with the material realities of everyday life in Puerto Rico.

It can be said, then, that the material object of the car acts as a centrepiece for examinations of race, class, gender and (petro)dependency in Puerto Rico. Of course, the central metaphor of Rafael Sánchez's text is that of the traffic jam, which represents the fact that Puerto Rico is locked into a specific pattern of economic dependency, underdevelopment, and dysfunction as a result of the domination of U.S. capital. The novel's repeated return to the metaphor of the traffic jam encodes the unreality of the oil economy in Puerto Rico. On the one hand, the dominance of oil has created the desire for North American style petrotopias and ways of living, and on the other the temporality of industrialising processes such as Bootstrap have created unsustainable jobs and a dependency on imported commodities, as well as the more general underdevelopment and impoverishment of the country as a colony of the States. The traffic jam, then, depicts a Puerto Rico that quite literally cannot move forward due to its energy dependency and neo-colonial relationship with the United States. Indeed, these two issues have led to a great deal more than being 'stuck' in a colonial matrix of energy dependency and imperialism; they have also led to Puerto Rico having to bear the burden of the catastrophic unpredictability of fossil fuel induced climate change.

### Thinking beyond the gridlock: ruin reading and envisioning new futures in the era of climate change

The ongoing deterioration of Caribbean environments has led to the 'sense of an ending' for many of the region's citizens. There exists, as Lisabeth Parasvini-Gebert puts it, the 'apocalyptic dread of a potential ecological disaster that can erase the islands, their peoples, and cultures from the geographies of the *mare nostrum*' (2010, 114). Puerto Rico's position as an energy dependent within the petro-capitalist world-system, a vulnerable peripheral node in the wider network of North American empire, and an ecologically precarious island nation vulnerable to the vagaries of intensifying climate change means that this apocalyptic dread is a lived reality for its inhabitants.

It was on the 20 September 2017 that the plight of Puerto Rico's energy dependency, its neocolonial position vis-à-vis the States, and its ecological vulnerability were all thrown into the international spotlight, and the 'sense of an ending' came to be understood by the world as being a very visceral reality. Hurricane María, which resulted in thousands of deaths and at least \$90 billion in damages, ripped across Puerto Rico, having already ravaged the islands of Dominica and St Croix (Johnson

2019). The hurricane destroyed houses, flooded streets, ravaged infrastructure and left 80% of the island's inhabitants without clean water, sufficient food, or safe homes for more than a month after the incident (Bonilla 2017). I want to briefly discuss María and the systemic inequalities that it showed to the world, because it was an (un)natural disaster that illustrated the island's precarious position within the colonial energy-matrix and 'exposed the vulgarity of Puerto Rico's colonial relationship with the United States' (Maldonado Torres 2019, 337).

The association between what Naomi Klein has famously called 'disaster capitalism' and Puerto Rico's situation was not widely considered by non-Puerto Ricans until María (Klein 2007, 5). The hurricane showed to the world 'the brutal consequences of energy colonialism and an extractivist economy' in Puerto Rico, while it accelerated the 'already launched collision of Puerto Rico's entwined economies, energy and environmental crises' (de Onís 2018b). The hurricane can be approached through Junot Díaz's concept of 'ruin reading', wherein (un)natural disasters in peripheral locations can be analysed to reveal the histories of socio-economic (and energetic) inequity that more often than not preface them (2011). María was one such apocalypse that shed a revelatory light onto the past, present, and future of Puerto Rico. As Maldonado-Torres points out, María's 'catastrophic nature' is 'directly entangled with other scales of catastrophe', not only the contemporary catastrophes of the unpayable debt which 'strengthens the colonial condition of Puerto Rico', but also this condition of coloniality itself. 'To be sure', Maldonado-Torres goes on to write:

[...] this colonial condition itself can be understood as a catastrophe [...] But the entanglement between Puerto Rico and colonialism did not start in 1898 [the year of the U.S. invasion]. It goes back to the period of 'discovery' and conquest of the New World and to the long sixteenth century, which is at the heart of the formation and constitution of the modern Western world [...] the story of Puerto Rico cannot be told without reference to Western modern catastrophe and coloniality. (2019, 336–337)

María's arrival and the destruction that it wreaked exposed the obscurity of North American domination in its revelation of the waves of austerity and debt crises which had flooded the nation in the previous decade and the island's extreme reliance on the United States for energy and food, the ongoing colonial dilemma that had been facilitated by legislature and programmes such as the Jones Act, Operation Bootstrap and PROMESA. María also exposed the precarious, uncertain and unstable future of the island. It led many Puerto Ricans to ask themselves precisely where this future was going to take them: in the direction of further neoliberal policies, or towards grassroots resistance and the rebuilding of a broken economic structure from the ground up?

Once marginal discussions of energy generation and consumption became key loci of attention after 2017. As Lloréns, Santiago, García-Quijano and de Onís put it, if Puerto Rico is to *transform*, rather than rebuild, its power system, renewable energy projects, advocated for and implemented by local residents and energy experts—not by large corporations in collusion with colonial governments—must be central to building a more sustainable and just energy future (2018). Part of this delinking from what Andreas Malm calls 'fossil capital' will involve a rethinking of the car-culture that has been culturally and politically imported from the United States and will demand an examination of, and a battle against, the energy coloniality in which the island has been imbricated for so long (2016, 1). Ian J. Seda-Irizarry and

Heriberto Martínez-Otero's words seem an apt note on which to end this paper. They write that 'there still seems to be no end in sight to the humanitarian crisis in Puerto Rico':

[...] while the local and federal government celebrate their 'efficient response' [to María] the death toll keeps rising. At the same time, the vultures of finance have again swooped in, offering additional loans to the beleaguered island while more and more of its citizens contemplate joining the emigration wave. Further privatization is also afoot [...]. What will come out of this crisis is difficult to predict. Political pressure from the diaspora, internal political struggles and the actions of other countries will all play a role in shaping the post-María future. Nevertheless, one thing is for certain. Puerto Rico and its people are now entering uncharted terrain. The future is up for grabs. (2017)

## Notes

1. Environmental racism is arguably an offshoot of the phenomenon of energy coloniality. Across the world-system, from Bhopal to the Niger Delta, it is it is poor people and people of colour that suffer the unequal consequences of the disproportionate distribution of environmental hazards. From 'garbage dumps, air pollution, lead poisoning, toxic waste production and disposal, pesticide poisoning, noise pollution, occupational hazards, and rat bites' to the siting of petro-based toxic waste facilities, factories and radioactive waste near people's homes, it is poor and non-white communities which bear the brunt of exposure (Foster and Cole 2000, 66). The antithesis of this environmental racism is, then, environmental privilege, which as Park and Pellow note:
2. [...] is embodied in the fact that some groups can access spaces and resources, which are protected from the kinds of ecological harm that other groups are forced to contend with every day [...]. If environmental racism and injustice are abundant and we can readily observe them around the world, then surely the same can be said for environmental privilege. We cannot have one without the other; they are two sides of the same coin. (2011)

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

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