

Interview: Elidio La Torre Lagares teaches, Department of Comparative Literature, University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras

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Do you think this generation of people who goes out to the streets, interrupting their daily activities such as work or school, in order to take part in the fight for the rights of Puerto Ricans has been influenced in any way by the protests that succeeded in expelling the US Navy from Vieques, Puerto Rico, in March of 2001? Do the protests that recently took place in Puerto Rico, pursuing the resignation of the governor, and the protests in Vieques share anything in common? How do you see it?

In 1967, Puerto Rican writer René Marqués wrote a polemical essay on Puerto Rican docility. He titled it “The Docile Puerto Rican,” and he contested that identity crisis and political subordination to the United States came as a result of Puerto Rico’s lack of courage to assume its own destination. Therefore, the docility. By the time of the Vieques’ protests, almost half a million people took the streets demanding the US Navy out of the island of Vieques. It was the year 2001 and it was significant, a sign of the new times to come. But that march was partisan based; established political parties in Puerto Rico like PIP and PPD led the protests, but also it was then-governor Pedro Rosselló, from the pro-statehood right wing party, who went to Washington and demanded in writing a cease and desist of all Navy operations in Vieques. Yes, political status-quo was present and

the people of Puerto Rico succeeded. However, the so called “Furia de Verano 2019” was apolitical, community based, and transmedia—that is, the call to protest was mainly transmitted through social media, text messages, and live on-site reports by people themselves. In both cases, we marched for dignity, with the slight difference that last July’s events were historically significant because of the wide response and the scope of the protests: no-one single political entity was in command; people did it ourselves.

What do you see as the role of social media outlets in this time of history: do these venues merely spread information about what can be just and noble causes, or do you feel that they serve, in a more significant way, as a trigger, a point of origin, a pushing force, or perhaps a mechanism that allows a campaign for social justice to evolve into action?

The phenomenon of social media is still a work in progress and we have not experienced its full extent yet. Social media transparentizes society -it makes it invisible and homogeneous-but social media allows people to express themselves and those who didn’t have a platform from which to speak and address important issues, suddenly realize they, too, can be heard. It’s the social media paradox. If there’s a will, there’s a way. And it works because it had never been used as a political tool in Puerto Rico- or in many other places, for that matter.

Technology has changed the way we perceive reality. Transmedia, in that sense, or the propagation of narratives across different medias, has trained us to complete ourselves in a more holistic way. Things don’t happen unilaterally or in one direction only; reality is rhizomatic; so

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there's no fixed center. Conventional politics are not equipped to deal with the new perceptions. So, yes, information travels faster, more efficiently, and with a sense of immediacy.

How did it feel to be there on the street as a participant of the protests? What were you seeing around you? What was the general sentiment amongst the participants?

It was a vortex of energy. Once one became part of the protests, we exercised a fearless freedom of speech. People were angry, hurt, tired; after hurricane María, when we were exposed to extreme social and economic conditions, we felt betrayed by those in power who manipulated the crisis for their own political benefit. It was some kind of twisted and perverse shock doctrine in double doses: first from President Trump's mockery and then from the very governor of the Island, Ricardo Rosselló. People deemed necessary to, once again, become united as one. One voice. One cry. Same tears. People cried, people were frustrated, people screamed out of anger; Puerto Rico wanted justice.

What do you think moved people this time? What was most impactful about the actions of the governor?

Again, it was pride in the name of love. We knew we had been fooled, mocked, laughed at, and taken to extreme living conditions on purpose, just as a way to advance and solidify political agendas. We all thought Rosselló had betrayed the principles of human empathy. The administration of governor Rosselló broke our bones and laughed at us, something we found out when certain Telegram chat transcript surfaced to the public. They did not deserve to be called our leaders.

The result of Furia de Verano 2019 was the resignation of the governor. Is this a victory "of the people"? Did you experience it as a victory?

I feel most accomplished, proud, but, most importantly, my daughter accompanied me during the protests and that gave me a new sense of purpose. I wanted her to see what it was like to fight for justice and to not allow anyone to diminish her. We'll make history, I remember I told her. I asked her if she was afraid, and she replied: «Hell no!»

In the end, we did make history; we were there; we celebrated; waved our black Puerto Rican flag; it was a glorious moment that gave the people a sense of participatory achievement. Not like when you see team Puerto Rico win in baseball and basketball, or when a Puerto Rican Miss Universe arrives in San Juan; those kind of popular celebrations connect via identity rituals; but when you are part of it, when your voice is heard, then it's poetic.

My daughter's political intelligence went someplace else since she realized that the sweet, calm, and friendly environments of Providence, where she lives now, do not signify a general rule of thumb. It was her first political intervention, and I'm glad I was there with her. We both think that Puerto Rico changed; we changed; there's a new country out here, one that is determined to stand up for what's fair.

Almost two months have passed since the events of Furia de Verano took place. What do you fathom what happened? What do you think will be the most significant repercussion or transcendence of these events?

I think that the most important thing out of the "Furia de Verano" (the Wrath of Summer) is that we stood as a power not to be messed around with. We exerted a truly democratic exercise: we ran the corrupt governor out of the house. It had never been done. And to think that, yes, it was revolutionary and not a single life was lost. That's not the history of other Latin American countries, unfortunately.

At a personal, individual level, do you feel more courageous after having taken part of these peaceful protests? Do you feel satisfied with the way everything happened? Did these events change or redefine, in any way, what it means to you to be Puerto Rican?

I feel realized. I feel we moved a step forward to greatness. It made me reaffirm something I've been saying for years: Puerto Rico is not one thing; is not even three things; Being Puerto Rican is being in a different dimension.

Many people, from different walks of life, diverse political and religious beliefs and ideologies, took part of the protests — from

Baby Boomers to Millennials, even so-called Generation Z, little kids with their parents. How did this it make you feel to see so many people from all ages marching next to you, supporting the same cause, knowing that there was something you all shared in common regardless of your so-called “generation”?

Well, my only regret is that traditional media has called this the “Millennial Revolution.” But, no, there were people from all ages and all walks of life; that they were more energized? Of course; but they were not alone. What matters here is that the future of Puerto Rico will be open, inclusive, admmissive, and all-encompassing, as demonstrated.

What do you think is the effect on the psychological and emotional health of the country that its governor, one of the most powerful persons in a country, and someone who was placed in his position of power by the people, was made to resign by the people? In what way does solidarity for a common, noble cause help to heal the spirit, if you will, or collective body of a country?

In my case, it was both an emotional valve as well as it was a psychological need. I think most people would agree. In my case, my resentment came mainly from the fact that my father died in the darkness, amidst subhuman conditions, and without any choices. Adjuntas was incommunicated for something closer to 20 days; and it was swamped in rain and darkness for many months after the hurricane. My father deserved better, as did other members of my family who had to struggle from within with whatever they had at hand, because they had no input from the rest of the country and the actual world.

My father was just one victim. We were advised not to send him to Forensics since, as we were told, we wouldn’t be able to bury my father for maybe six months. It happened that one of the worst crisis during the after-Maria period was that of the accumulation of bodies at Ciencias Forenses. So we cremated my dad.

However, some people were not even that close to lucky. They had to endure the crisis without having their deceased properly buried. Burials provide a sense of closure and people generally try to move on. Knowing your deceased are stored in a fridge and there’s no date for

releasing the body could be detrimental for our inner peace.

What does solidarity mean to you? Have any of these events altered your definition of it?

Solidarity is crucial in order to survive. Solidarity is horizontal and communal, not vertical and hierarchical. Of course, we learned that the hard way. Solidarity means to abandon all prejudice and all ego. We are the “modernized generation;” the one that, as opposed to that of our parents and grandparents, had an education, shoes, food, and smart phones. We only heard of stories like the one we lived after María from our grandparents and great-grandparents. During the Wrath of Summer ’19 we proved that we had become ourselves. It was either that or to perish. And the word resilience is only necessary here.

After-María, my neighbors and I cleaned our street. We shared whatever we had, whether it was coffee or batteries. During the Summer of ’19, everyone seemed more enthusiastic in helping others. Giving rides, providing food, any which way the felt helpful. Yes, a new Puerto Rico was born.

Everyday there is an event that challenges the potential for the world and its inhabitants. The Amazon burns, and so does the Artic. There are wars and corruption, racism and senseless assassinations everywhere. What motives you to keep going forward? Did Puerto Rico’s victory during the events this summer alter your perspective about the world, the sense that you derive from your own life and participation in your surroudings, and of everything you deem worth an effort? Did you learn something new about what moves people into action?

I think that what happened in Puerto Rico points to a major change in the world’s consciousness. People are becoming more aware of the powers of nature and the need to take control of our actions. Nature is benevolent, but it also could be unmerciful. We must assume the power and the responsibility, and it’s completely doable. At least for me, it gives me a reason to keep thinking about the possibilities of the human race, because, as a race, we’re all human; we’re not skin color or religious belief; we are sentient,

living people that need to take accountability for the world's situations.

I had the chance to witness that first hand during the Puerto Rico protests. People decided not to sit back and watch anymore. They wanted to change things, overcome differences, and work toward the common good.

Imagination nurtures itself from a vision, that which does not yet exist, what hasn't come into being. One could also argue that it feeds from precedents. Why do you think so many people in other parts of the world felt so compelled to express their happiness for and emotions about what Puerto Rican people were able to achieve?

What Puerto Rico attained is what every democratic society aspires to: peaceful change. Okay, one might argue that the manifestations were not that peaceful: people got pepper-sprayed; property was graffitied and damaged; some people got arrested; but in general, these are all part of the structure and dynamics of change. If chaos arouse, it was controlled chaos, nothing really went out of hands.

Many people outside of Puerto Rico felt moved to join the movement from their respective geographical locations in the world, in many cases, creating peaceful protests of their own. Why do you think that happened?

The so-called Puerto Rican diaspora played a big role in the Wrath of Summer '19. They were very vocal and active wherever they were. This is important because it proves that Puerto Rico is not a mere island in the Caribbean, but a nation on the move, a widely dispersed people that are not centered on a specific geographical coordinate. We are everywhere, so to say. There are more Puerto Ricans outside of the island than inside.

And I believe that's the modern truth for most ethnic groups around the world: they are not confined to a geographical territory. It's more of a wider imaginary community.

How do you imagine the "destiny" of Puerto Rico, the possibilities for its trajectory as a Pueblo, as a result of the Furia of Verano, 2019 or influenced by it?

Now, that's a big step towards the recuperation of the national psyche, our value as a people, and system of beliefs. We will eventually have to make peace with our destiny, which I think will be independence. It's either that or statehood, but definitely by 2030 we should know where are we heading. I think Puerto Rico will be declared an independent country because statehood still has a long way to go. Not in the sense that it's a long shot, but what I mean is that if Puerto Ricans want statehood (which is a possibility), they should be ready to make up sacrifices and give up one or two things. It's costly, because things like language and culture are unnegotiable. Are we willing to pay the price? If no, independence is also onerous, but probably with more character building and humanizing.

The final decision will be the answer to the question: which status brings you peace and lets you be you?

Elidio La Torre Lagares earned his MFA in creative writing from the University of Texas at El Paso. His work has appeared in a number of journals and magazines, including *CENTRO Journal*, *Azahares*, *Sargasso*, *Acentos Review*, *Nagari*, *Malpaís Review*, and *Ariel Chart*. He teaches literature and creative writing in the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras.

