

Citizenship & Hysteria: The Puerto Rican as the Surplus of American Identity

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Hysteria has always been with us. Every era understood it differently, weaved it into the social fabric with a new and fashionable pattern. No longer restricted to dealings with God or the Devil, the doctor or the analyst, hysteria expresses loud and clear "what is not working" for human beings. Hysteria exposes the irremediable conflict and discontent that culture creates when it imposes a "civilized" life. Hysteria symptomatically denounces the failures of the law of the father, and reveals the alienation and precariousness of identity, while challenging the absurdity of social bonds. Puerto Rico's American-born "foreign" citizens obtained self-government while establishing "permanent union" with the United States - the historical determinations seem to create a perfect double bind. The obvious reappearance of a spectacular mode of hysteria frozen in time testifies to the truth of Freud's motto that hysterics suffer from reminiscences. Their memory, symptomatically remembered in act, is both a gift and a relentless curse. The symptoms keep alive a history; then, the syndrome stands for a missing chapter in a national history that does not cease to be written (Gherovici, 54-79).

I. The "Double" of Double-Citizenship

Chance is the often unexpected handmaiden of insight. I remember ever so fondly, a lay presentation I gave on Althusser and Lacanian psychoanalysis to a group of peers at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York. In explaining the dynamics of the "mirror stage," and the formation of the imaginary ego,¹ I inadvertently provided an analogy most apropos to a discussion of the tensions and contradictions of American identity and its relation to colonial politics. I mused that the formation of the unitary ego out of the matrix of contradictory multiplicities is not unlike the relation of the American "nativist" to various immigrant and minority ethnic groups in the face of an external threat. In times of strife elicited from outside the American symbolic² (via the irruption of the oppressed, the return of the repressed, or the breaking-in of the Real depending on your theological-political-philosophical tastes), suddenly the racist and ethnocentric American nativist spreads his loving arms to embrace the African, the African-American, the Asian, the Latina, and others, interpellating them into the American symbolic proper: "Black, white, yellow, brown... hell, we're all Americans now!" Out of the over-boiling pot of identity politics and nativist-immigrant conflict, a singular subject is produced: the American citizen-cogito. This ideological-political cogito, not unlike the cogito of Descartes or the cogito of the modern era, is a product of the

multiple disavowals, abjections, and traumatic-affective excesses that serve to constitute it - a shining city on a hill, propped up atop the corpses of countless partial-ego residues, the collective id of a society embroiled in manic denial of its violent and brutal origins.

The precarious "citizenship" of the Puerto Rican could be as fitting an example as any of the traumatic excesses that serve to maintain the fullness and "integrity" of American identity. It is in fact a "double-citizenship," for we (the subject of this article being a Puerto Rican born in *la isla*, the island) are both "American" citizens as well as "Puerto Rican" citizens. To my psychoanalytic friends, the "jig is up" at the outset, for our "double-citizenship" contains both the canny subject and its uncanny double which brings it into unitary being, the citizen(-ship) of the dominant subject (America) and the citizen(-ship) of the subjugated other (Puerto Rico). As a Puerto Rican, my inherent political doubling acts - to paraphrase Dusan Blejic's (2009) passing mention of Franz Fanon - as a constant reminder of my signifying master. At the same time, my double-citizenship acts as a subtle reminder to my American friends of my signified inferiority-in-relation to their signifying superiority. Every now and then a friend or acquaintance will randomly bring up my citizenship-status - and the political status of Puerto Rico itself - in conversation, and each and every time they bring up as a matter of fact, the usual suspect of my geo-political castration: "You guys can't vote for president, right?" A moment of awkward silence follows as the proverbial lever is pressed by the recognition-hungry laboratory rat so that I can give up the goods: "No, we can't." "Just like I thought," comes the satisfied response, usually followed by "I guess it makes sense since you don't pay taxes." They usually don't bat an eye at the fact that although I am technically an American citizen, I did not enjoy all of the "benefits" of citizenship until I moved to the continent to attend college (more on this "transubstantiation of citizenship" below). It simply never bothered them that millions of people both in the past and in the present were/are granted the title of "American," without all of the rights dispensed by the American Constitution. On the contrary, these exchanges seemed to fill the role of some kind of circulatory identity maintenance. It is almost as if in the wake of the collective electoral impotency many experienced during eight years of the George W. Bush administration, some people needed the ability to say to themselves, "Well, at least we can vote for president, even if that vote is essentially useless." Useless? Oops! My apologies well-intentioned liberals! What I meant to say was "performative." Adding insult to injury, an insinuation is made that Puerto Ricans haven't paid for their citizenship, and thus haven't earned the right to full rights.

II. Colonialism and its Discontents

A little history lesson can help flesh out some of the intricacies of this dynamic. In the wake of the Spanish-American War in 1898, U.S. Major General Nelson A. Miles occupied the island of Puerto Rico, promising its people all of "the advantages of enlightened civilization," as well as "to put the conscience of the American people into the island" (Gherovici 155-156), in essence, promising the automatic re-colonization of the Puerto Rican people, an almost Oedipal interpellation from the savagery of centuries-old Spanish occupation to the ideals and values of American "liberty." The American Father arrives on the scene and promises the colonial-child civilization at the cost of withdrawing from his/her Spanish (and later Puerto Rican) Mother. If we recall that "conscience" stands as one of Freud's synonyms for the super-ego, one could argue that Miles prophesied and professed the oedipal-Diasporic passage from the Puerto Rican motherland to the American fatherland. Passing through the Oedipal gates, the Puerto Rican would be included into the American imaginary,⁴ granted full citizenship with all of the benefits and rights it should convey. Over a hundred years have passed since that non-emancipation proclamation, and one finds the prophecy not so much contradicted by history so much as cast into hysterical limbo. Puerto Rico today stands in a political no man's land, neither a state properly incorporated into the republic, nor a sovereign, independent nation of its own. Instead, starting in 1952, Puerto Rico became what is called an "*Estado Libre Asociado*," a "free associated state," the equivalent of a political word-salad which maintains the island's colonial status, granting degrees of autonomy like crumbs from the master's table, but without the express democratic vote of the people or governmental validation by the U.S. Congress. As a "free associated state," we Puerto Ricans can elect our own governor, and even a representative to the U.S. Senate, but we can neither vote for the President nor can our representative have a vote in the senate.

But then again, what was an ever-rising empire like the United States, emerging victorious from the Spanish-American war, to do with its new possession and surplus citizenry? It could not be properly incorporated into the U.S. body politic, due to the Puerto Rican's so-called exotic culture, and their sexually aggressive and violent nature. The Constitution, after all, was crafted by the civilized people *for* the civilized people, not this lower rabble of the Caribbean. Thus, with the Foraker Act of 1900, and the Jones Act of 1917, Congress effectively created a second-class *American* citizenship, what Roman (1998) dubs the "alien-citizen paradox," which it could use to

extend the sphere of influence of the United States without also extending the rights of the Constitution. In this way, power could be maintained over an "uncivilized" race of people without bestowing upon them rights that Congress felt they were not ready for. The second-class American citizenship of the Puerto Rico-born Puerto Rican, then, was restricted according to the political geography, as well as under the direct regulation of Congress.

The way in which the U.S. dealt with this surplus citizenry maps on quite deliciously to a psychoanalytic (in this particular case, Lacanian) lens. U.S. nativism effectively used this Spanish-American excess by both including it within the American imaginary as well as excluding it through the American symbolic. It granted a type of hollow citizenship that exudes a built-in lack, yielding castrated sub-citizens who served as counterpoints to the wholeness and totality of the American nativist. At the same time, it envelops them in an oedipal double-bind: in order to be full American citizens, you primitives must become like us/U.S., but at the same time, you cannot become like us/U.S. The creation of our lack as secondary citizens thus helps to cover up the lack inherent in the American cogito, helping reproduce its illusory image as a total and full expression of the human being as a political subject with full rights. But there was another parallel side-effect, or symptom, of this double-bind, one that Patricia Gherovici (2003) has artfully explored and "diagnosed": It is the hysteria-prone condition of the Puerto Rican, caught between independence and statehood, first and second-class citizen, *la isla* and the continent, Puerto Rican motherland and American fatherland, conscious and unconscious, double-citizenship and the double-speak of the master's desire. In attempting to resolve this set of tensions, the Puerto Rican hysteric poses the question: Who am I?

III. The Political Geography of Puerto Rican and American Citizenship

What is most interesting theoretically as well as personally, in terms of the quandaries of double-citizenship, is that there is a degree to which the different acts Congress enacted to both make us and unmake us as citizens, left, what might be seen as a type of Constitutional loophole, another lack in the Big Other⁵: we could *move* from the island to the continent. There was something almost magical about the *idea* of voting for the President of the United States. Growing up, I had a sense that it was something both momentous yet unavailable to me as a citizen. For most of my life up

until the age of eighteen I was in the same position as every other Puerto Rico-born Puerto Rican. But eighteen was the age at which I graduated from high school, and left *la isla* to attend college in the continent. Within a year after moving to college, a kind of transubstantiation of my political body had taken place. By looking into the American mirror, I was no longer just stale bread, for I was now the vibrant body of Christ; a member of the American political imaginary. My stillborn American-Puerto Rican citizenship suddenly throbbed with life. I could now vote for the President of the United States of America. There was a kind of terrible joy associated with that first step I took into the voting booth for the 2004 Presidential election.

Given the results of that election, I quickly found out democracy wasn't all it was cracked up to be. But the magical euphoria of that transformational *jouissance* left its mark on me. A one-way plane ride and a year's worth of residency had impressed upon me the political power of time and space. The political geography of U.S.- Puerto Rican relations seemed to have outlined the essential ingredient for full political subjectification, the resolution of the Puerto Rican's hysteria-prone condition. And it was as deceptively simple and attainable as booking tickets for a holiday trip to visit relatives in Florida or New York State, and scale either Cinderella's Castle in Disney World or the Statue of Liberty in New York City. This is apropos, given the function of these two structures as bastions of freedom, political transubstantiation, and the salvation offered by immigration.⁶ This is Walt Disney's Cinderella as directed by the Big Other: Lady Liberty plays Fairy Godmother to a Puerto Rican Cinderella, turning her dirty rags into a beautiful gown, her *alcapurria*⁷ into a coach, a group of *coquis*⁸ into horses, and a *jibaro*⁹ into a coachman, rendering her prepared and able to attract the loving gaze of the American Prince. But like the source material on both counts, once the clock strikes midnight the spell is broken, and the princess becomes a colonial step-child once again.

The transubstantiation of citizenship triggered by movement across the political geography would appear to resolve the colonial subject's hysterical position by resolving the oedipal conflict between motherland and fatherland. This wandering Puerto Rican exposes and at the same time fills the lack in the Constitutional symbolic with his or her own colonially-induced lack. Their attempt to undo the lack inherent in Puerto Rican-American citizenship simply by *moving* from periphery to center simultaneously points out the contradictory (say, hysterical?) nature of the colonial system, and paradoxically restores its stability. Likewise, the excess ejected from the system returns like the Prodigal Son, but in the return of the abjected surplus its original abjection is likewise reinstated. In attaining this political inscription into American

citizenship, the contrast between it and its Puerto Rican-double becomes highlighted as opposed to diminished. I personally felt as if leaving Puerto Rico to attend college in the States displaced what was the inferiority in my citizenship back unto *my* homeland, heeding the oedipal call to "be like us/U.S." In the act of moving from Puerto Rico to the States, I unintentionally practiced an orientalizing of the North Atlantic, othering and abjecting my motherland as a result.¹⁰

IV. Towards an Excess of Excess: an Excess of Resistance

One of the tenets of liberation psychology is that those who suffer psychologically - those who are depressed, oppositional defiant, acting out, hysterical, and etc- are perhaps having the most realistic response to truly unbearable social conditions (Martin-Baro, Watkins & Shulman). One may be hysterical, for example, not because they are disconnected from reality, but rather because one is in touch with a reality that is itself hysterical. Given this possibility, what would be the appropriately hysterical response of a hysteria-prone Puerto Rican to a truly hysterical situation?

As alluded to earlier, social systems expect and are, in fact, dependant upon a certain amount of excess to be excluded in order to function. Likewise, in *The Ticklish Subject* (2000), Slavoj Žižek discusses the Foucaultian notion that systems of control expect and are in fact dependant upon a certain amount of resistance in order to stabilize and reproduce themselves. Given this tragic reality, Žižek argues that what is needed is an excess of resistance which can overcome the system's fail-safes in order to destabilize it. This suggestion, then, is tantamount to arguing that what is needed is a kind of political septic shock, the result of an overwhelming infection spreading through the system and pushing it to malfunction.

Consider the following thought-experiment: at this point in time more than a good number of Puerto Ricans living in Puerto Rico have relatives living in the mainland whom they usually visit for the holidays. Hypothetically, they could all declare residency with their relatives in the States, pay taxes with their relatives and do everything required for that residency to be official in the paperwork. They could do this without moving to the States themselves, and instead continue to live and work in Puerto Rico. After a year's time they would be registered voters in the particular state in which they declared residency. This would transform Puerto Rico into a land of ghosts, a mass of the politically undead, haunting the contours of American citizenry. Once the time came for the presidential elections, millions of

people who would have been unable to vote would suddenly garner political power.

In order to accomplish such a feat, one would indeed have to engage in a number of misleading and perhaps outright illegal behaviors. The ensuing bureaucratic, political, and governmental chaos would throw the electoral and social system into disarray, as millions of actualized American citizenships flooded through the system and pressured it into malfunction. It would bombard a hysterical system with a hysterical question: who am I? Who are we as a people within your borders? Perhaps as the hysteric outlasted and overpowered the physician through the continuation of her symptoms, and the latter's inability to answer her question, perhaps we Puerto Ricans can also overpower the American Big Other by assailing it with the question of our political status - as citizens and as a people - that so drives our symptoms.

Is it possible for us to enact ourselves as an excess of excess which leads to an excess of resistance? Could we possibly ever act-out such an enactment? The simple answer is, of course, probably not. But as I reflect on the current economic crisis, and all the questions raised on the left about whether this crisis will present such an excess of excess, I cannot help but wonder about the effect it will have on Puerto Rico's economy, and the ever increasing rate of migration to the mainland. More and more of us, I feel, leave *la isla* never to return, aside from the occasional holiday trip. Will this increasing migration ever render the fantasized island of ghosts? How will this affect our status as citizens, both on the island and on the mainland? How many of us in the end will walk the path of Diaspora in the American step-fatherland in abjection of the motherland?

In 1998, a plebiscite was held in Puerto Rico, asking its citizens whether they preferred statehood, independence, or their current commonwealth status. The winning result was an option added just before the plebiscite took place, titled "*ninguno de los anteriores*," "none of the above." What makes this plebiscite and its result so interesting is that regardless of which option proved the victor, the U.S. government made no commitment to honor the results. In fact, quite a number of U.S. senators have voiced their disinterest and outright rejection of the very idea of granting Puerto Rico statehood. On the other hand, it appears that the majority of Puerto Ricans also reject independence as a viable political alternative (Roman, 1998). Thus, one hysterical Puerto Rican wonders: if our people on *la isla* generally frown on independence, and the U.S. government in turn frowns on Puerto Rico's inclusion as a state, citing everything from our irreconcilably "uncivilized" and "un-American" character, to our voracious sexual appetites, then one must borrow Freud's oft-maligned query "what do women want?" and ask: "what do (we) Puerto Ricans want?" Or even better, *what are we waiting for?*

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Only Bad Mommies Eat Their Babies: American Motherhood, Myth and Tragedy

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There is the event. Language bends and breaks under the weight of it. Images carry the memory pain and easier on the outside of my body not the subconscious stored in abstracts but my artistic process speaks now that I can't in a painted image of thought that apprehends a multitude at work to which your response is a series of slashes to the face and a slow burn from a fire lit under your chin you see the impermanence of the body promises that when it's gone the memories scarification—a story cut into my hip two fetal skulls one mute asleep the other screaming but he is too young to voice the unstoppable loss of his mother from the tiny mouth a vine appears thorns leaves then buds mud roses cutting through my woman side defense against the outside. So written on me is my testimony before I find the sounds to utter.

¹² Sewing and Singing.

¹³ Hyphenation or biculturalism have often been associated to schizophrenia because of Janus identities. For a psychoanalytic study on migration see Grinberg and Grinberg.

¹⁴ I AM FROM THERE//I AM FROM HERE.

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¹ In Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the "mirror stage" refers initially to the development of the child's ego but also pertains to the subject's tensions around identity formation throughout the lifespan. In Lacan's schema, the infant "sees" their reflection in the "mirror" as representing a unitary whole in contrast to their experience of still uncoordinated motor and emotional states. In order to resolve this tension between their disorganized affect state and the unitary image they perceive, the infant identifies with the image in the mirror, a process Lacan refers to as "alienation." The ego is the imaginary product of the infant's alienation from the reality of their unregulated emotional states.

² I am referring briefly in this context to the Symbolic Order as the system of Law(s) which regulates alterity and difference within broad systems of relations within American society.

³ One could almost cry at how little the change of an era affects these little colonial mess-alliances. With the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States, I am (un)happy to report a subtle change in this pattern: "Hey! We elected a black guy for president! Oh wait, you guys can't vote for president, can you?"

⁴ The "imaginary" stands as one of the three orders (Imaginary, Symbolic, Real) which Lacan articulates in order to account for the complexity of psychic reality. In the same way that the ego is an imaginary product of the subject's alienation from their emotional reality, so too the imaginary order emerges as a field of alienation brought about by deceptive illusions about the self-other relationship. An example of an illusion constitutive of the imaginary order is the belief that two subjects are essentially similar, alienating both from their emotional realities and radical differences. An oedipal interpellation of the Puerto Rican into the American imaginary would entail the former's transformation from a abject colonial subject to a full American citizen equal to American citizen's in the continent. As we can see, this relationship is imaginary. Puerto Rican's born on the island are not politically equal to U.S.

⁵ In a certain sense the "Big Other" is a synonym for the Symbolic Order, the system of

Law which regulates alterity/difference between the subject and the other, in this case between the Puerto Rican in Puerto Rico and the full American citizen in the continent.

⁶ It is indeed a little tongue-in-cheek to describe the Puerto Rican's move from la isla to the mainland as "immigration." One certainly wouldn't characterize moving from one U.S. territory (like Florida) to another U.S. territory (like New York City) as immigration. And yet to move from Puerto Rico to the mainland does indeed feel like an immigration, complete with residency serving as an artificial naturalization process for an artificial alien.

⁷ An alcapurria is a type of stuffed green banana, a delicious snack enjoyed by Puerto Ricans across the continent and on la isla.

⁸ The coqui is Puerto Rico's unofficial mascot, a small frog native to the island.

⁹ Jibaro refers to Puerto Ricans who are identified with the mountainous countryside, sometimes used in a derogative manner akin to "hic" or "hillbilly."

¹⁰ I am inspired here by Dusan Bjelic's (2009) paper on psychoanalysis and "self-orientalization." Bjelic critically examines the way analysts from Sigmund Freud to Julia Kristeva have used psychoanalysis to attempt to heal the trauma of colonialism while unconsciously internalizing the effects of orientalism. The case of Sigmund Freud (the pun on Sander Gilman's [1993] work is intentional) is especially relevant here. After moving to highly anti-Semitic Vienna as a child, Freud internalized and reproduced his own abjection and that of other Galician Jews even as he attempted to cure his own subordinated state through the production of psychoanalysis. As an adult, he recast himself as a civilized Viennese Jew in contrast to the more primitive Eastern-Galician Jew. Julia Kristeva's own political writings on the Balkans as the abject-periphery to the French cultural-center serve as a more contemporary example of this dynamic. Defining her Bulgarian homeland as a pathogenic mother, and French culture as the revolutionary father that redeemed her psyche, she re-abjectifies the Balkans in an attempt to cure her own subordinate position as an immigrant. Thus, both Freud and Kristeva saw their ethnic origins as devouring mothers which needed to be beaten back by the paternal power of the dominant culture.

The Problems With Identity: Distribution, Agency and Identification

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¹ Barrie, J.M. *Peter Pan*. 100th Anniversary Edition. New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC 1987, 13.