Puerto Rican Liberation (Draft)

Indigenous Borikén

The Caribbean archipelago currently known as Puerto Rico, (including Vieques and Culebra) has been inhabited for 7000 years. The Arawakan speaking people of the northern Caribbean arrived roughly 2000 years ago and are currently called the Taino, although this is not what we called ourselves. The "mother island," Borikén, was part of a civilization that extended from eastern Cuba and the Bahamas across all the Greater Antilles and south as far as Montserrat. We traded widely by canoe, grew cotton, created intricately carved works of art and lived from farming, fishing, hunting and gathering. We still refer to ourselves as Boricuas. 3000 Arawak words survive in Puerto Rican Spanish.

We were the first people of the hemisphere to experience European genocide. Ships from the new Spanish empire came to Boriken in 1493, and renamed it San Juan Bautista and later Puerto Rico, meaning "rich port." European imperialism fell heavily on all the islands and included massacres, rape, enslavement, land theft, violent extraction of precious metals and woods, ecological devastation, and epidemics of new diseases. Many genocidal policies have continued into the present.

The Catholic church played a central role from the start, including imposing male domination on a culture with female leaders and inheritance. Catholic priests also documented Taino culture and some spoke out passionately against genocide. Spiritual/religious traditions have always been part of our resistance to assimilation. Espiritismo has Arawak roots, Yoruba Ifá/Santería is widely practiced, Candelaria bonfires celebrate Ibero-Celtic Imbolc.

The separate entity of "Puerto Rico" and the identity of "Puerto Rican" are colonial inventions, the result of European empires carving up the territory of the Taino,

Kalinago (Carib) and other nations into separate colonies. Puerto Rican is also an identity built together by our many peoples and defended as part of our anti-colonial struggles.

At every moment since 1493 the people of Borikén have resisted oppression. Indigenous women played especially critical roles as diplomats, warriors and holders of culture. Taino leaders tried negotiation, marriages to build kinship, and armed uprisings. Anacaona lived in what is now Haiti but was a chief negotiator between the Taino and Spanish. A renown poet, she chose death rather than submit to sexual slavery. A mass uprising in 1511 was defeated, but the war to expel the Spanish from Borikén continued for thirty years. Indigenous people across the Caribbean joined forces to support revolts on different islands, including Borikén, constantly raiding Spanish settlements by sea. To understand our history, you must think of us as a Caribbean people.

African Borikén

The first Africans in the archipelago were free contract laborers from West and North Africa who worked as miners and farmers. The Spanish crown authorized large scale direct shipments of kidnapped Africans to the Caribbean in 1518, the first of which arrived in San Juan in 1519. Because of colonizer rivalries, those escaping enslavement from other colonies could live free in Puerto Rico. Throughout our history there were many more free African heritage people than enslaved ones.

African people created broad Caribbean networks of information, mutual support and escape, often with help from kidnapped working class Europeans, "pressed ganged" crews on commercial ships. Afro-Boricuas revolted, escaped, destroyed property and built free communities. In the 16th century, Wolof/Yelofes led several mass escapes into the mountains along with Bambara, Biafara, Ashanti/Akan and Mandinka people. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the majority of stolen people came from the Yoruba, Igbo,

Bakongo, Fulani-Fon and Dahomey nations. Dahomey female warrior traditions played a critical role in uprisings, including training in combat and strategy. Bomba, our national dance, comes from the Bakongo people. North African migrants have included Amazigh and Guanche people. Our history and culture are part of the African diaspora.

European and Asian Borikén

The majority of other settlers were from Iberia, including indigenous Basques. Others include exiled Sephardic Jews, Irish, French, English, Syrian, Lebanese, Palestinian and Chinese people escaping poverty, war and persecution, who saw colonial settlement as a way out and also brought their own resistance traditions. Since 1898, majority white USers have also settled, and are currently buying large amounts of land and housing for retirement homes or tourism projects.

US Imperialism

Puerto Rico has been the colony of a foreign power since 1493. In 1898, as the US expanded its territory, it declared war on Spain and seized its remaining colonies, including Puerto Rico, Cuba, Guam and the Philippines. We are the largest remaining colony of the United States.

In the early 20th century, the US imposed laws and treaties to make sure residents of island colonies did not have the same rights as US citizens. The 1917 Jones Act forced partial citizenship on Puerto Ricans over the objections of our own government. Puerto Rican men were drafted into US wars, but we have no voting representatives in Congress and cannot vote for US president. Shipping treaties force us to buy only US goods at inflated prices.

US programs carried out mass sterilization of Puerto Rican women. In the 1970s 37% of women of childbearing age had been sterilized. Puerto Rican children were sent to the Carlisle Indian Boarding School to be “Americanized,” and medical experiments

were carried out on our people. Pentecostalism brought from the US has grown to be the second largest religious group in the archipelago after Catholicism.

Throughout the 20th century, large scale chemical contamination and environmental destruction have been subsidized for the benefit of US corporations. The 2020 Plan of 1982 called for massive strip mining of the interior, military-industrial zones on our coasts, offshore oil drilling, and large-scale displacement of the population. Mass opposition stopped the plan, but its ideas still guide colonial policy. In 2016, the PROMESA Act put a fiscal board controlled by US financial companies in charge of our economy. The junta has closed hundreds of schools and hospitals, privatized health care and utilities and is defunding our universities.

MIGRATION

Since the early 20th century, Puerto Ricans have migrated back and forth between the islands and the US, as sugar cane workers on Maui, cigar makers in Florida, cotton pickers in Arizona, cannery workers in California and garment workers in New York. After WWII economic conditions, government policies and the creation of "commonwealth" status caused large numbers of us to migrate to the US. Puerto Ricans concentrated in New York City created "El Barrio," one of the oldest and most important centers of diaspora culture and activism. But there are Puerto Rican communities in every state and territory of the US creating a rich and diverse diaspora. While New York City historically had the largest number of US Puerto Ricans, there are now more of us in central Florida, and some of our oldest communities are in California and Hawaii. Diaspora Puerto Ricans have made important contributions to liberation movements wherever we are, and have built and enriched local culture.

We are one people with historically different experiences. Some speak only Spanish or only English, and many speak both, or mix them together. Many of us have a

mixture of ancestries. Since 2004, more Puerto Ricans live in the US than in Puerto Rico. Puerto Ricans in the US have the highest poverty rates of any Latinx nationality, similar to African heritage and Native American people. Poverty rates in Puerto Rico are 40%, three times that of the poorest US state. Half of all Puerto Rican archipelago children live in poverty. In Puerto Rico and our diaspora we face intense racism, state violence, addiction, domestic and sexual violence. In the archipelago we also face climate crisis, high rates of femicide, developer land theft and militarization.

We have also built vibrant, powerful communities and alliances that have won battles in education, housing, healthcare, food sovereignty, reproductive rights and civil liberties.

MILITARISM

Our location at the northeastern corner of the Antillean island chain has made Puerto Rico a military prize. Since 1898 the US has heavily militarized the archipelago in order to dominate the Caribbean and the Americas as a whole. Roosevelt Roads Naval Station is one of the largest US naval bases outside the continental US. Ramey Air Force Base housed many bombers during WWII and the Cold War. Although it officially closed in 1971, military presence there has been increasing since 2025. The base is used to launch attacks on small boats in the Caribbean, was part of the kidnapping of Venezuelan President Maduro and threatens Cuba. From the 1940s until 2001, the US Navy used the island municipality of Vieques for training, including bombing, use of chemical weapons, and practice invasions for US and NATO forces. A powerful protest movement forced an end to the Navy presence on Vieques, but the island remains heavily contaminated with radiation and other toxins.

CLIMATE AND COLONIALISM (Archipelago)

Over 500 years of colonialism have deforested large areas of our archipelago which increases heat, erosion and soil degradation. US companies and the military have been allowed unregulated contamination of our air, soil and water. Climate change is causing both severe drought and flooding, dangerous heat waves, and much stronger and faster developing hurricanes than in the past. Declining fisheries, changes in growing seasons and a US monopoly on food imports make us vulnerable to famine. While Saharan dust has blown to Puerto Rico for hundreds of thousands of years, desertification and pollution in West Africa means much more dust, contaminated with toxins from diesel and trash incinerators, which affect our health and damage our coral reefs.

Key strengths: Fierce and longstanding resistance, throughout more than five centuries.• A communal and cooperative culture.• Cultural and linguistic flexibility and inventiveness.• Ability to draw strength from multiple traditions, and build alliances wherever we are.• We're brilliant and creative at survival.• We are loving, warm and funny, and have many ways of expressing joy under hard conditions.• We have strong artistic traditions going back thousands of years.•

Key historical hurts and patterns: Genocide recordings that our lives don't matter and we are insignificant.• Undischarged big grief and anger about all our losses can lead to depression or addiction instead of action. • As colonial subjects whose homeland is neither a sovereign country nor a US state, we fall between the cracks and are forgotten or excluded from both US and international liberation movements, and global events like UN climate conferences and the Olympics, which can leave us feeling invisible, unimportant, non-existent• Racism portrays our men as more sexist than white men. This makes it hard for our women to work on male domination in our families and

communities for fear of racist attacks on our people.• Feelings that we're still colonized because we aren't smart enough or brave enough to get free.• Believing citizenship makes us better or safer than other Latin Americans.• Addiction to consumerism as a substitute for freedom. • It's hard to rest from struggling and problem solving all the time. We deserve to relax. • We experience heavy language oppression that says our Spanish is inferior, our English is inferior, our Spanglish is inferior, that not speaking Spanish means we're not real Puerto Ricans, and not speaking English makes us backward.• We're told we're too loud, too colorful, get resources we don't deserve (when really our resources have been stolen from us) are lazy and criminal and have too many children.• We're treated as worthless. A campaigner for President Trump described Puerto Rico as "a floating island of garbage." Trump tried to trade Puerto Rico for Greenland without consulting us.

Session perspectives for us:

"Guakía yahabo" means "we are still here" in Taino. • Borikuas, resisting oppression since 1493! • Boasting in detail about our intelligence, courage and persistence. We have always been smart, resilient and creative. For example…• Celebrating our minds.• Deciding to trust our counselors with how grief stricken and enraged we really are, without holding back.• Demanding attention for our people, now!• Proudly claiming all our identities and knowing we are whole.

Key ways to support us:

- Almost all Puerto Ricans have Taino heritage. We should all be encouraged to do Native Liberation "coming home" work.

- USer counselors need to discharge internalized imperialist patterns that allow them to ignore us and the impact of US policy on our lives. Remember to wonder about how events in the US might impact us more or differently.
- Discharge all disinformation you've been taught or exposed to about us so you can show us you don't believe any of it. This is the only way we will feel safe to discharge our internalized oppression.
- Decide to learn as much as you can about our history, culture, and current struggles, both in Puerto Rico and our diaspora. Make it a team project. Asking us questions is good, but we have also been deprived of our own history, and may feel shame about not knowing enough, so take charge of learning and share what you find out. This is a major contradiction to the ways we are treated as forgettable.
- Remember and reflect back to us that we are intelligent, creative, hardworking and loving people. We are a gift to the world.
- Show us that you trust our minds. This is more important than insisting we follow even the best counseling directions. Stay close, and relaxedly invite our thinking.
- Encourage us to value all the ways we speak and write. Our languages are all brilliant, expressive and right.