



States of Return

Rethinking Migration and Mobility

Edited by

Deborah A. Boehm *and*

Mikaela H. Rogozen-Soltar

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The “Peculiar” Institution of Twenty-First-Century Puerto Rican Colonialism

“Vaivén” *Return Migrations in the US Rust Belt Diaspora*

LAURIE KAIN HART, PHILIPPE BOURGOIS,
FERNANDO MONTERO, AND GEORGE KARANDINOS

Fieldnote (Laurie)

Lucia’s “froggies” line the windowsills, the top of the TV, and every other flat surface in the living room. Almost all (Fernando counted fifty-two) are replicas of Puerto Rico’s beloved *coquí*, the tiny native tree frog and cultural-national emblem whose deep croaks fill the island’s air at night. Pointing to a few of her favorites, Lucia, laughing, explains that she *loves* froggies.

In the kitchen, Lucia and her brother Papito have arranged an altar with votive candles to the Virgin Mary next to a photograph of their recently deceased father in his coffin; a portrait picture taken some years earlier in front of the zinc-roofed squatter’s shack at the edge of the Caribbean sea, where Lucia and her brother grew up; and snapshots of his grandchildren. Lucia’s and Papito’s parents, with the help of neighbors, built the shack themselves in a “land invasion.” In the portrait, their father, cheeks bloated from alcoholism and diabetes, stares at the camera with rural patriarchal authority. The Philly-based grandkids, in contrast, pose US-style, clowning, with toothy smiles, fingers askew imitating Hollywood gangster hand signals.

We gather in the cramped rowhome kitchen, celebrating Lucia’s household’s unexpected return from Puerto Rico. I gravitate to Santi (short for Santiago), Lucia’s six-year-old, younger, son. He is perched on a dented washing machine precariously tilted backwards on a brick (otherwise, he explains, “it leaks out the front door”). His ten-year-old “big sister” Nata (short for Natalia) runs over to join our conversation.

Both are eager to practice their now-rusty African American English, but their speech is halting; so, we toggle back and forth between Spanish, Eng-

lish, and Spanglish. They are sweet, respectful kids, and earnestly appreciative of adult interaction.

Moving “back to the block” and reenrolling in their mainland, majority Black, English-speaking elementary school has clearly been a difficult switch for them. Nevertheless, they say they “like school” and have “nice teachers.” They name them one by one, “Mister so-and-so” and “Misses so-and-so,” with the open-eyed innocence of elementary school children sharing their school day with an attentive grown-up.

They pull me over to see a newborn baby girl, Yadira, sleeping peacefully in a corner of the kitchen, oblivious to the noise. She arrived last month, when Papito and his wife, Genesis, invited her homeless teenage mother, Karina, with her new boyfriend Bubito (Papito’s former neighbor in Puerto Rico), to live with them. Papito and Genesis are going to adopt baby Yadira. Papito seems especially excited about the baby: “We fell in love with her at first sight!” he says.

Karina, I find out later, arrived in Philadelphia from Puerto Rico distressed, homeless, and six months pregnant, to seek residential drug detox treatment. Her baby Yadira is the result of a rape. Karina and Bubito met in rehab, and bounced between squats and homeless encampments after painful detoxes. Despite multiple imposing tattoos including two on his neck featuring former girlfriends’ names, a teardrop under his left eye, and a police radio code for homicide on his temple, Bubito is shyly devoted to Karina and tender with the baby.

Bubito explains they are saving money for a oneway airplane fare back to Puerto Rico to start a “new life together, home in *el campo* [the countryside].” Mention of Puerto Rico’s countryside prompts Papito into hard-scrabble stories about sugarcane cutting, fishing, and chicken raising on the island. Probing for details on shifting modes of production from rural subsistence to urban wage labor and inner-city drug selling, Philippe confesses he wouldn’t know how to pluck, much less kill, a chicken.

Papito smiles. “Don’t worry Felipe! Genesis is from New York, like you. She doesn’t know nothing about killing animals either.” On her first visit to his mother on the island, Genesis tried to help prepare a chicken soup to celebrate their arrival, but “she couldn’t even catch the poor bird.”

Papito and Bubito break into laughter—they had worked together for several years at a meatpacking plant in Allentown, Pennsylvania, two hours outside Philadelphia. Bubito ruefully acknowledges that the horrendously

dangerous and exhausting assembly line of the Allentown slaughterhouse was the best paying job he ever had, at \$11 an hour.

Lucia interrupts: "Except for when my *chillo* [lover] paid you to chop up his heroin!" (i.e., dividing compressed wholesale bricks of heroin into tiny three-hundredths-of-a-gram \$10 fine powder street-sale packets). Proud of her lover Heriberto's notoriety in the block's narcotics economy, and worried that his prominent status in the local drug trade might be left out of our book, Lucia speaks directly into Philippe's recorder, silencing everyone: "No one remembers that time back then, but me; Heriberto was the first real *bichote* (Puerto Rican Spanglish triple onomatopoeic entendre for 'big shot'/'drug boss'/'large phallus') on Tanner Street." Bubito interrupts morosely, "Yeah, I remember; that's when I relapsed."

Papito diplomatically circles back to legal employment, remembering his own best wage for "the worst job" in the slaughterhouse; and, as if caught in a trauma flashback, leaps up demonstrating the repetitive deadly motions of plunging an icepick into an oncoming live cow's forehead and then lunging forward towards the next victim thrust down the chute every forty-five seconds for eight nonstop hours. Mesmerized, we watch as Bubito simultaneously mimics his own gruesome task—chopping off hooves—further down the line. He explains how male and female cattle each require distinct knife sizes and strokes. They reminisce about the "Darth Vader-like" metal protective gear they wore, and their fear of slipping on the blood and fat splattered on the floor along the whizzing assembly line.

Papito, ever cheerful, recalls the award their shift received for three straight months "accident-free"—a company record.

Bubito says he was relieved when, because their neighbor's car broke down and they had no way to get to work, they lost their jobs. The four-plus-hour daily commute "drove him crazy." "We left for Allentown in the dark at 4:30 [a.m.] to clock in at 6:30"—and it could be three hours with rush-hour traffic returning after nightfall. Papito shrugs, "*Bregaba* [I dealt with it; I woulda' stayed at that job]." It took three days to find a loan shark to buy the broken car part, and when they showed up again for their 6 a.m. shift, the manager had already fired them: "*No quería saber más nada* [he wouldn't listen no more]."

Glancing through the open front door, Papito waves to a twenty-five-year-old neighbor—Roland—and pulls him inside. Roland looks depressed and not in a party mood, so Papito hugs him, and wraps two heaping plates

of food in tin foil for him to take home. There is obvious tenderness between them. They call one another “*pai*” [pa] and “*hijo*” [son]; Papito raised Roland “like a son” when he and Roland’s mother were a couple in the early 1990s. “But crack swept us off our feet and we fought over *chavos* [money].” Papito uprooted back to Puerto Rico alone, and Roland’s mother stayed on the block smoking crack.

[*Roland later explained his depression to George: Roland and his seven-months pregnant teenage girlfriend had just been evicted for rent nonpayment. They moved into his mother’s squatted rowhome but now had to share the basement with one of her subletters who treated Roland’s mother to crack instead of paying cash for rent. Roland subdivided the damp space with a curtain—but, he said, “we can’t make love with just a sheet hanging between that crackhead and us!”*]

Suddenly sirens, skidding tires, and shouts announce a police raid just outside. Papito peers through the front window, and gently curses in sympathy, watching three young men spread-eagled, face-down on the pavement, arms handcuffed behind their backs, officers straddling them brandishing guns.

One month after the welcome home party, Santi and Nata’s classic rural respeto (traditional respect for elders and teachers) shifted to outrage over the corporal and psychological brutality of their teachers and school security guards. They had been tracked into “special education” for “disruptive behavior” because of their “limited English,” but, they protested to us, “we were just defending ourselves” from classroom bullies who picked on them for being newcomers with *jibaro* (Puerto Rican hillbilly) accents.

When Nata came back from school one afternoon, eyes red from crying and a large purple bruise on her forehead, she asked Fernando and George to film her. Calling over her older brother Izzy (short for Israel), they pantomimed “disciplinary restraints” in their violent charter school, Stetson Middle School (listed on the Pennsylvania Education Department roster of “persistently dangerous” schools [Hardy and Graham 2008]):

IZZY: (*Demonstrating in slow motion for the video camera*) You grab her tight-tight-tight-tight, like that (*putting Nata into a half-nelson shoulder-to-neck hold*). Pull her up (*unsuccessfully trying to lift Nata off the ground*), but really up, so you (the child) can’t feel your feet

(on the ground) no more. And slam you against the wall! (*imitates swinging Nata face-first against the wall*).

FERNANDO: (*Horried*) Really?

NATA: (*Eyes wide open with emotion, but half-smiling to reassure Fernando to continue videoing*) Yeah twice! I swear to God. And I was hit like this (*loudly slapping the flat of her hand against the wall*). They do that! They slam you into the wall. Then three of them, Mister Wade, Mister Rodriguez and Mister Fayer be like (*shouting*), “WHY YOU DO THAT HUH HUH? YOU FUH—” (*censoring herself*)—like they be cursing at you . . . and everything. Until they make you cry. (*Emotions rising*) And they just keep doin’ that over and over until they make you cry (*shaking her body, gasping for air as if crying inconsolably, then smiling gently again to reassure Fernando and George that she is all right*).

The Existential Impact of the “Peculiar Institution” of US Colonialism and Puerto Rican “*Vaivén*” Limbo

The opening fieldnote depicts Lucia’s household’s welcome home party back on the block where we conducted fieldwork as an ethnographic team for a dozen-plus years (fall 2007 to summer 2015, with repeated subsequent visits through 2023). Located in Philadelphia’s infrastructurally devastated lowest-income Puerto Rican enclave, the neighborhood is the epicenter of an around-the-clock open-air narcotics market. Private and public sector investment in the neighborhood has long since disappeared. Instead, unemployed local youth sell cheap high-quality heroin and cocaine to slightly-less-poor whites in the shadows of deserted factories that once employed their grandparents. Neighbors tolerate drug selling because some revenue percolates into needy households through the block’s informal economy. Illicit drug debts and territorial disputes, however, cannot be mediated in court, and as a result generate cycles of retributive fire-arm violence and generalized physical insecurity. In this precarious context, households living on the edge of subsistence migrate back and forth between the US mainland and Puerto Rico in an irresolvable search for physical and economic stability.

Drawing from more than a thousand pages of fieldnotes, transcriptions, audio, video, and photo files, this chapter unpacks six structural-cultural forces evoked in the opening fieldnote to highlight the ongoing impact of the US colonization of Puerto Rico on return migration: (1) accelerated shifts in modes of production trapping rural Puerto Ricans in the most exploitative rungs of legal and illegal labor markets; (2) the relentless everyday emergency of hunger, addiction, and unemployment; (3) the fragile interpersonal “politics” of squatted property rights and kin-based and neighborly generosities and solidarities sabotaged by overcrowded domestic arrangements; (4) cultural-nationalist, affective, and sensory attachments to rural Puerto Rico resonating throughout the inner-city mainland diaspora; (5) abusive schools producing dropouts; and (6) brutal policing sweeping unemployed youth into mass incarceration.

Return migration is also a peculiarly *productive* force in US mainland and island urban and rural political-economic landscapes. The recuperation of vacant housing stock in Philadelphia, and the seizure and maintenance of otherwise abandoned oceanside property in Puerto Rico through undervalued subsistence-level sweat-equity labor, revalorize abandoned housing stock during economic downturns. Inevitably, however, subsequent gentrification and real estate speculation destabilize low-income Puerto Ricans whose labor revivifies abandoned urban infrastructure. The island’s dramatically unequal access to federal public subsidies and health care, combined with off-shore tax rebates and corporate profit margins and exacerbated by a lack of infrastructural development has historically turned Puerto Ricans into guinea pig protagonists and victims of the contemporary model of US neoliberal globalization, which subsidizes corporations and rewards predatory accumulation/extraction from even the most lumpenized surplus populations displaced by deindustrialization (Bourgeois 2018).

Puerto Rico’s anachronistic status as a contemporary colonial “insular territorial possession” is foundational to the phenomenon of chronic “return migrations” which, in the Puerto Rican context, are called “*el vaivén* [going and coming].” Echoing Jorge Duany’s call for “the subjective experience of [Puerto Rican] migration” to be understood as an indefinite process of “deterritorialization and reterritorialization” (Duany 2003, 433), we are highlighting the existential, affective, and embodied

stakes of Puerto Rico's "peculiar status" as a twenty-first century US colony that traps poor households in an edge-of-subsistence "limbo" (Blocher and Gulati 2018). Drawing on our long-term (and ongoing) fieldwork in Puerto Rican North Philadelphia, we adapt Loïc Wacquant's (2000) insights framing the US post-1980s hyperpunitive carceral behemoth as the latest institutional manifestation of contemporary *de facto* slavery to render visible the institutional violence of the Puerto Rican colonial experience under US "racial[ized] capitalism" (Robinson 2000; Kelley 2018; Hansen, Netherland, and Herzberg 2023). Our use of "peculiar," like that of Wacquant, is inspired by W. E. B. Du Bois's (1935) seminal critique of the South's racist rationalization of chattel slavery as its own "peculiar institution" ("peculiar" in its archaic meaning of "private," its "privilege" concerning the ownership of human beings) to legitimize state-sanctioned enslavement under industrial agricultural capitalism. Wacquant extends the term to the "peculiar institution" of ongoing virulently racist hyperincarceration stripping low-income mainland US Black and Latino/a people of freedom and civil rights. Likewise, we apply it to the ongoing anachronistic US colonial "peculiar" dominion and possession of Puerto Rico and its imposition of second-class citizenship that drives low income Puerto Ricans to US mainland inner cities.

US Military-Economic Conquest and Ongoing Domination of Puerto Rico

US troops invaded Puerto Rico in 1898 in a scramble to catch up with European imperial powers through an orgy of turn-of-the-century island military seizures across the Caribbean and Pacific. On the coat-tails of conquest, exclusive US mercantilist control was imposed on Puerto Rico's import-export trade. The Spanish colonial semifeudal small and mid-sized coffee- and tobacco-growing elites located in the highlands were excluded overnight from their European markets and went bankrupt. Predatory New York-based industrial sugarcane corporations seized control of the colonized export economy, imposing proletarianized plantation export agriculture that offered only part-time, below-subsistence-level employment in the lowlands. This cataclysmic mode-of-production collision (industrial plantation agriculture versus quasi-feudally patron-client mercantile sharecrop export production)

displaced tens of thousands of semisubsistence small farmer artisans in a hunger-driven internal migration to lowland sugar plantations. During World War II, the US recruited Puerto Rico's newly dispossessed, landless, and unemployed surplus population into the part-time seasonal migrant agricultural and industrial labor forces of the northeastern and Midwestern US mainland states. In the 1950s, Puerto Ricans were drafted in large numbers into the US Army to fight and die disproportionately in US imperial wars in Korea and Vietnam (Franqui-Rivera 2018).

Neoclassical economists celebrated this militarized imposition of starvation-driven mass migration and special-interest US corporate and plantation industrialization—a textbook 1940s case of seventeenth century “primitive accumulation” per Marx (1990, 873–926)—calling it “modernization” (Lewis 1949; see critiques by Badillo-Veiga 1981; Horowitz 1981). For the rest of the twentieth century (late 1940s to 2006), complex tax laws and corporate subsidies consolidated a tax-free import-export assembly manufacturing economy. Puerto Rican industrialization had virtually no links to island-based enterprise, but generated windfall US corporate profits. The phase-out of the US corporate tax break subsidy system in 2006 predictably and catastrophically crushed the island's economy. As a direct result of over a century of super-charged economic turmoil and colonial disempowerment (exacerbated by climate crisis hurricanes), well over half of island-born Puerto Ricans alive today have left their homeland. The poorest migrants find themselves confined to US rust belt inner cities (Krueger 2019; Dietz 2003; Chappatta 2016).

De Jure Second-Class Citizenship for Insular “Unincorporated US Territories”

There is nothing metaphorical about Puerto Rico's colonial status. The island is *de jure* a formal possession of the United States federal government (Rivera Ramos 2001). In a pathetic acrobatics of racialized jurisprudence, dozens of US Supreme Court rulings and Acts of Congress over the past 127 years have attempted to legitimize US conquest and ongoing colonial domination of the island of Puerto Rico. (Indeed, Congress once again failed to advance legislation to review its colonial status as recently as 2023.) In an embarrassing body of law replete with racist non sequiturs known as the “Insular Cases” and

still in effect today (nine rulings in 1901 with fourteen more through 1922), the US Supreme Court invented the novel arbitrary US legal category of “unincorporated island territory,” starkly defining US militarily conquered islands as “subject to the sovereignty of and . . . owned by the United States.” It was a shameless nineteenth century bid to establish an enduring tropical “American empire” in the Caribbean and the Pacific that survives unabated to the present day (2023, 4), encompassing Puerto Rico, the US Virgin Islands, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and American Samoa. Puerto Ricans residing on the island were declared to be “foreign to the United States in the domestic sense.” This bizarre legalistic non sequitur excluded island “possessions” inhabited by “alien races” from the US constitutional rights that the Supreme Court acknowledged are *automatically granted* when “contiguous territory inhabited only by people of the same race or by scattered bodies of native Indians” are “annexed” (Brown 1901; see also Locke 2020; Rivera Ramos 2001). Thus, although a US property, Puerto Rico was legally indexed as inherently racially external and “unincorporated territory.” In 1952, Puerto Rico transitioned to the status of US “Commonwealth” (translated into Spanish by the title “*Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico*” or “Free Associated State of Puerto Rico,” although it is neither free, nor a state). Resolution 23 of the US Constitutional Convention arbitrarily declared the elimination of “the last vestiges of colonialism” by granting Puerto Rico “complete autonomy” in “economic, cultural, and social affairs.” To be more precise, however, Commonwealth status was to confer a “full measure of self-government, *consistent with Puerto Rico’s status as a territory of the United States*” (Northrop 1952; our italics). In yet another calisthenic legal twist, the US Congress declared Puerto Rico’s “self-government” to be limited by its “territorial status.”

As a “US territory,” (aka formal colony), consequently, Puerto Rico is strictly limited in the financial policies it can pursue. After it lost more than 20 percent of its jobs and 10 percent of its population during financial crises of the 2010s, the federal government vetoed Puerto Rico’s attempt to declare bankruptcy. Instead, Congress imposed a “fiscal control board” through the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (ironically abbreviated “PROMESA”) to force the island to repay \$73 billion of bond debt to US hedge funds and mutual funds, while imposing draconian cuts of desperately needed public services for

low-income, disabled and retiree populations. Obligated to pay \$1.2 billion in fees to federally imposed debt managers, Puerto Rico emerged from its “undeclared bankruptcy” in 2022 saddled by immense debt and forbidden from controlling its own public sector budget. A Bloomberg news report noted the debt managers “added principal and interest payments to Puerto Rico’s current budget after [island] lawmakers failed to approve them” (Kaske and Wyss 2022). Ironically, “tax-weary” US mainland citizens (so-called nomad capitalists) were moving to Puerto Rico during these crisis years to avoid federal taxes; they simultaneously qualified for Puerto Rico’s generous subsidies to wealthy investors and profited from plunging real estate values. These tax-dodging “nomads” pay zero taxes on interest, dividends, and capital gains. Wealth advisors boosted the colonial expatriate arrangement as an “ideal alternative to citizenship renunciation” for federal US tax “relief” (Henderson 2022). Conversely, although hunger is historically endemic in Puerto Rico (Torres et al. 2019), low-income native-born Puerto Ricans are eligible for only a limited subset of reduced federal social assistance programs. Unlike SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or “food stamps”), available to the fifty states and expandable to accommodate the volume of need, Puerto Rico’s second-class NAP food program is a limited lump-sum federal “block grant” insufficient to cover all eligible islanders. Similarly, Puerto Rico’s Aid for the Aged, Blind, and Disabled (AABD) provides drastically lower monthly subsidies to a fraction of those eligible (Puerto Rico Report 2021). As Federal judge William G. Young ruled in 2019, when he extended temporary benefits to Puerto Rico during the COVID-19 pandemic, “to be blunt, the Federal government discriminates against Americans who live in Puerto Rico” (Young 2020). Put simply, he wrote, “exclusion of otherwise eligible residents of Puerto Rico” is “unconstitutional.” Given that the island per capita income is half that of the poorest US state, Mississippi (Krueger 2019), “welfare” inequity becomes a significant push factor in *vaivén* out-migration.

Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Hunger and Incommensurable Vulnerabilities

Nata, Santi, and Izzy, portrayed in the opening fieldnote, journeyed back and forth between North Philly and Puerto Rico three times during our fieldwork as their mother Lucia, ever hopeful but recurrently unsuccessful, sought to find a stable food supply, safer schooling, and secure housing for them and strove to balance affective attachments and obligations to place and extended kin. Six months after the welcome party, Lucia's lover (the successful *bichote* Heriberto), bought a cousin's house in rural Puerto Rico and gave it to her for free. Frustrated with her children's violent Philadelphia school—and their special-ed classification—she moved with them to Puerto Rico in the middle of the school semester. After six months fruitlessly searching for work, they returned to Philadelphia, driven out by hunger, substandard medical facilities, and loneliness:

LUCIA: Puerto Rico . . . it's a place for somebody to go on vacation or with tons of money, to invest in a business. But for me—it's impossible. I was there six months looking for work all over the place. I applied to lots of jobs. And *nothing*! And I couldn't get any welfare, not even any food stamps. My children were hungry. I was hungry! Bibi [Lucia's affectionate nickname for her *bichote* lover] bought me a house over there and even a little car. But he didn't come visit us. So I just left it all because I said, I can't be here—I just can't. Before, in Puerto Rico, I had worked in the Child Welfare Department, with children—the ones they take away from their mothers? I went to that office again. They told me they'd call me. But they never did. I couldn't even find jobs cleaning toilets or caring for old people even though I have official papers that prove I have training. But nothing turned up for six whole months. So we just picked up and left everything, *Pam*! I said, we can't take it. It's impossible. I have to leave. Aye!

My nephew agreed to stay in the house so that no one steals it. But look at what we came back to here (*sighing and lifting her chin towards the drug sellers arguing on the corner*)—to *this*!

In Puerto Rico we spent our time looking for metals, searching for any old little things to sell. But they paid almost nothing for the

metals. [...] Sometimes I called Norma [her neighbor on the block] “Can you send me fifty, sixty pesos [dollars]?” And she did! But really (*shaking her head*)! That’s no way to be! I couldn’t make it, and neither could the children. They had just learned English, but school over there is all in Spanish, which they didn’t know well any more. They kept getting F, F, F. And I said “‘Chacho [Bro’]!” I gotta get my children out of here fast!

So I brought them back here, ‘cause it just wasn’t working over there.

Yet again, Nata, Santi, and Izzy returned to Philadelphia mid-semester and, with their English now rusty, were bullied by their classmates for being “slow and stupid.” They had liked the countryside. School in small-town Puerto Rico felt liberating. They loved the physical freedom to walk through fields and explore the rural terrain. The relative disciplinary laxity of teachers was in stark contrast to the rigid time schedules, physical barricades, and X-ray scanners they queued through whenever they entered their Philadelphia inner-city school building:

SANTI: Damn, I miss Puerto Rico school.

IZZY: I used to run around ‘cause it’s all rocks. And you see all these big cliffs (*sweeping his hand across an imaginary breath-taking view*).

SANTI: (*Excitedly*) Mira! Yo! The thing I liked to do over there [in Puerto Rico] was go to school. Over here [in Philadelphia], they don’t let you go outside. It’s . . . (*struggling to remember the English word*) blocked . . . but in PR, the schools don’t got no walls, and you can leave the doors open. If you want water you just get a drink. At lunch time, if you want to eat first, you eat, but you don’t really have to. You can just play for one whole hour. And you could even go outside the school and explore. Or go to your house. And you could buy stuff outside. (*Nata and Izzy nodding in agreement.*)

NATA: The neighborhood was . . . (*struggling for the English equivalent to the Spanish colloquial term “tranquilo” for calm, safe, relaxing, friendly*) “regular.” Yes! for me, regular. But in the school it was fun because there was a store inside the school that you usually buy whatever you want. And when the teacher don’t come to school . . . Miss . . . (*frowning at forgetting her favorite teacher’s name*) . . . we can all just go outside, and hang out. We can even go to our house and

then come back to school for lunch. It was really different. And the milks are like that (*mimicking lifting a big carton with two hands*).

Really big . . . (*smiling*) I loved it . . .

IZZY: Yeah it was . . . like . . . open school.

NATA: And it usually was fun. It was great because the president . . .

Not the president. (*Frowning to remember the English word*) . . .

SANTI: Principal.

NATA: Yeah! The principal in the school used to say, "I'm'a take you out of [suspend you from] the school!" But (*giggling*) he never do it.

GEORGE: What did you get in trouble for?

NATA: (*With cheerful innocence*) For fighting. And being bad and cutting class.

GEORGE: For cutting class?!

NATA: Shhhh! My mom don't know.

Despite having a free house, car, and a robust network of kin in rural Puerto Rico, Lucia returned to Philadelphia because she could not find a job, and because the island's annual NAP block grant for hungry, food-stamp eligible families had already been depleted early in that fiscal year. Lucia's sudden decision to uproot her three children midsemester was overdetermined: multiple challenges as well as opportunities were pushing her back involuntarily to Philly. First, unemployment; second, hunger; third, loneliness; and fourth, inferior health services. A favorite cousin, ill with brain cancer, urgently needed chemotherapy unavailable in Puerto Rico; Lucia brought him back with her.

Although they missed the beautiful countryside and stress-free school ambience, Santi, Nata and Izzy were relieved to be back in Philly because, as Santi explained (with Nata and Izzy nodding in agreement), "we were hungry. The icebox was always empty." Stark economic and technological disparities consistent with Puerto Rico's colonized second-class citizenship status played out viscerally inside the tummies and on the tongues of the littlest migrants. Despite Nata's appreciation for the school's big Puerto Rican milk cartons, the children did not like "Puerto Rican food." It wasn't the Philly Puerto Rican food they had gotten used to, they insisted, although whenever we ate at their house, they served us (delicious) Puerto Rican food. To the children, however, island food was, "not the same."

Upon arrival, Lucia hesitated before registering her children for school. She wanted to avoid the neighborhood's notoriously violent local catchment schools. Her plans were unclear. Her oldest son Izzy was acutely aware of the importance of obtaining a high school degree. He anxiously kept urging his mother to pick a school, but Lucia was torn:

GEORGE: Are you afraid to send them to Edison [the local high school]?

LUCIA: Yes! That school is really bad. They kill kids, and everything, in that school . . . three *chamaquitos* [young ones] were killed there. One thirteen, another fourteen, and the other sixteen.

GEORGE: Inside the school?

LUCIA: (*Nodding emphatically*) All over a girl. No, no, no! 'Chacho [Bro']! I'd rather not send Izzy to that school for sure. Absolutely no! It's the worst!

GEORGE: Wow. So what are you going to do? Are you going to stay on the block?

NATA: (*Winning and shaking her head emphatically*) mmn mmn! [No!]

LUCIA: (*Sighs*) I'm looking around [to sublet an apartment]. But it's hard. They ask for three months [deposit].

I have to hope—they haven't yet responded to the request for Santi, [i.e., his application for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) for pediatric bipolar psychosis, initiated by a Philadelphia social worker before they left for Puerto Rico]. They tell me it is still . . . going [pending review].

Lucia's concerns about all her neighborhood's schools were justified. During the second half of our fieldwork years (2011–14) the local high school's graduation rate plummeted by 24 percent. The "nonprofit" charter school agency (ASPIRA) that had taken over from a previous notorious for-profit charter (Edison Schools) proved to be equally corrupt and organizationally incompetent (Graham and Hanna 2022). In fact, ASPIRA was the same nonprofit that had previously tracked her children onto the abusive "Special Education" floor at Stetson Middle School. Violence among students surged and math and reading proficiency rates remained abysmal (8 percent and 20 percent, respectively). Local press coverage of the violence and financial malfeasance shamed the city into attempting to cancel ASPIRA's contract in 2016 and again in 2019 following a scath-

ing 2018 Pennsylvania state audit of ASPIRA's mismanagement of Stetson, detailing: "poor accountability, . . . poor record-keeping practices, . . . poor organizational structure," increased "risk of fraud, waste and abuse" (DePasquale 2018; see also Hanglely 2019; Hanna 2019; Graham and Hanna 2022; Graham 2023).

Meanwhile, lacking cash for a rental deposit and receiving only occasional gifts from her former lover Heriberto, and from Norma, her generous, but also very poor, welfare-dependent neighbor, Lucia and her three children doubled-up again with Papito, Genesis, baby Yadira, Karina, and Bubito, in their squatted rowhome.

Pushed from All Sides: The Drug Economy in Colonial Context

Typically, low-wage labor migrations depend on restrictive borders for maximizing short-term profit extraction in a structurally violent process classically conjoining state power (law enforcement), "hostile terrain" (De León 2015), capital, racism and xenophobia. This conjugation of structural forces and policies imposes labor discipline on foreign, undocumented migrants devoid of civil rights, thereby assuring the supply of young, energetic laborers at peak productive age. Undocumented migrants have the added benefit of displacing their social reproduction costs (e.g., education, child-rearing, retirement) to the sending nation (Walter et al. 2004; see the classic critique of parallels between the racist political economies of migrant laborers under South African apartheid and in the US West, see Burawoy 1976). The stranglehold of undocumented illegality does not (technically) legally constrain Puerto Rican opportunities. Structurally, however, 'racialized oscillating migration' reproduces illegality's fundamental outlines, imposing below-minimum-wage subsistence employment and inferior public resources on Puerto Ricans both on the island and in the diaspora as they find themselves segregated into mainland inner-city, deindustrialized neighborhoods.

Between the late 1960s and 1990s, Puerto Rico's annual return migration occasionally exceeded out-migration. By the 2000s, this had reversed course (Krogstad 2015). The flight of corporate capital initiated in the early 2000s in anticipation of the 2006 termination of tax-free profit repatriation was exacerbated by the 2014 downgrading of Puerto Rican bonds. This precipitated massive out-migration, exceeding the

WWII-through-mid-1960s exodus. Puerto Rico experienced its second sustained population decline since the seventeenth century genocide of indigenous Taino. From 2000 to 2007, more than four hundred thousand Puerto Ricans—out of a total population of under four million—uprooted to the US mainland (Duany 2000, 19). Climate-crisis-driven hurricanes have further induced record-level *vaivén* migration patterns (Bonilla and LeBrón 2019; Wyss 2022).

From a purely economic standpoint, there is little reason for entry-level Puerto Rican workers *not* to migrate to the United States: During the 2000s, per capita income on the island has remained 300 percent lower than mainland income, and unemployment 2.5 times higher (Brown 2016). (The fact that Puerto Rico's legal minimum wage equals [and arguably exceeds] the mainland's minimum wage [because of the *aguinaldo*, Latin America's tradition of a thirteenth annual bonus holiday month] highlights the complexity of formal and informal labor market disparities in the two sociocultural formations—colonized island, and segregated inner-city diaspora. Our neighbors straightforwardly identified wage disparities as their primary reason for returning to Philadelphia. Economic logics, however, are double-edged: the US entry-level working-class economy is increasingly unstable, unlicensed, and devoid of benefits. Furthermore, during our core fieldwork years (2007–2015), almost half of returning migrants settled in high-poverty mainland neighborhoods. Migrants were poorer and less skilled than in earlier waves. Forty-one percent of Puerto Rican adults in Philadelphia had not completed high school, compared to 21 percent of adult Black people and less than 13 percent of non-Hispanic white people (Singer et al. 2008). Poverty rates in the three census tracts surrounding Lucia's block exceeded 54 percent. Five of Philadelphia's eight poorest census tracts were in the segregated Puerto Rican neighborhood (more than double the citywide rate of 24 percent and 3.5 times the nation's rate of 13.5 percent). Shockingly, our microneighborhood's poverty rate was higher than Puerto Rico's overall rate of 45 percent (US Census Bureau 2005–2021). Why, then, do low-income Puerto Ricans seek economic opportunity in such devastated rust belt neighborhoods beset by unemployment, inferior schools, high levels of physical insecurity and abusive policing?

Violence is a major driving force of mobility, but it operates in both directions. Our teenage neighbor Willy's experience highlights the complex

interface between economic opportunity and physical insecurity. Born in Puerto Rico, he arrived in New Jersey as an infant when his mother sought employment in inner-city Newark garment sweatshops. When Willy started failing middle school, his mother brought him back to Puerto Rico to join her parents in their successful squatter's community in Loiza, a swampy patch of "flood zone" condemned as hazardous by US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Fearing intensifying drugs and violence in Loiza's high school peer-youth networks, Willy's mother sent him alone to an uncle in Philadelphia to complete high school. Initially committed to staying in school and out of trouble, Willy soon fell into part-time drug selling on his stoop alongside his uncle. Both began consuming opioid pills, unaware that their diverted prescription pills were as addictive as the powder heroin they sold to their primarily white customers. Following an arrest after a drug-turf stabbing, Willy jumped bail and fled "home" to rural Loiza.

Fieldnote (Fernando, Philippe, Laurie)

We navigate via cellphone texts, missed turns, and impassible mud to meet Willy in the squatter settlement. He greets us proudly snuggling his three-month-old son in front of the shack where he lives, built by his grandparents and aunt. Unprompted, he reminisces nostalgically for "the block back in Philly." He sweeps his hand towards the dirt road. "Look around here! *A quien tú ves pasar?* [Who do you see passing by?]" Laughing, he enumerates the exciting diversity of a Philly drug-corner: "White dopefiends, little kids, old church ladies, all kinds of people passing by."

He pauses, picturing his white customers. "I used to look at them and wonder ... (*mimicking a catatonic heroin nod*), Don't you see what you doin' to yourself? Why they want to be like that? I mean I would understand if they like ... (*mimicking ecstatically happy face*), but they like ... (*nodding despondently again*). And ... 'Chacho [Bro?!] (*Shaking an imaginary overdosed body awake*.) 'You alright?'" As an afterthought Willy adds, "There's no heroin or pills in Loiza ... just lots of coke and weed." He reassures us, "I got no interest in that shit."

A half dozen adolescents on bicycles suddenly arrive and Willy heads off to the beach with them, waving goodbye cheerily.

The sociability that infuses the settlement is even more dynamic than that of the Philly drug corners. Nevertheless, Willy misses the urban

excitement of Philly's open-air drug scene. A displaced twenty-first century US inner-city flaneur (Benjamin 1999), Willy longs for the "spectacle" (Debord 1970) and action of Puerto Rican Philly's "cosmopolitan" drug scene (Bourgois et al. 2021; Anderson 2011). In contrast, on Philly drug corners, neighbors like Lucia and her children pine for Puerto Rico's rural tranquility, natal villages, hunting-fishing-and-gathering subsistence opportunities, and the intimacy of extended families.

Most of our newly arriving neighbors were young monolingual Spanish speakers from the countryside who rapidly achieved English fluency. At first bewildered by Philly's decimated inner city, within a year many found themselves juggling unemployment and public benefits, and dabbling in seductive drug-market opportunities. Bucolic Puerto Rico, however, is also riven with explosive violence. With a population over one million, Philadelphia regularly rates as the deadliest US big city (Randolph 2022; Pew Charitable Trusts 2013). Young immigrants nevertheless insisted that violence was "way worse back home." Heroin was also more toxic (enhanced by "*anestesia de caballo*" [horse tranquilizer, legal name xylazine]), and its drug bosses even more murderous.

Willy's uncle had fled to Philly with a bullet in his calf. He dismissed Philly-born youth for "thinking they so hard. They wouldn't last in Puerto Rico. Here [in Philly] they shoot you maybe once . . . or twice. On the island they spray all their bullets." In 2011—midway through our Philly fieldwork—Puerto Rico's murder rate was four times that of the US mainland. Indeed, the island has the world's highest ratio of firearm murders (91 percent). Its strong gun control laws are sabotaged by its colonial status that imposes open borders. This converts the strategically located Caribbean "insular possession" into an optimal trafficking corridor for US firearms and Latin American narcotics, rendering its murder rates 3 to 6 times higher than those of any US state—and comparable to those of its fellow Caribbean colony, the US Virgin Islands. Over 90 percent of crime scene guns seized on both these colonies are purchased/smuggled from the US mainland.

Repeatedly, we met energetic island youth looking for an escape from the Puerto Rican narcotics market who fled to the United States to find refuge and legal employment. When they lost jobs or, more often, could not find them in the inner city, they slipped into part-time narcotics street-selling and were caught in Philly's carceral dragnet. Chronic police raids plunged youth into prolonged trials prompting involuntary returns to the

exhausted alternative of the Puerto Rican countryside. The peculiar “interstitial position” of Puerto Rican retail drug sellers in the US rust belt made that job “successful” relative to sparse legal employment options, supplying labor-power to the wholesale and retail trades at both ends of the migration pendulum (Bourgois and Hart 2016). Quasi-inevitable “carceralizing entanglements” spawned desperate hopes for “escape” to “redeemed lives” propelling *vaivén* in a deadend closed cycle. It ensnared most of the neighbors we befriended, including entrepreneurial single mothers scrambling to support their children. Our neighbor, Rosita, reflected with concern, “I had never heard of dope [heroin] until I came here [Philadelphia]. I didn’t even know what it was when I moved to the block. My daughter Julieta fell into selling it first and fixed-up our [squatted] house. And when she quit [using and selling] I got involved in that world. Only because I didn’t know English. I went to job sites with experience and everything, but no! I couldn’t get work.” Ironically, the narcotics market drove people in both directions and also confined them: Carolina—a generation younger—came to Philadelphia fleeing Puerto Rico’s toxic, xylazine-infused rural narcotics scene: “I lived in the countryside. I was my own boss, selling drugs. I got locked up. When I came out of prison, my sister said, ‘Come over here to Philly.’ I had lived there in 1994 and I thought, if I stay here, I’ll fall back into the same scene [using and selling]. So I worked hard at the village fairs with a friend until I saved up enough money to leave with my daughters. I don’t like Philadelphia. I like my hometown. But there’s no work back home—especially not in the countryside.”

Land, Labor, Squatting, and Edge-of-Subsistence Economics

Housing access is key to the magnetism of both rust belt urban and rural island squatter settlements. Circulating shared or discounted subsistence resources dangles hoped-for positive life-changing options through sweat equity and solidarity at both migratory ends. This generates a destabilizing—sometimes fatal—flexibility of segregated quasi-subsistence residential and income generation options. Post-1980s, deindustrialization and neoliberal public- and private-sector abandonment devastated both Puerto Rico and the diasporic inner city infrastructure. Empty factories, decaying rowhomes, vacant lots, defunct railroad lines, and festering piles of rubble and garbage riddle segregated low-income

Philadelphia neighborhoods. Puerto Ricans settled in neighborhoods decimated by the factory closures that had already propelled most local whites to suburbia. Pushed north out of central city locations by white mob violence, new immigrants seized or bought degraded infrastructure and mobilized strong ties among vulnerable kin networks to improvise shelter.

Squats and overcrowded rentals circulated among kin and friends moving back and forth to Puerto Rico or other US cities. In rural Puerto Rico, our same neighbors squatted, owned, rented, or freeloaded with generous kin in similar precarious arrangements. Squats sometimes devolved into shooting galleries but many others offered working families remarkable residential longevity. Intensive sweat-equity labor investments resurrected decrepit infrastructures and rejuvenated abandoned land in the public and private investment vacuum.

Age-old Puerto Rican political struggles for semisubsistence land rights carried over to urban reclamation strategies in Philadelphia. Fragile assemblages of resources combined with enduring pride of place, informal self-reliance, and kin solidarity engendered *vaivén* migration as a transhistorical survival strategy. From the 1920s to 1950s, disenfranchisement of small coffee and subsistence farmers, shantytown day laborers, and sharecroppers (known by the Spanish Colonial feudal-era term *agregados* [hangers on]) fomented militantly politicized autonomous squatter settlements (Cotto Morales 2006). In short, Puerto Rico's land-rights consciousness and semisubsistence resourcefulness have persisted through the transition to advanced finance capitalism under US racialized colonialism.

Colonialism's "everyday emergency" is highlighted in Lucia's brother Papito's multiple *vaivéns*, which appear unpredictable but reflect the structural bad luck of multiple occupational injuries in the bottom rungs of both the legal and illegal labor forces. At eighteen, Papito wounded a policeman and was injured in a shootout during a botched carjacking commissioned by a discount mechanic operating in his settlement. He suffered a second gunshot injury, in his right arm, after his release from fourteen years in US federal prison. He was forced to rejoin his sister, Lucia in Philly when, because of the limited range of motion in his wounded right arm, he lost his seasonal job harvesting melons in Puerto Rico. Pointing to sellers huddled on our stoop, he said, "I wanted to leave

all that [*Quise ya salir de todo eso*]. And never again go to prison no more [*No quería caer preso más nada*].” A Philadelphia contractor hired him to work in the suburbs, a long train commute from the block, but he fell off a substandard ladder painting a third-floor window, seriously injuring his shoulder and back. The contractor refused responsibility for his employee’s \$108,000 hospital bill. Papito applied for occupational injury benefits, unsuccessfully, and was forced, infirm, to return (with Genesis and baby Yadira) to his mother’s shack in Puerto Rico to heal.

Fieldnote (Philippe, Fernando, Laurie)

The access road to Papito’s natal squatter settlement washed away in last week’s hurricane, so we walk the last quarter mile. His mother’s compound is one of about fifty zinc-roofed wooden shacks on a sliver of land sandwiched between a mosquito-drenched swamp and an eroded beach. We are in the shadows of three crumbling colossal smokestacks of a dismantled New York-based sugarcane processing plant. Papito played hooky from middle school to cut cane here until the company left. FEMA condemned the site as an “uninhabitable flood-zone,” but most of Papito’s extended family, grandparents, cousins, uncles, nephews, and so on, live here, within a few dozen feet of one another. Most also speak perfect inner-city English, having (unsuccessfully) sought stable mainland employment.

We surprise Papito standing in his swampy backyard sorting broken computer chip boards for recyclables. He looks up and springs towards us, calling Genesis, who hangs back smiling at the kitchen door. Genesis is as shy and placid as Papito is gregarious and energetic. Born and bred in New York’s South Bronx, she maintains a cautious streetwise reserve around strangers and seems at a slight remove from her surroundings here, unlike Papito.

Thrilled, he gives us a tour of the yard’s trees—plantain, jobo, quenepa, and avocado—and medicinal herbs, praising each one’s uses. He is especially proud of a large, rusty, discarded deep freezer shell converted into a crab nursery. He hoses the crabs down and they burst into a flurry of activity: “They love cold water because their blood is jelly.” He feeds them corn and *viandas* (tubers) and carefully releases the females when their egg sacks swell. Papito’s tophophilia is infectious: “*Bonito, bonito, bonito todo abunda* [beautiful, beautiful . . . everything plentiful] . . . always something to eat.

You can fish (*pointing to the ocean*), grab a crab, make a soup; and that's enough for the day."

Papito's mother sets up a patio table, apologizing for serving "*comida de pobre* [poor people's food]," a steaming "*habichuelas con patitas* [rice and beans with pig's feet]." Pointing to the trees that shade us and produce the juice we are drinking, she explains, "*Cuando cañoneamos aquí* [when we invaded here]" it was all sand, coral and rocks. They said nothing would grow so close to the sea. But I *insisti* [persisted] in planting. Some trees couldn't survive but look at these beauties now . . ."

A dozen families working together constructed the settlement "house-by-house." She recites the numbers of the lottery ticket that paid for her crucial supply of cement and zinc.

After lunch, Papito waves to two boys playing next door, challenging them to *gallitos* (play cockfights). Thrilled, they climb a flamboy tree to collect a handful of red flowers shaped like roosters' crests. They delicately remove petals one by one to isolate the central hook-tipped pistil. They "swordfight" with Papito, attempting to decapitate one another's pistil tip. They shriek gleefully, beating Papito (most of the time) and then challenging each of us.

Conclusion: Recognizing US Colonialism in the Twenty-First Century as Peculiarly Predatory Accumulation

Papito's catastrophic occupational injuries were unfortunately not unusual. We collected dozens of legal and illegal employment histories on our block alone. A clear pattern emerged: (1) long commutes to abusive legal jobs; (2) predatory medical, insurance, or legal mistreatment (or a combination of the three); (3) a retreat into entry-level hand-to-hand retail drug selling; or (4) a meager monthly disability SSI check (approximately \$650 in 2007–2015), supplemented by returns to Puerto Rico for subsistence food or artisanal production schemes or scavenging for recyclables.

Each time an injured worker sought hospital care, the facility immediately tested for "narcotics." Savvy corporate employers and insurance agencies boost their profit margins through the zero-tolerance drug war. Routine tests detect marijuana up to two weeks after ingestion, disqualifying even conscientiously sober-on-the-job workers from occupational health compensation. The care that workers did receive was often

cursory if not abusive. Pain was either over- or undertreated at clinics, maximizing traffic and revenue streams.

Neoliberal corporatization has violently lumpenized the American dream, turning chronic disability Social Security checks into a default refuge of last resort. Perversely, receiving SSI is conditional upon exclusion from legal work—imposing idleness or incentivizing participation in undocumented or illegal activities. Papito, for example, qualified for long-term SSI disability, but was excluded from the worker's supplement that would have rendered it a more viable income—had his employer not lied. Instead, he was compelled to return to rural, off-the-grid Puerto Rico to seek foraging opportunities to lower his family's expenses and consumption. During the COVID-19 epidemic, however, baby Yadira suddenly required complex medical care unavailable in Puerto Rico. They migrated to a brother's house in Buffalo, New York, where Medicaid was available.

* * *

Existential philosophers treat hope and despair as fellow travelers (Kierkegaard 1954; Sartre 1963). Fanon (1963) eloquently showed how colonialism's Manichaeian oppression generates a resistance that is coupled with internalized, mimetic (Taussig 1986, 134) self-alienation. Puerto Rican *vaivén*—like the return of urbanized Native Americans to annual reservation and inner-city powwow celebrations (Orange 2018)—is a form of cultural resistance to ethnocide, an agency-filled quest for redemptive life projects, and a colonized condition of edge-of-subsistence mobility, plagued by unemployment, addiction, and violence.

Puerto Rico's disarticulated, unsustainable colonized economy deserves particular public attention because it served as the Cold War pilot for twenty-first century neoliberal globalization. Through "Operation Bootstrap" corporations reaped windfall tax breaks to relocate import-export assembly plants to politically favorable sites with weaker environmental and civil rights protections. For more than a century, Puerto Rico has generated more profits per dollar invested for US corporations than any other place on earth. Until 2006, the federal tax code's Section 936 enabled corporations to shift profits from factories around the world to Puerto Rico through "transfer pricing" gimmicks enabling instant "repatriation" of corporate profits tax-free to mainland CEOs and shareholders (Caban 1993; Dietz 2003).

Straddling two poles of subsistence survival as “domestically foreign” subjects, Puerto Rican households boomerang between bucolic FEMA disaster sites and concrete rust belt ghettos. Second only to Native Americans, Puerto Ricans suffer the highest US rates of family poverty, premature death, substance use disorders and physical and cognitive disabilities. Disproportionately shunted into toxically hazardous entry-level narcotics retail jobs, Puerto Ricans are a classic expendable surplus population subject to hyperincarceration. To shift emerging subsidy costs from municipal to federal budgets, social workers churn the injured unemployed into permanent disability to mitigate destitution. The perverse effect is to reduce population-level labor force participation and normalize collective suffering as individualized “pathology.”

The charisma of Papito, Lucia, and dozens more of our neighbors embody the contradictory affective universe of what legal scholar Locke (2020) calls “absolute and perpetual liminality.” The *vaivén* phenomenon among low-income Puerto Ricans camouflages racism, economic dislocation, physical insecurity, and second-class citizenship, in pursuit of elusive personal autonomy, cultural affirmation and redemptive life projects. Their *vaivén* is a litmus test revealing colonialism’s structural and ideological brutality that frames colonial subjects oxymoronically as both indelibly “unincorporated” and nonsovereign. At the same time, however, concentration into toxic segregated zones promotes vibrant sociality and irrepressible cultural production. Direct colonial domination of Puerto Rico has rendered its cultural identity and frustrated national pride ever more assertive and dynamic both on the island and in the US mainland diaspora. In the early 2020s, the—always in Spanish—poetic lyrics of the wildly popular reggaeton rap star “Bad Bunny” exuberantly broadcast the love and angst of Puerto Rican culture across English-language radio and social media airwaves (Diaz 2023). As anthropologist Vanessa Diaz (who is herself Puerto Rican from the US mainland diaspora) highlighted on US National Public Radio, “direct colonialism . . . has fostered this spirit of refusal and resistance . . . [that is] what it means to live on this incredible island, in this incredible rich nation full of culture and pride and amazing history—and at the same time, what it means for that nation to be under direct colonial rule that never puts the people first” (Diaz, quoted in Demby et al. 2023). While US federal managers impose mandatory debt payments and social welfare

austerity measures, tourists and non-Puerto Rican expatriates from the mainland blissfully enjoy the delights of the Caribbean in “the land of the enchantment,” as the long since defunct Braniff Airlines 1960s jingle enticingly promised, “without ever leaving America.”

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