

- Feature Review -

**BEATRIZ LLENÍN FIGUEROA'S
*AFFECT, ARCHIVE, ARCHIPELAGO: PUERTO
RICO'S SOVEREIGN CARIBBEAN LIVES (2022)***

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Beatriz Llenín Figueroa describes her captivating, insightful, and unique monograph *Affect, Archive, Archipelago: Puerto Rico's Sovereign Caribbean Lives* as a “rather undisciplined book.” By this, she means that the conceptual framework, writing style and overall structure do not fall neatly within the confines of a discernible academic discipline, nor does it read like what we've come to expect of traditional academic writing. But, for me, the book's purported unruliness responds to an ever-present fidelity to its contents. Inasmuch as *Affect* stands as a one-of-a-kind critical consideration of emancipatory politics in Puerto Rico, stretching from the 19th century until today, the author should be expected - and allowed - to let the liberatory spirit of her subject matter influence her writing practice. And it does, to dazzling effect.

In her book, Llenín Figueroa sets out to offer readers a treatise on the oh so important - though historically negated - influence of a definitive and generative pro-Caribbean sentiment upon Puerto Rican decolonial thought and action over time. This immediately positions the book at odds with the dominant discourse and presumably with the dominant modes of feeling both within local governmental institutions and without. The author, fortunately, pulls no punches: “Most intensely, these stories have to do with countering Puerto Rico's continuous political-institutional refusal to recognize its *archipelagic condition* and to *imagine itself Caribbean*” (xvii).

Two of the stories the author tells in the first half of the book revolve around the two most revered figures within the Puerto Rican independence movement, Ramón Emeterio Betances and Pedro Albizu Campos. Another is about the lesser known, but still much-mythologised, anarcho-feminist activist Luisa Capetillo. Though not a historian, Llenín is an adept and astute chronicler of feeling. The author reads into and around these figures looking to tease out what she surmises to be the originating impulses behind their emancipatory work and their corresponding legacies. As such, the book is not so much about what Betances, Capetillo and Pedro Albizu Campos had in common, but rather to highlight the ways in which each envisioned a Puerto Rican future within the socio-political and cultural context of the Caribbean. Here, Betances and Capetillo stand out for the expanse of their vision, and their willful desire to bind the political potentialities in and of Puerto Rico to the rich history of the surrounding island nations, and/or to the broader international landscape. Albizu, on the other hand, comes off as tame, or timid,

or simply unwilling to fully sever ties with the ghosts of the Spanish empire. Still, his love of place and willingness to sacrifice for the future of the place shines through. Lenin writes of Albizu Campos:

Perhaps his most astonishing achievement is to have drawn very different conclusions from his Spanish-nostalgic, Catholic, arielista ideological stance than those of the ruling White criollo political-intellectual class in his immediate Puerto Rican atmosphere. His would not become a project of obedience, accommodation, and financial calculus, as he repeatedly denounced. (127)

In consideration of the above, I would say that Lenin essays here a radically new way of regarding and relating to the life and work of historical figures: rather than make Betances, Albizu and Capetillo an aggregate of their doings - and possible undoing - as political leaders and innovators, claiming some sort of expertise over this or that facet of their lives, she strives to make them appear complex in her portrayal of them. Here lies, I think, the book's strongest commitment: to complexity. To read though the histories of small islands, occupied territories, and colonised lands, one cannot simply glance over things - that is perhaps how conquerors and foreign investors 'take in' the landscape. There is a level of opacity, Lenin argues by way of her fascinating reading of Édouard Glissant and Marta Aponte Alsina, as it pertains to the intricacies and interconnections of these embattled, marginal places, kept apart and brought together as they are by the surrounding waters. As such, there are no bottom lines to be found in this book, but rather a sense of bottomlessness, of endless searching. And so, the author urges us to look again at those figures that, perhaps, we are sure we know and to seriously consider those we may have simply heard of or glanced over. What we find is another way to story ourselves into our contemporary moment. Lenin writes:

Puerto Rican 'intimate histories' are overflowing with instances that, when approached from Glissant's and Aponte Alina's conceptual, and methodological scaffolding, constitute an affective archive of Caribbean relations where our archipelagic lives and loves have been laboratories of experimentation of/for decolonization and liberation against power. (24)

In the book's second half, the author turns her attention to artists, activists, and art-activist collectives that are presently working in Puerto Rico and whose work engages the Puerto Rican archipelago as integral to the history and the future of the greater Caribbean community. These are: Teresa Hernandez, Colectivo 8M, Amigos del Mar, Agua Sol y Sereno, Tito Kayak and ComunaCaribe. Admittedly, the performances, interventions, and projects profiled in the latter part of the book while no less expansive in regard to vision, are infinitely more modest as it pertains to direct political action, when compared to that of their predecessors. A question thus may pop up in the reader's mind. It is a question about what it might mean when the liberatory spirit of yesteryear as embodied in the realm of armed revolutionary struggle finds resonance mostly in political performance. The question is: What - if anything - has been lost? The reader senses - and they would not be wrong - that there must be a difference between acquiring, storing, and distributing weapons for the revolution, and imbuing artistic performances and interventions with revolutionary motifs and meanings, even as these artistic interventions impress upon our political imagination, push us to look and think again about our social-political predicament.

How, I think, the author would answer the question is that there is nothing to be gained or lost in this affective genealogy of art and activism. Ultimately, Llenín is not measuring how likely is the possibility of revolution in Puerto Rico. Rather, she is tracking the intermittent surges and resurgences of a specific sensibility that has given both rhyme and reason to the best of Puerto Rican emancipatory politics to date, whether we acknowledge it or not. Moreover, and as it pertains to our contemporary moment, she is emphasising the importance of individual bodies and lives in relation to those of others as a means of sovereignty. To be clear, these are not bodies in waiting or lives held in suspense until the great Puerto Rican revolutionary project comes to fruition, this is the hard emancipatory work of at once making do with existing conditions and making as if we already were living in the sort of society we dream of. For Llenín how we move around the island space figures into this. How our bodies enter the water. Whose company we keep. And how we seek to connect with both the living and the dead among us. As the author states:

this book clearly shows a great diversity of alternative, affective offerings for Puerto Rico's decolonization that do not position the nation-state as an objective or litmus test for their emancipatory impulses. They claim our sovereignty as the which is not to come and be bestowed, but rather, as always already embodied and practiced in the liquid homeland of our relations. (220)

Lastly, I would be remiss if I did not mention the gift that this book represents beyond the field of Puerto Rican and Caribbean studies. The author's commitment to complexity, as hinted at before, is not purely intellectual, but rather ethical in nature. An islander herself, and a colonised subject, the author refuses to replicate imperial ways of relating in her research and writing practice. And so, while we may be taught as academics to *take* what is relevant and useful from the work of another to enrich our own, Llenín refuses to take part in this practice. She does not reference other people's work so much as she has sought companionship in them. As a result, the quoted passages in *Affect* are numerous, and they are long. They also *make sense* within the author's vision: it is not about the insight we extract from a given source - it is how another's work has made, is making, life bearable for us under unbearable circumstances. So, you bring as much of their text into yours as your writing can hold. This, I would argue, is in tune with the book's foundational ethos: islands are not spaces for others to extract the wealth of the place and its people, they are - have always been and will continue to be - places from which its people can dream, and work toward, new ways and structures of relating. *Así es y será.*

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