

Introduction

Beyond Corruption and Anti-corruption Narratives: Introducing A Critical Research Agenda for Puerto Rican Studies

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ABSTRACT

This special issue of the *CENTRO Journal* seeks to open a critical space for understanding and debating corruption in Puerto Rico, away from neoliberal, colonial, and legalistic representations, offering new questions, narratives, and political imaginaries. Building on critical scholarship, anticolonial and postcolonial traditions, and on conversations that emerged during and after the summer of 2019 anti-corruption protests, this introductory essay frames corruption and anti-corruption as a narrative mobilized across time and space with varying effects, shaped by colonial and racist structures. Rather than providing a narrow definition of corruption, this critical approach aims to center the analysis of sociopolitical implications of corruption narratives in a colonized, impoverished, and racialized country enduring the consequences of colonial capitalism for the past two centuries. To articulate this critical approach, this introductory essay offers an overview of the 15 articles within the special issue, and highlights the wide array of disciplinary approaches and methodologies deployed to underscore the social structures, power dynamics, and knowledges that have traditionally constituted corruption and anti-corruption narratives in PR. In the introduction to the special issue, we offer suggestions for a future research agenda on corruption in Puerto Rico, pointing to the need for further investigation of the connections between corruption narratives and coloniality/imperialism, race/whiteness/anti-blackness, gender and sexuality, arts and popular culture; the relation between corruption and migration/diaspora; and alternative anti-corruption narratives and futures. Overall, this introductory essay aims to articulate a call for the development of critical corruption studies within Puerto Rican studies.

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Corruption in Puerto Rico seems ubiquitous. At the moment of this writing, in August 2022, former governor Wanda Vázquez Garced was arrested by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and charged with bribery connected to the financing of her 2020 gubernatorial campaign.¹ The arrest shook Puerto Rico’s public sphere.² Immediately after the arrest, many members of the New Progressive Party (PNP) declared innocence and distanced themselves from the former governor. Similarly, members of opposing parties condemned Vázquez Garced’s actions, while suggesting that current governor Pedro Pierluisi and the PNP were complicit in the latest corruption scandal.³ The general public, however, went to social media to denounce the entire machinery of partisan politics in Puerto Rico which many have come to view as corrupted to its core.

Major US and international outlets picked up the story of Vázquez Garced’s arrest and headlined it as an “episodic event” (Virella, this issue) in their breaking news section.⁴ Without providing a critical perspective to understand the former governor’s arrest within the complicated political, economic, social, and cultural relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States (US), such portrayals by the US and international media mainly fueled the colonial imaginary that views Puerto Rico and its people as corrupt. In fact, we have yet to see a media article about Vázquez Garced’s arrest that seriously considers the colonial condition of PR, the US and local legislation, the transnational economic networks, and the money laundering practices that enabled the cases of bribery in the first place. Likewise, we are still missing a media article that questions why a US federal agency like the FBI is

conducting criminal investigations and arrests in Puerto Rican politics. Regardless, we see Vázquez Garced's arrest and media reactions as part of a "repetitive, circuitous, and circular" loop (McKittrick 2021, 15) that deeply shapes how we know and talk about corruption in Puerto Rico.

According to Villanueva (2019, 19), these corruption loops follow a similar format: "[e]very so often, an especially rapacious scandal would dominate the headlines. An FBI raid would ensue, resulting in the seizure of evidence and few arrests. An investigation would be conducted, some would serve time, others would get away." These repetitive stories, "corroborate what everyone already knew: the corruption of the political class." Ultimately, "[s]candals, headlines, FBI investigations, apologies from the accused—all these performances helped hide corruption behind its imperial gown, allowing the cycle to be repeated" (Villanueva 2019, 192). Thus, the spectacularization of corruption and the cyclical performances of anti-corruption deployed by the US in PR reifies a colonial narrative of the corrupt other, while maintaining the legal, political and economic structures that enable those corrupt schemes in the first place.

With this special issue we aim to break away from this repetitive loop in order to ask new questions, create new narratives, and trace new political imaginaries. As the first special issue dedicated to corruption in Puerto Rican Studies, we gathered fifteen articles that explore the topic from a wide range of disciplines, methodological approaches, and theoretical inclinations. The special issue responds to not one particular repetitive loop, but rather seeks to identify the social structures, power dynamics, and epistemologies (ways of knowing) that delimit corruption narratives in Puerto Rico. Our objective is to open up a critical space for debating corruption away from dominant representations and narratives. The articles in this issue, moreover, build upon and expand a series of conversations that took place in the streets of Puerto Rico during the summer of 2019.

The summer of 2019 demonstrations that ousted former governor Ricardo Rosselló rallied against corruption and, through their collective actions, broke away from the repetitive loops that have defined anti-corruption politics in the past. The insurgent public articulated varying corruption and anti-corruption narratives and understandings that went beyond the dominant corruption loops described above (Atiles, this issue). For many of those in the streets of Puerto Rico during that summer, corruption was to be found within Ricardo Rosselló's administration, the Fiscal Control Board (*Junta*),⁵ the PROMESA Act, local and international financial institutions held responsible for Puerto Rico's debt crisis, and other elites and powerful actors. The insurgent public called not imperial institutions, such as the FBI, to deliver justice, but rather demanded a complete overhaul of the system that enabled the corrupt to operate. The street slogans "Ricky renuncia y llévate a la Junta" ("Ricky quit and take the Board with you") and "*¡Que se vayan todos!*" ("They must all go!") indexed, according to philosopher Rocío Zambrana (2020, 289), "[a] demand stating that all corrupt officials in power are unsuitable to govern," and thus "an affirmation of the ongoing activity of holding accountable, to the point of removal, those who reinstate and sustain the colony, serving the interests of capital." The public on the streets during the summer of 2019 showed a political willingness to interrupt the anti-corruption circuit that reproduces the colony over and again (see also Jiménez 2020).

Inspired by the different understandings of corruption emerging from the summer of 2019, we put together a panel for the Puerto Rican Studies Association (PRSA) biennial Symposium in Austin, Texas in October 2019. There we were asked by Xavier Totti, former editor of *Centro Journal*, to submit our papers to the Journal. Rather than sending our individual papers, we asked Totti if the Journal would be interested in a special issue on corruption. Xavier immediately agreed, and thus, we started crafting a call for papers. To our surprise, and despite the COVID-19 pandemic at its peak, we received around 35 abstracts from diverse scholars, activists and researchers for consideration. The process of collecting abstracts, inviting authors to submit their papers, peer-reviewing, and final publication took us over two years and a half. This process has been extremely formative as it has brought together a community of scholars interested in challenging orthodox understandings of corruption by enabling an open dialogue about state-corporate power and crimes, and alternative futures. With this collection we hope to foster a critical and systematic approach to the study of corruption in Puerto Rican Studies.

To foster this dialogue on corruption, we have structured this introductory essay as follows. First, we provide a general overview of previous research and studies on corruption in PR. We frame this discussion in the context of global trends and narratives of anti-corruption and demonstrate how the papers collected in this issue constitute a groundbreaking effort to critically analyze corruption and anti-corruption in PR. Second, we provide a general overview of the articles included in this special issue, and demonstrate their interconnections, dialogues, and their rich methodological and theoretical contributions. Third, we reflect on the contribution of this special issue to the development of a critical research agenda on corruption in Puerto Rican Studies. Finally, we delineate some areas that need further research, and/or that could contribute to the development of this critical research agenda in the Puerto Rican Studies. Altogether, this introductory essay and this special issue are aimed at disentangling the meanings, representations, and narratives of corruption in PR, and enabling the common ground for producing a meaningful understanding of state power, colonialism, and gendered and racialized discourses of corruption so pervasive in PR.

Corruption: Puerto Rican Studies and Global Perspectives

Despite the repeated high-profile cases of corruption that every so often dominate the headlines, Puerto Rican experiences with corruption have received limited academic attention, with the few exceptions of research conducted by Atilés (2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2021), Bobonis, et al. (2016), Go (2000), Pérez-Chiqués and Rubin (2021), Pérez-Chiqués and Bustos (2021), Torrez (2002), and Villanueva (2019). In contrast, corruption has been largely covered by independent journalists such as the *Center for Investigative Journalism*, local NGOs,⁶ and tell-all books published by former politicians.

There have also been some efforts by the Puerto Rican Anti-Corruption, Compliance and Oversight Agencies to study the effects of corruption. For example, the PR Office of Governmental Ethics⁷ and the Comptroller of PR have published some studies on the impact of corruption on public administration (Colón and Martínez 2010; Enchautegui 2010a, 2010b;

Rodríguez Castro 2010; Segarra Alméstica 2010; Segarra Alméstica and Enchautegui 2010). There is a consensus among these agencies and scholars that public contracts are a primary source of corruption. Consequently, one is left to believe that corruption is to be found in the public sector alone, especially when the latter “procures” and enters into contact with the private sector. There is a degree of truth to that claim, but as this special issue demonstrates, the story of corruption in PR is much more complex, requiring us to consider corruption practices beyond the public sector.

Furthermore, the Puerto Rican Civil Rights Commission in 2015 published a special report on the impact of corruption on Human Rights (García San Inocencio and Rivera 2015). In their study, the authors documented how public corruption has a direct impact on citizens’ enjoyment of their most basic civil and human rights. Nevertheless, the study privileged the opinions and experiences of former governors, secretaries of justice, and others in positions of power, neglecting and disregarding the experiences and opinions of those communities most affected by such violations of human rights.

In contrast, the summer of 2019 has led to a burgeoning academic reflection on corruption, social mobilization, and state power, and the resulting transformations that took place in PR. In particular, we draw on the works of *Editora Educación Emergente* and the five titles under their special edition *Revoluciona* (Onis, Lloréns and Santiago 2020; Powers 2020; Atilés 2020a; LeBrón 2021; Rodríguez Castro 2022); a *Society and Space Forum*, edited by Marisol LeBrón and Joaquín Villanueva, entitled “Decolonial Geographies of Puerto Rico’s 2019 Summer Protest,”⁸ and a *Latin American Perspectives* Special Issue entitled “Calles de la Resistencia: Pathways to Empowerment in Puerto Rico.”⁹ In the *Society and Space Forum*, corruption was a key component of analysis, and various authors reflected on the implications of corruption narratives in the configurations and development of the summer of 2019 (see Atilés 2020b; García-López 2020).

From these various research projects, we can clearly see that corruption has been at the center of contemporary Puerto Rican history, policymaking, and scholarship. Despite its overwhelming presence, corruption remains undertheorized. For example, several of the studies on corruption reproduce orthodox conceptualizations and understandings of corruption developed by transnational organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the World Bank (WB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), among others. These transnational organizations have broadly defined corruption as “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain.” A definition taken up by the PR government’s sponsored studies (cited above), and which narrowly assumes that only individual actions within the public sector can be corrupt. Similarly, some of these studies and NGO efforts have engaged in research that reproduces economists, numerical quantification, rankings, and survey/opinion-based studies à la Transparency International. It is worth remembering that Transparency International contributed to the popularization of restrictive definitions of corruption, quantification, indexation, and the promotion of anti-corruption policies and legal reforms which primarily ranked global south countries as corrupt (Brown and Cloke 2006; Osrecki 2015).

Fighting corruption has become equated with development, modernization, compliance, and more importantly, with “democratic governance” (Osrecki 2015), ideas that in PR are associated with the concept of Americanization (see Go 2000). Thus, fighting corruption

reflects a widely accepted legalistic approach to anti-corruption that claims that education, prevention, investigation, prosecution, and punishment can curtail corruption. The most common anti-corruption policies recommended by transnational organizations include asset and interest declarations; beneficial ownership; transparency in political financing; whistleblowing; transparency in lobbying; and open contracting. This is precisely what Act 2 of 2018—entitled the Anticorruption Code for the New Puerto Rico—constructed as the most effective mechanisms to “deal” with corruption in PR (see Atilas, this issue). These transnational, neoliberal-oriented, legalistic, and compliance approaches have been defined by Sampson (2010; 2015) as *anti-corruption industry*.

Against these approaches, in this introduction we follow anticolonial and postcolonial traditions, and other critical scholarship, that have aimed to provide a better understanding of corruption in the context of colonial and racist structures. For example, several scholars have questioned the above-mentioned conceptualizations of corruption and anti-corruption policies by pointing out the neoliberal, colonial, and neocolonial agenda, and the methodological and epistemic flaws of this scholarship (Brown and Cloke 2006; De Maria 2008; Murphy and Brindusa 2017; Pertiwi and Ainsworth 2021; Whyte 2007; Zaloznaya 2013). These scholars remind us that corruption narratives, and descriptions of colonial territories and subjects as corrupt, are a constitutive part of western colonialism (Apata 2019; Go 2000; Pertiwi & Ainsworth 2021). Muir and Gupta (2018, s6) argue that corruption, as a key category of modern political economy, typically indexes the nonmodern. Similarly, Haller and Shore (2005) point out that ideas of corruption and economic backwardness have consistently featured in imperialist and racialized historical narratives that invoke the primitiveness of less-developed states to justify colonial interventions. Thus, corruption narratives are a key technology for justifying colonialism in non-western societies.

As Villanueva (2019, 190) points out, “corruption discourses served to justify the US government’s denial of Puerto Ricans’ right to self-rule. As a result, the ‘corrupted’ colonial subjects were forced to endure an intense policing regime to correct their behavior.” Likewise, when analyzing legal and political development of US colonialism in PR, it can be seen how corruption has served a double function: (1) corruption has been the narrative that legitimized US colonialism in PR, and (2) US capitalism has routinely pushed for instrumental anti-corruption measures and exceptional practices to ensure wealth extraction and profit-making while functionally pathologizing local leaders as untrustworthy, deviant, or otherwise “corrupt.”

In tandem with these critical and postcolonial traditions, Doshi and Ranganathan (2019, 438) developed a capacious concept of corruption that conceived it as a “normative discourse about the abuse of entrusted power and resulting social decay.” Accusations of corruption are often informed by an individual’s or a collectivity’s perception that social conditions have worsened because of said abuse of entrusted power. As opposed to narrow conceptualizations that conceive entrusted power as only held by public officials, Doshi and Ranganathan expand it to include power held by public, private, or public-private authorities “that ostensibly serve a public purpose” (2019, 438). As such, under the label of corruption, different and contradictory actions can be understood as an abuse of entrusted power, and a wider range of actors, beyond the public sector, can commit such abuses.

Why then embrace such a vast conceptualization of corruption when presumably anything and anyone can be tagged as corrupt? Don't we lose analytical precision, political effectiveness, and opportunities for pragmatic action when we embrace broad definitions of corruption? In short, what do we gain by focusing on corruption narratives rather than providing a cookie-cutter definition of corruption that can yield demonstrable, verifiable, and quantifiable case studies that can then be translated into public policy recommendations such as those proposed by Puerto Rican agencies and NGOs mentioned above (see for example the PR Office of Governmental Ethics' project Radiography of Corruption)?

In the spirit of the summer of 2019, in this introduction we want to challenge the need for precise, narrow, and actionable definitions of corruption. For example, Doshi and Ranganathan (2017, 184) state that when "understood as a malleable and morally charged discursive field," rather than a narrow set of actions and behaviors, corruption as a narrative directs our attention to the geographic, historical, political, economic, social, and cultural contexts that give rise to it." Thus, by challenging legalistic, narrow, and orthodox definitions of corruption, in this introduction we want to think about the sociopolitical implications of corruption narratives. For us, that means seriously considering how corruption is talked about in a colonized, impoverished, and racialized country that has been enduring the consequences of colonial capitalism for the past two centuries. Thus, when thinking about corruption narratives, one ought to ask: Who is doing the accusation, who is being accused, and where are those actors socially positioned relative to power structures?

This special issue does not have the answers to all those questions. Nevertheless, the papers in this volume aim to challenge reductionist, state-centered and legalistic definitions of corruption, in order to stimulate a critical conversation about the full implications of corruption for Puerto Rican society. In particular, this special issue demonstrates that the everyday operations of the PR government under US colonialism are largely dependent on corrupt practices for its survival. This dependence on corruption and corrupt practices simultaneously contributed to the decadence and delegitimization of the PR government, while reinforcing US colonial power. Indeed, the imposition of the anti-democratic Junta illustrates how US institutions and policies (e.g. the repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act, the triple tax exemptions of PR bonds), and deregulatory Puerto Rican legislation and policies (such as Luis Fortuño's 2012 laws 20/22 for the super-rich) have expanded the geographies of corruption, tax evasion, and financial manipulation and fraud, while eroding the capacity of the Puerto Rican government to protect the public from these extractive economies.

Unlike traditional corruption narratives, which tend to categorize PR politicians as corrupt, this special issue aims to unravel the operativity of corruption as a *technology* that enables domination, exploitation, and extraction to continue its course uninterrupted. Taking a cue from the anti-corruption narratives prevalent on the streets of PR during the summer of 2019, the articles in this special issue consider corruption as a "normative discourse about the abuse of entrusted power and resulting social decay." For many on the streets that summer, Puerto Rican society was worse off as a consequence of the corrupt practices of politicians, financial institutions, la Junta, and the fraudsters in Puerto Rico seeking to evade tax payments elsewhere. Lastly, corruption narratives, as an analytical device, articulates the multiplicity of critical understandings of the unequal distribution of power, in a way that allows us to build a systemic understanding of what critical scholars and activists consider to be corruption in PR.

Corruption Narratives, Embeddedness and Decadence: Structure of the Special Issue

As an analytical approach, this special issue seriously considers corruption as a narrative device mobilized across time and space with varying effects. For instance, as Joaquín Villanueva demonstrates in his paper, the Criollo elites of nineteenth century PR viewed Black working-class women, and the laboring masses in general, as indecent, and therefore, as a corrupt group that needed to be managed and politically controlled (see also Findlay 1999). Similarly, protesters at the summer of 2019 inverted those accusations as they saw the contemporary Criollo political elite as a morally dubious group when their private communication was made public during the Telegram chat scandal (see Atilés, this issue; Atilés 2020a, 2020b; LeBrón 2021). For many on the streets during that summer, the political class was corrupt because it was indecent (see Powers, this issue). Historically, decency has been opposed to corruption, but who is considered decent (and corrupt), and how those accusations are made and by whom depends on the conjunctural moment (García-Quijano and Lloréns 2019). Corruption as a narrative obligates us to consider the historical geographies that shape its discursive field.

Moreover, accusations of corruption are directly correlated with perceptions that social conditions have worsened because of said behaviors and actions. For instance, Cristalís Capielo, Hector Adames and Nancy Muro-Rodríguez (this issue), using a critical liberation psychology approach, found that deception, defrauding, and overlooking corruption by individual members of society were perceived by interviewees as having contributed to the worsening of social conditions in PR. For many of their interlocutors, this perception was a primary factor in their decision to migrate to the United States. They show how in these accounts, colonial narratives of Puerto Rico as corrupt and unable to govern itself are internalized, generating a feeling of powerlessness to act, while the US's role remains generally unacknowledged. In fact, the United States has been historically conceived as an anti-corruption antidote to PR's supposedly innate tendencies to abuse entrusted power (for a critique of this argument see Go 2000; Villanueva 2019). Such framings and perceptions are fully entangled in colonial and imperial cartographies that not just reproduce uneven power structures but actively color our "scopic regime", that is "the ways in which both what is seen and how it is seen are culturally constructed" (Rose 2007, 2). In a colonial society like PR, as Frantz Fanon never tired of reminding us, the oppressor "manages to impose on the native new ways of seeing," designed to maintain the very same structures that keep them in power (Fanon 1967, 38).

Those fields of perception are reproduced by the colonized themselves, who by doing so, keep the colonial structures intact. How hegemonic narratives are maintained and reproduced, is a question taken up by Patricia Virella (this issue) whose article critically explores corruption narratives in PR's media. The author notes how PR's major newspaper outlets reported on corruption as an "episodic event" isolated from the larger historical structures of colonialism and capitalism. As Virella argues, media coverage deeply shapes the public's perception on corruption who, as a result, often see it as an individual act committed by morally suspicious characters. The media's failure to relate corruption to power structures, does not allow the public to question the colonial and capitalist structures that give rise to the systematic abuse of entrusted power. In short, how we speak of corruption matters politically.

Rather than considering corruption as an individual act expressive of the person's moral position, or a legal deficiency of liberal democratic governance, our original call for papers invited critical analyses that mobilize understandings of (anti)corruption, as a systemic phenomenon arising from structural processes and struggles. Karriann Soto-Vega's article (this issue) about the ex-Secretary of Education, Julia Keleher, expertly relates the corrupt actions of this individual with the intersecting structures of gender, race, and colonialism. From a decolonial feminist perspective, Soto-Vega is able to consider corruption as an individual act that is always expressive of larger structures and power relations, rather than the person's moral position. Such an approach effectively challenges dominant corruption narratives that fail to connect individual actions with structural processes, as Virella shows in her piece.

Similarly, Mónica Jiménez and Marisol LeBrón (this issue) challenge the notion that the Puerto Rico Police Department (PRPD) are uniquely corrupt, in comparison to other police departments, or that corruption within the police arises from a "few bad apples." Instead, through a historical approach to the study of policing, the authors understand policing as corruption, a set of institutional practices that mobilize all means necessary to maintain the structures of colonial capitalism intact. Drawing on two case studies from early 20th century Puerto Rico, the authors effectively demonstrate that police corruption is not about personal gain, but that abuse of entrusted power and explicit politicization, is a "structural component of police work." A contemporary example of police corruption reinforces the authors' assertion.

In their piece, Mayra Vélez-Serrano and Jean Paul López-Cepero (this issue) document the attempts to expropriate and displace the community of Vietnam in the municipality of Guaynabo. Drawing on what they call "mediated corruption," the authors show how politicians tried to gain politically by mobilizing key donors' interests. In an effort to develop the only waterfront location in Guaynabo, the municipality sought to displace the community by claiming the area was susceptible to flooding. The police, as a key colonial capitalist apparatus, was mobilized to the area to intimidate residents and force them to relocate. Moreover, the authors show how the municipality of Guaynabo mediated corruption through the abuse of eminent domain to benefit private donors seeking to develop this waterfront community for profit making. Mediated corruption also forces us to consider the networks that enable and reproduce corruption practices across time and space.

Gustavo García López's paper (this issue) expands on the intertwined relationship between corruption and environmental exploitation, by focusing on the process of 'de-conservation' of protected areas intensifying since the 2010s and culminating in the 2019 Zoning Map. In his paper, García López broadens the definition of environmental corruption beyond the typical legalist/institutionalist accounts and introduces the concept of "accumulation by corruption." He situates environmental corruption within the expansion of a colonial neoliberal growth machine and its state-corporate alliance, which demands continued deregulation to facilitate consumption of land and other resources for accumulating capital and political power. García López's analysis pays particular attention to the elite actors and strategies used in corruption schemes, the structures that facilitate and reproduce these, as well as the ways that social movements counter them.

The analysis of the powerful and/or the power elites can be found across several papers in this special issue. For example, in mapping networks of corruption, Iyari Ríos (this issue), documents the detrimental behavior of the power elites for the collective wellbeing. Ríos introduces the important concept of “state capture,” which centers on how the powerful take over and transform the state and its institutions to serve their interests. Drawing on multiple sources, Ríos develops a “power map” in the Department of Education, to show how powerful groups seek to influence government decisions to promote public policy and redirect public resources to the benefit of private interests. As with García López, he identifies the main strategies of these corruption-seeking groups: revolving doors, campaign donations, and corporate lobbying. His work helps situate and illuminate the operations of power groups and develops the tools to identify and understand corruption in PR.

In tandem with the analysis of corruption of the powerful, Joaquín Villanueva’s paper (this issue) provides a historical-geographical analysis of corruption and demonstrates how anti-corruption narratives are discursive frames assembled to reproduce class power in PR’s colonial political economy. Villanueva develops the concept of the “criollo bloc” to underscore how power elites and hegemonic groups developed anti-corruption narratives to justify their self-appointed vocation as the historically chosen class with ruling capacity. Drawing on archival analysis of the configuration of the criollo elites under Spanish colonialism (1860-1898) until the first two decades under US occupation (1898-1917), Villanueva demonstrates the historical configuration of the dominant corruption narrative. Corruption, accordingly, is a flexible narrative historically mobilized to define, inscribe, and perpetuate the racial-sexual hierarchies that legitimize dispossession and differential access to administrative power under colonial and imperial conditions.

Many of the pieces in this special issue focus on the local state apparatus, showing how corruption is a key element for gaining access to scarce public resources and political power in this colonial capitalist economy. Elizabeth Pérez-Chiqués (this issue) explores the complex issue of personnel management in the civil service system of PR. In particular, the author critically analyzes how personnel management is often determined by political-discriminatory dynamics which, ultimately, allow “political parties and external actors to gain control over—and extract resources from—public employees and the bureaucracy with dire social consequences.” Using a mixed-method approach, Pérez-Chiqués triangulates diverse sources of data to show us how the corrupted practices in the civil service system—advancement, demotion, or dismissal of public employees based on their political affiliation with the party in power—directly results in social decay. That is, a bureaucratic system that manages resources in the interests of political parties and external actors rather than the public.

The relationship between social decay and corruption is again picked up by Gustavo Bobonis, Luis Cámara, Harold Toro, and Julie Wilson (this issue), who analyze municipal audit reports from 1952 through 2015 to forcefully demonstrate how institutional decay is directly correlated with the normalization of corruption practices over time. Focusing mainly on municipal corruption, understood as malfeasance of public funds by municipal employees, the authors take us into a large data set across time to first, periodize corruption patterns and changes during Puerto Rico’s commonwealth experiment, and, second, correlate reported levels of corruption with political and economic changes. Their data confirms that judicial

impunity and increased political polarization, particularly around the two-party system, increases the conditions of municipal corruption, as Pérez-Chiqués work also demonstrates.

Fernando Tormos-Aponte, Wendy Prudencio, Mary Angelica Painter, and Brevin Franklin (this issue) take the analysis of public corruption and its consequences a step further, by engaging in a systemic analysis of how clientelism and pork-barrel spending are central to the configuration of corrupt practices in PR and on the weakening of the local democracy. The authors demonstrate that what are often considered individual cases of petty corruption or clientelism actually contribute to manifestations of grand corruption. This becomes particularly clear in the analysis of the structural impact on the uses of the pork-barrel spending and disaster resource allocations. Tormos et al. argue that pork-barrel spending may contribute to the concentration of power, thereby enabling the continuity of the systems in which corruption occurs, and illustrates how the electoral impact in disaster contexts like PR remains under-examined. This research points to the need to adopt transparency measures that enable assessments of disparities in disaster resource allocation and policies that mandate a more equitable distribution of disaster recovery resources.

An important addition to this debate is the work of Sarah Molinari (this issue), who explores the temporality of corruption, focusing on how federal agencies, prejudiced in assuming fraud, denied access to key recovery funds to needy families. Drawing on ethnographic research and other qualitative methods, Molinari documents the complex and deeply frustrating experience of families seeking disaster funds from federal agencies after Hurricane Maria. The author shows how colonial representations of Puerto Rican subjects as fraudulent or susceptible to financial mismanagement determined the distribution of aid. Denial of aid was based on the proper documentation and presentation of legible property titles, pieces of evidence that many families lacked given the variegated property regimes that exist in Puerto Rico. For many federal agencies, like FEMA and HUD, the present social conditions of those needy families were conveniently ignored, and corruption accusations were made based on a future yet to come. Molinari's work demands that we seriously consider the temporality of corruption and anti-corruption narratives, that is, the ways in which representations of the past, present, and future shape who is deemed corrupt and/or anticorrupt.

Christopher Powers and José Atilés both address the Verano 2019 as an instance for imagining anti-corruption futures—ones that are starkly different from the anti-corruption narratives of federal agents (Molinari), local politicians (Atilés), and others. José Atilés engages in a socio-legal and discursive analysis of the summer of 2019, and demonstrates how in this context, one can identify three general understandings and definitions of corruption and anti-corruption policies: (1) colonial corruption, and anti-corruption discourses and policies implemented by the US government in Puerto Rico; (2) corruption as a form of government, and/or Puerto Rican government anti-corruption policies that focus on petty corruption, while ignoring the corruption of the powerful; (3) and decolonial approaches to corruption, and/or the Puerto Rican summer of 2019 as a form of *decolonial justice*. By looking at these three understandings of corruption, and anti-corruption policies, Atilés proposes an analysis of how anti-corruption shaped the recent Puerto Rican history.

Finally, Christopher Powers, develops a politico-philosophical engagement with the summer of 2019 and demonstrates how in defense of the dignity of the María dead,

hatred of institutional corruption became catalytic in the *Verano Boricua*. A spontaneous revolt that suspended normality for the two weeks of protest and created an alternative spacetime that values solidarity, tolerance, mutual aid, and transparency. Powers argues that the experience of *autogestión* and mutual aid faced with state failure after Hurricane María prepared Puerto Ricans for the monumental task of forcing the resignation of the governor. The experience of anti-corruption struggle, Powers argues, will produce long-lasting effects.

Why Critical Corruption Studies in Puerto Rican Studies?

This special issue seeks to open new analytical grounds to stimulate a critical inquiry about corruption as a powerful narrative in the history of PR. Although the articles in this special issue do not share a single view of corruption, one can identify a systematic effort to critically engage with it. These efforts are largely defined by a series of interventions in terms of methodology, theoretical approaches, interdisciplinarity, engagement with communities, and conceptualizations of what alternative anti-corruption policies should look like.

The interdisciplinary approach is one of the major strengths of this issue, including an array of disciplinary approaches to the study of corruption in PR. From political sciences, public and social policy, sociology, legal studies, historiography, geography, economy, political ecology and political economy to cultural and ethnic studies, the authors in this volume make the case for the necessity to engage with corruption from a multiplicity of epistemic frameworks and disciplinary approaches.

The richness of these interdisciplinary approaches is also reflected in the methodologies implemented by the authors. From ethnographic research, archival, historical and critical discourse analysis, quantitative methods, to mixed methods, the authors in this volume make the case for the necessity to engage in eclectic methodological practices if we truly aim to understand the operations of corruption. Hence, there is a clear understanding that opinion/survey base approaches, indexing, numerical comparison and econometric approaches, although relevant in some cases, should not be privileged as the only methodological approach to the study of corruption.

The papers in the volume account for the experiences of corruption in PR and in the Puerto Rican communities in the US. Additionally, in these articles we can identify an effort to address the cases of corruption and their consequences at the macro and microlevels; at the individual and structural levels, and; at the level of municipalities, public administrations, the PR government, and the US. Altogether, these papers demonstrate the need to think of corruption beyond the narrowly defined framework of corruption as an issue of public administration.

Similarly, the papers in this special issue direct our attention to political motivations and effects, rather than policy-oriented effectiveness, which often responds to the interests, desires, and perceptions of particular groups over others. Unlike previous research, many of the papers in this special issue did not privilege the opinion and experiences of the powerful, but rather, the authors aimed at centering the experiences of those communities and individuals whose livelihood have been affected for the normalization of corruption in PR.

Altogether, the articles in this special issue compel us to consider the social structures, power dynamics, and knowledges that have traditionally constituted corruption narratives in PR. The interdisciplinary and methodologically diverse approach to the study of corruption presented here, allows us to pay closer attention to the gender, racial, class, and sexual structures through which corruption practices and narratives operate. In other words, this special issue disentangles the study of corruption from orthodox and neoliberal approaches to corruption, which are narrowly considered morally reprehensible behaviors by individual actors; and pushes forward an approach that forcefully relates corruption and social structures, power dynamics, and ways of knowing. Corruption in Puerto Rico must be understood always in relation to colonialism, racial capitalism, patriarchy, and heteronormative structures.

A Research Agenda on Critical Corruption Studies for the Puerto Rican Studies Tradition

As we have already established, this special issue aimed at bringing together scholars engaging in interdisciplinary and critical research on corruption in PR. Evidently, there are limitations and gaps in this special issue, which rather than considering them as failures of this SI, we regard them as future lines of research or the areas that could be further explored. In general terms, we have identified six areas that need further development and research.

First, there is a need for further studies on the connections between corruption and diaspora studies. Only one paper studies the connections between migration and corruption in this special issue. Similarly, the literature on migrations and corruption have been largely silent on the interconnections between these two social phenomena. How does corruption, impunity, and other crimes of the powerful contribute to migration? How are representations of diasporic communities shaped by corruption narratives?

Second, the connections between corruption narratives, arts, and popular culture need to be further studied and developed. That is, how have music, literature, poetry, and other artistic and cultural productions received, interpreted and described corruption in PR? If something is clear from the summer of 2019, it is that arts, poetry, literature, music, performance, and other artistic expressions are fundamental for the configuration and development of a political understanding of corruption.

Third, even though there are some important studies, the analysis of class and corruption in PR remains undertheorized. Similarly, the interconnection between coloniality, empire and corruption has received limited attention in the context of PR.

Fourth, a systemic analysis of the role of race, whiteness, and anti-blackness in the development of corruption narratives in PR needs further study and theorization. Particularly, the interconnection between whiteness and anti-blackness in relation to corruption narratives behooves exploration.

Fifth, a reflection and/or a study of corruption narratives, gender and sexuality is needed. Particularly, given the long history of anti-LGBTIQA+ politics, it is relevant to look at how

corruption is used as a homophobic trope to describe LGBTIQA+ communities. Similarly, it is important to look at the uses and resignification of corruption narratives during the summer of 2019. Memorable chants and signs during the Verano Boricua, such as “*Pato pero no Corrupto*” and “*Puto pero no Corrupto*,” point to important reformulations of corruption narratives that signal alternative decolonial and queer futures.

Sixth, we still lack a reflection of alternative anti-corruption narratives and futures. More ethnographic work that can document anticorrupt decolonial futures are urgently needed in order to help us define alternative political horizons. What does a decolonial anti-corruption project look like?

As a critical analytical approach, corruption narratives force us to consider the diverse social positions and privileges enjoyed by those doing the accusation and those being accused. Certainly, corruption accusations operate within specific relations of powers, in which state institutions are constructed as victims of a harm. This special issue intended to change that orthodox and legalistic understanding of corruption, by demonstrating how the colonial state and the US have systematically engaged in corruption practices. Attention to gender, race, sexual, and class relations, and empire and colonialism are thus central to the articles in this special issue. We hope to stimulate vibrant and critical conversations around corruption in PR and the diaspora.

NOTES

¹ See <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/former-governor-puerto-rico-arrested-bribery-scheme>.

² See <https://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/seguridad/notas/la-exgobernadora-wanda-vazquez-es-arrestada-por-el-fbi-por-cargos-de-soborno/>.

³ For some of the reactions see <https://www.telemundopr.com/noticias/puerto-rico/llueven-las-reacciones-tras-el-arresto-de-wanda-vazquez/2377881/>.

⁴ For example <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/08/04/vzquez-garced-puerto-rico-bribery/> and <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/fbi-puerto-rico-governor-wanda-vazquez-garced-bribery-arrest/>.

⁵ The official name of la Junta is Financial Oversight and Management Board (FOMB).

⁶ See for example: Transparency Networks, Sembrando Sentido, Espacios Abiertos, Agenda Ciudadana, and the Law Clinic for the Access to Information of the Interamerican University Law School.

⁷ See for example the project entitled Radiografía de la Corrupción, published by the Office of Governmental Ethics. <https://www.eticapr.net/radiografias-de-la-corrupcion/>.

⁸ See <https://www.societyandspace.org/forums/the-decolonial-geographies-of-puerto-ricos-2019-summer-protests-a-forum>.

⁹ In this special issue, Atilés (2020c) develops an analysis of the role of law, corruption, and state-corporate crimes in manufacturing the Puerto Rican colonial debts. See *Latin American Perspective* 47 (3). <https://journals.sagepub.com/toc/lapa/47/3>.

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