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Authors

Ortiz, Lisa

Vaught, Sabina

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Educational Labor Migrations and the Suturing of Forgotten Places: Puerto Rican Teachers, Oklahoma City Schools, and the Ongoing Networks of Colonialism

Lisa Ortiz-Guzmán and Sabina Vaught¹

University of Pittsburgh

Abstract

In 2014, Puerto Rican educators were recruited to teach in Oklahoma City Schools. What resulted in a seemingly small labor migration illuminates a deeper understanding of the actual relations among colonial experiments. It functions as no minor illustration of the centrality of educational labor experiments to the militaristic, capitalist, and other relations between the United States and its occupied territories. In this article, we observe educators as migrant laborers, whose lives are shaped by a nexus of colonial forces and whose labors and migrations suture two “forgotten places” (Gilmore, 2008) through new formations. We seek to understand how a “fly-over” state and an archipelagic possession are both related and central to educational colonization, how educational colonization is a labor project, and how all of this maps emergent analytic possibilities. How does this labor migration help us understand the unlikely interplay of two contexts in the colonial project? Through news articles, testimonio, ethnographic interludes, and archival data, we examine how we might newly understand the role of education and educators in the larger network of colonial relations.

Keywords: colonialism, education, labor, migration, Oklahoma, Puerto Rico

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¹As co-authors we have listed authorship alphabetically.

In 2015, KFOR, Oklahoma's News Channel 4, published an online article announcing the arrival of 14 educators from Puerto Rico: "You would have thought rock stars were landing at the airport. They're teachers, but to the OKC School District, they're better than rock stars." These teachers, "better than rock stars," were part of a professional labor recruitment undertaken by the Oklahoma City Public Schools (OKCPS). When OKCPS recruited Puerto Rican teachers in 2014, the recruitment was highlighted in the Puerto Rican and Oklahoma news media. Puerto Rican newspaper *Primera Hora* ran an article entitled, "La Actriz Lymari Nadal Quiere que los Maestros Boricuas Guisen en Oklahoma" ("Actress Lymari Nadal wants Puerto Rican Teachers to Have a Piece of the Pie in Oklahoma") (Tirado, 2014), in which she is quoted as championing this initiative as both an opportunity and a response to Puerto Rican teachers facing job insecurity on the archipelago. In a separate article, an OKCPS senior administrator weighs in, emphasizing the mutual benefit: "Puerto Rico has a surplus of certified teachers in the areas we have vacancies. They will be a tremendous asset to the school site where they are placed" (Willert, 2014). The public, celebratory framing—in a state context deeply hostile to migration, to Spanish language, to non-white people, to poor white people, and even to education (H.J.Res.1042, 2011; Nagle, 2019, 2021), and in an archipelago where frequent front-page news stories display migration through images of luggage and narratives of loss (elnuevodia.com, 2011)—is striking for what it might reveal about how schools and teachers operate in surprising and complex ways at the conjunctural intersections of major colonial forces. From militarism to capitalism, this labor migration is sutured to contemporary iterations of an ongoing cluster of colonial experiments.

In this article, we center this educational, professional labor migration to ask novel questions of educators and archives, surfacing a deeper understanding of the actual relation among these colonial experiments. Through this labor migration, we ask readers to understand education, particularly as it is organized formally through state schooling, as part of a network of colonial forces that exceed the classroom, the policy, or the curriculum, and as a coordinated force that moves people, resources, and knowledge. In addition to an analytic approach that places education within a web of colonial forces, we understand educators as also or even primarily laborers, whose lives are shaped by the nexus of war, militarism, and capitalism.

Specifically, we seek to frame the educational interplay of a network of colonial conditions and characteristics of two "forgotten places" (Gilmore, 2008). This framing emerges through our effort to put into dialogic and dialectic relation these conditions and characteristics, in service of an evocative and provocative revisioning of educational colonial relations. This is an anti-colonial concept- and method-forming inquiry that moves us toward a narrative, aesthetic, and symbolic constellation, in which we coordinate our thinking toward apertures: delineating colonial relations—of, through, against, and outside education—that encompass and co-constitute such networks. Accordingly, we stretch a twinned methodologic and conceptual consideration across the length of the article, underscoring the paired shift in *what* we ask with *how* we ask. Insisting on staying anchored in the quotidian as we shuttle through vast scalar networks, we organize our interwoven

conceptual-methodological formations through objects, through artifacts that signal the tense conceptual, ideological, material links between the structural, historical, and mundane.

In organizing our concept-formation through the methodologic traces and assertions of a cluster of artifacts (Trouillot, 2015) we dialectically map our interknit, multi-scalar geographic and anthropologic anti-colonial observations across archival data, news media, testimonio, and ethnographic interludes. Organizing through artifacts, we take seriously the way in which anthropologic objects circulate among networks of colonial power, including in the exacting epistemic coercions of the disciplines themselves. The artifacts help us move across several scales from macro forces of colonialism to the individual space of researcher interiority. They also surface evidence of the dialectic and anti-colonial practices, sensibilities, and conditions we seek to understand. These emergent, or grounded, analytic processes challenge our own sometimes derivative notions and admonish us to reconsider just a few of the central roles and functions of education to anti-colonial and colonial projects.

Degrees: Schooling, Labor, and the Colonial Network of Migration

We rarely observe labor migration movements from Latin America and the Caribbean into the 50 U.S. states that are anchored in professional educational work. Some of this is owing to the insular coloniality of the U.S. educational system and its attendant certifications, standards, and governance. Some of it is owing to the supremacist imagination of who migrates into the 50 states. But the migration of Puerto Rican teachers is longstanding (Velázquez, 2024), due in part to the U.S. Department of Education's governing of schooling in Puerto Rico and the federal imposition of (abridged) citizenship on Puerto Ricans. Such colonial state-sponsored migrations afford a unique vantage point for considering a cluster of ongoing, asymmetrical relations. In describing state-sponsored migrations, Meléndez (2017) writes that the state, through the Departments of Labor and Education, historically understood "every Puerto Rican a potential migrant" (p. 36). This construction of Puerto Ricans is as old as the colonial relation itself but emerged as it is expressed today through the pivotal particularities the United States imposed on Puerto Rico at the end of the 19th century.

Targeting Puerto Ricans for work is rooted in a particular historical practice of colonial labor migration in which U.S. states, agencies, and enterprises take full advantage of having made Puerto Ricans partial U.S. citizens since 1898, or "foreign in a domestic sense" (Burnett & Marshall, 2001; see also Trías Monge, 1997; Whalen, 2001). In this way and others, colonial subjectivity is at the core of the U.S. recruitment of Puerto Rican labor migrants. Such liminal positioning has been amenable to the state and capital entities, who could imagine Puerto Ricans as temporarily laboring in the United States but always desiring and planning to return home. This positioning disambiguated labor from colonial-isolationist anti-immigration fears, providing a less worrisome labor pool for the U.S. project. Hirings have frequently been characterized by impermanence and have ranged from short-term contracts using islanders to work agricultural farms seasonally (García-Colón, 2020) to un- or less-defined periods of labor to slaughter or cut hog parts at

excruciating speed in “la marranera,” other factories, and processing plants (Ortiz-Guzmán, 2024). Puerto Rican migrants have also been hired toward upholding carceral and related U.S. colonial projects, for example by “diversifying” law enforcement ranks through officer recruitment and training (Al Día News, n.d.; Díaz Tirado, 2023; TelemundoPR, 2016).

Manufactured as always-potential labor migrants, Puerto Ricans are utilized to sustain colonial logics, but little is known about how Puerto Rican teachers figure into such a project. What does migrant teachers’ labor allow to be maintained or built by way of their credentialed colonial subjectivity? What does Puerto Rican teachers’ state-certified labor do to uphold tentacles of the colonial project in unique ways and what formations exist to facilitate that?

The centrality of the Department of Education is crucial, as schooling is a pervasive and falsely benevolent colonial force (Colón & Vaught, 2022; Dias & Vaught, 2025). Since its inception, state schooling in the United States has served complex colonial aims. Because peoples are organized differentially within colonial orders, schooling has been expressed in myriad ways—from exclusion to boarding schools to “progressive” education—to align with the state aims for the particular targeted peoples and communities. Schooling in Puerto Rico is well-documented to serve assimilatory functions (Negrón de Montilla, 1975; Velázquez, 2022) through ideologies of progress and U.S. nationalism. Drawing on archival documents from 1920 Puerto Rico, del Moral (2013) writes,

A newspaper article entitled “Hacer patria” (To build the nation) celebrated the school activities, for they best typified the practice of creating citizens and building the nation. ‘Making *patria*, developing patriots, is the noblest of missions that the guides and shepherds of peoples can have.’...The key to forming a modern community of citizens committed to the progress of the nation was education, that is, schools and teachers. Patriots were ‘created neither in the battlefields nor in the military.’ Rather, ‘the patriot and the *patria* were created [*se forman*] in the school. (pp. 3–4)

Teachers as makers of citizens and nations have been core to Puerto Rican schooling for over a century. In the vein of citizen-making, the OKCPS board chairperson commented publicly on the recruited Puerto Rican teachers, “I think the fact that they are highly educated and bilingual is such a gift for us. We can now begin to create the children that can take the jobs that need bilingual-speaking employees” (Willert, 2014). The centrality of patriotic citizenship in schooling in occupied territories signals important linkages between unlikely geographies. And teachers in this network of linkages are formulated as laborers whose job is to cultivate, forge, and package the appropriate citizen.

Where citizenship is resonant, so too are other dimensions of colonial life that often go unexplored in the study of schooling: militarism, labor, migration, extractive racial capitalism, land contestation, and struggles for self-determination (Aggarwal, 2024; Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua, 2019; Pérez, 2015; Trask, 2010). Here, the teacher is the “shepherd” for the children who are meant to be made into

appropriate, Spanish-speaking, Brown citizens: factory workers, future manifestations of past and present labor (Bender & Lipman, 2015). As we later show, in archives such as the Oklahoma Historical Society, patriots are made in *both* militarism and the school through colonial, narrative accounts of connected and even deterministic structures of migration. Moreover, where citizenship is asymmetrically controlled and contested, we see even greater resonance. Thirty-nine Tribal Nations maintain sovereignty on the land occupied by the territorial boundaries of Oklahoma. Most Nations are geographically present by way of Removal, and operate in various conditions of legal federal trust, such that the state of Oklahoma (which governs state schooling) is in active juridical, epistemic conflict with the sovereign, Indigenous peoples whose homelands it occupies. Puerto Ricans as subjects of a U.S. territory experience restricted citizenship in representation and no recognition of Indigenous sovereignties, but are subjected to military, educational, health, and other forms of rule. Toggling between Oklahoma and Puerto Rico news media, archival data, and testimonio interviews with Puerto Rican educators, we surface the dynamic relations of people and place—relations that help reveal the shape of a contemporary colonial order through one of its key forces, schooling.

One of the architects and champions of this schooling experiment was Puerto Rican actress, Lymari Nadal. Nadal undertook a dual-site media tour, with distinct purposes: in Puerto Rico, to encourage teachers to interview; and in Oklahoma, to promote the value of the experiment. As part of this tour, Nadal appeared in a video interview with *The Oklahoman/NewsOK* (Willert, 2014). She described being invited to a dinner with OKCPS then-superintendent Robert Neu at which the subject of the need for teachers emerged. As we know through field research, professional, and lived experience, it is important to note that many business and political decisions get worked out at private functions in Oklahoma and Puerto Rico. Nadal shares,

I think it was before it was all over the newspapers and how they need bilingual teachers, and of course, I'm like, 'oh my goodness!' We were going still through a recession in Puerto Rico. Our unemployment is between 14 and 15 non-stop, which is very sad...I went back to my home [PR] to try to work with everyone that's trying to, you know, better the situation and so I know up close and personal that that's very bad for our children, for our parents, for the government, for everyone. And so when they say they need bilingual teachers, we have unemployed teachers but nevertheless super qualified. We take very seriously education. I mean I grew up in Puerto Rico, and I can tell you our parents—that, it's a tradition. They're really strict and very, very supportive of all things education and in my house it was very much like that. So, as we'll hear soon, the teachers are going to be interviewing. Some of them have doctorate degrees, master's degrees. You know, we like going to college. We like studying. We love that.

Nadal taps into multiple discursive strategies common in colonial-relation contexts during this and her other public appearances and press engagements. She vouches for the worthiness of Puerto Rican culture writ large and Puerto Rican teachers specifically, working to preempt panic in Oklahoma with news of the impending arrival of “foreigners.” She emphasizes respect, humility, and hard work. And, she describes decontextualized economic struggles through plaintive affect. Elsewhere in the video, Nadal validates her own expert testimony by professing unadulterated love for Oklahoma and her own good fortune for being welcome there. Significantly, her discursive strategies link the two places, bringing them into connection through the idea of shared values. And yet these ostensibly shared values both elide and point to the vast colonial forces that actually connect place.

The Pendant: Forgotten Places

As a geopolitical frame for exploring the dimensions that both characterize and connect place, we draw on Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s notion of “forgotten places,” which, she writes, “are places that have experienced the abandonment characteristic of contemporary capitalist and neoliberal state reorganization” (2008, p. 31). Gilmore richly elaborates Lyson and Falk’s (1993) conceptualization of forgotten places as late 20th century rural sites languishing from what they describe as uneven development in a relatively prosperous United States, sites where previous avenues to economic growth were blighted. Their wide-reaching anthology helped frame the inquiry into why and how entrenched repressed economic conditions were organized through locally particular and complex formations. Contributors to this early volume surfaced some of the ways rural economic decline and atrophy were not accidental but rather part and parcel of capitalist regional extractive investment. The authors help us understand how such exploitative capitalist arrangements make Puerto Rico and Oklahoma simultaneously sites of attention, investment, and economic concern and, necessarily, sustained impoverishment. For instance, the leisure economies in Puerto Rico that proliferated vacation rentals invariably exaggerate local rents and property taxes, creating new economic segregations sustained by the inherent plunder of such dispossession economies.

In her theorizing of forgotten places, Gilmore asks us to consider place as a set of complex relations that defy reductive cartographic geographies and politics. How do those complex relations reveal surprising connections to other places? And, what do those connections tell us? These places, through mimetic though locally particular practices of “organized abandonment,” surface often hidden or normalized ongoing, dynamic, and deliberate capitalist structures shaping contemporary colonial systems. Organized abandonment, Gilmore reminds us, “results from plans as well as abdication of responsibility. So, it is not merely a withdrawal” (The Forge, 2023, 20:49). Such plans capitalize on and expand the suffering, imbalance, and hierarchy of places. And this abandonment might appear as deliberately differentiated local coordinations of investment and divestment, resulting in the blanket appearance of investment but actualizing in staunch asymmetries with resolute abandonment featuring spatialized life conditions (Harvey, 2006). The multi-scalar capacities of this analytic help us consider hyper-local geographic projects of plunder. For instance, in the United States, teaching or

training hospitals were deliberately built in the hearts of already economically suppressed Black and Brown neighborhoods. By providing free or reduced cost healthcare services to residents, the hospitals exercised brutal control over the quality of said services. This asymmetrical economic relationship provided unskilled healthcare trainees with the plundered resource of bodies on which to practice their craft and afforded medical researchers unknowing populations on which to conduct experimentation. This organized abandonment, maintained through a cluster of tactics, created racialized archipelagos of forgotten places (Washington, 2008).

Forgotten places is a muscular analytic that provides supple, scalar attentions to coinciding forces otherwise severed by way of numerous schemas. Stretched to attend to the specificities of our study, we mobilize discontinuous, scalar forgotten places to understand military, oil, and leisure (Moreton-Robinson, 2015) occupation economies to be organized through vehement, particularized, local abandonments tethered through global forces. It is this tethering that anchors our particular attention to the labor migration of educators from Puerto Rico to Oklahoma. Notably, Gilmore proposes a geography that does not require contiguous spatiality but rather is formed through interlocking systemic conditions and forces. Forgotten places are not un-remembered. Rather, they are sutured together into and through systems, institutions, and ideologies that rely on their resonant, structured abandonment. Abandonment, rather than operating as a failed memory, creates the conditions for stitching together a geographically discontinuous occupation. And while forgotten places emerged in Lyson and Falk's (1993) effort to inquire into what were then rural contexts, scholars such as Ujju Aggarwal have stretched the concept to attend to a more complex contemporary network of places not adequately captured by old divides of rural and urban (Aggarwal, 2024; Vaught & Dancy, 2025). So, our application is not beholden to that divide but rather aligned with the multi-scalar analytic premise that organized abandonment creates and sustains forgotten places and that we can observe the linkages among these places by observing unsettled and surprising labor migrations.

Gilmore notes the role of bureaucracies in the practice of organized abandonment across forgotten places. We observe that the colonial bureaucracy of education not only works to mystify and obscure state-corporate organized abandonment by excepting itself from the cluster of violent colonial forces, but also to make cryptic its central role in the maintenance of forgotten places. Its analytic and functional role in suturing discontinuous colonized spaces through law, policy, and ideology is longstanding, but carries contemporary economic distinctions as the U.S. careens toward even greater capitalist, militaristic imbalance.

Oklahoma and Puerto Rico share core colonial features of organized abandonment and occupation (Lloréns, 2018; McCormick, 2009), including: geographically strategic military bases and installations on occupied Indigenous lands; ecocide through extractive and military economies; suppressed standard of living through service economies; state-run education; and incarceration. In these resonances, they are also particular: Oklahoma has among the lowest per pupil expenditures in the United States and its occupied territories, maintains districts

unable to afford a five-day school week, is the site of massive teacher labor contestation (Blanc, 2019; Dyke & Muckian-Bates, 2023), and is a national laboratory for repressive educational policy.

But we are not looking for sameness in these connections. Rather, we are trying to understand what the linkages might tell us about colonial power and its undoing, both through education. How are these forgotten places connected through planned educational abandonment? How is that abandonment a form of labor and knowledge control? And, what do people do?

We return here to actress Lymari Nadal. As she narrates the story of her role in the teachers' labor migration, and campaigns for its value by serving as an expert witness on Puerto Rican cultural educational principles, she emphasizes her love of Oklahoma. At the end of the over five-minute interview, she tells the interviewer Oklahoma is "home," and says "Look," slowly lifting her chin and opening the unbuttoned collar of her shirt as the camera zooms in to reveal a delicate gold necklace with a pendant in the shape of the state of Oklahoma (Figure 1). Her face no longer in the frame, Nadal asks, "Did you get that?" and laughs. The screen fades to gray-blue.

Figure 1

Nadal's Gold Pendant in the Shape of the State of Oklahoma



Note. Screenshot from *The Oklahoman/NewsOK* (2014). Copyright 2014 *The Oklahoman/NewsOK*.

How is the display of geo-political boundaries on the skin, through the zoomed-in gaze of the news media, a symbol of the complex subject relations of people in occupation? How might a pendant stitch together two places and make vivid a confusion between colonial discourse and a colonial subject? What networks of occupation does it illuminate? It is to the features of this occupation that we turn to by studying the collision of Puerto Rico and Oklahoma in an educational labor migration.

Education is an urgent and imperative focus for anti-colonial analyses, as it is centrally mobilized by colonial entities precisely to enshrine the inherent,

necessary good of their existence and its ongoing re-establishment through violent vectors. As Karrieann Soto Vega (2022) writes, “It is important that scholars and activists revisit the ways in which education is entangled with colonial-capitalist empire in ways that both push against and engage in corrupt practices” (p. 125). For us, the ideological, material garrisoning of education from the colonial systems and institutions to which it is actually sutured insists on an analytic remapping. This mapping must constellate rather than contiguate. As Gilmore impels us to, we ask what are the interconnected corridors and networks of which schooling is at one center?

The Umbrella: Testimonio and Ethnographic Inaugurations

To explore these questions, we rely on the experiences and perceptions of one interlocutor, Marilyn. She is one of the teachers hired to the 2015 cohort and continues to teach in Oklahoma City Public Schools. Lisa located Marilyn through news media and public records, and visiting Latine/Hispanic-centered community organizations mentioned in scholarly literature. Marilyn volunteered at one of the centers Lisa visited. With Marilyn, we merge testimonio practice and ethnographic sensibilities. To be clear, we do not focus on her to make totalizing claims, but rather because her stories establish richly textured lines of conceptual inquiry that challenge received conventions around labor, migration, and education. This methodologic emphasis on a single interlocutor’s or a pair of subjects’ stories draws from multiple transdisciplinary lineages of research that unveil multi-scalar systemic and structural forces through the lens of one person’s complex experiences (Placido, 2016; Simpson, 2016a; Sojoyner, 2022; Vaught et al., 2022).

All testimonio and ethnographic observations are co-written in first-person from Lisa’s point of view, drawing from her field work. The testimonio conversations are presented as they transpired, in Spanish and in English, in keeping with an anti-colonial effort to reflect the conversations as they occurred, and not as a gatekeeping tactic in any regard. We acknowledge the colonial history of both Spanish and English languages and do not collapse language fluency with place or identity. We present these first-person stories in italics to signal the narrative shift to readers.

After Marilyn and I spent the better part of the weekend together—on Saturday a parade; then Sunday at a church service, and a lunch at a Mexican restaurant with Marilyn’s husband, chatting familiarly about life experiences—we went to a local bar and grill Marilyn liked. Facing one another across a high-top table, I could sense we were both a bit nervous, perhaps about the sudden formality of an interview. Thinking it might alleviate the tension, I offered to share the questions and Marilyn acceded.

Marilyn began talking about her experience moving to OKC as a teacher. She described the day in 2015 that she and other educators arrived. “Me acuerdo que estaba lloviendo. It was afternoon. Cuando salimos por las puertas del Will Rogers, había un committee recibiéndonos,” she drew her face into a quick expression of surprise to emphasize, enveloping me in the feeling of the moment, “con reporteros, cámaras” she stretched out her annunciation for emphasis, “todo como si fuéramos rock stars!” Still wearing her pressed, stylish black-and-white

pants outfit she had worn to church, Marilyn sat confidently in her chair. “Y me acuerdo que estaba lloviendo porque the gift that they made us were umbrellas. Y yo todavía tengo esa sombrilla. I still have it.”

The umbrella was a gift, indicating the kind of asymmetric institutional gesture of welcome typical to colonial contexts. But it was also a material marker for the giver, an imposed symbol of the importance of colonial subject adaptation, of navigation, and location. Such objects work to visibly relocate people to a new place, anchoring them there. How might an umbrella, saved as a memento, as a reminder of a significant life change and moment, symbolize the scalar ways in which coloniality is kept?

“Cómo te sentiste?” I asked without letting her answer first. Our conversations reflected the inherent inflections of the testimonio tradition (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Huber Pérez, 2009; Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012) which honors the longstanding practice of people being in dialogue through real cultural, political, and familial experience and refuses the extractive pretense and imposition of euro-modern research neutrality that invades qualitative research. “Yo me imagino sorprendida al ver a toda esa gente ahí—.” “Sí. Sí,” Marilyn affirmed quickly, leaning forward, “porque yo no esperaba que—I didn’t expect that. Yo no esperaba que nos estuviesen recibiendo—sí sabía que del distrito nos iban a recibir porque fue con ellos con quien vinimos. Pero, yeah, nos recibieron like rock stars.” The surprise filtered into her cadence and tempo, expressed in the slow shake of her head, as if she was reliving that surprise, the disjuncture between her expectations and the context to which she arrived. “Reporteros, había como tres diferentes canales de televisión. We were technically coming to help. ¿Verdad? Porque para eso fue que nos buscaron a nosotros.”

The circumstances, forces, steps, and decisions that got Marilyn to Will Rogers World Airport and the “Crossroads of America” that day were not as straightforward or streamlined as the news media presentation of Nadal’s public narrative might have suggested or wished. In introducing a global anthropology of labor, Bender & Lipman (2015) write “we demarcate the spatial formations of empire and insist upon the routes of labor migrations as key to the geographies of empire” (p. 8). In this case, these routes across forgotten places are not magical recruiting pipelines that allow straightforward responses to labor supply and demand. Rather, Nadal herself shares with the interviewer, it is the relations in and across place that shape labor geographies:

When I lived in Puerto Rico for three years, I worked as a consultant for the mayor of my town in cultural education endeavors. Even though I’m not an educator, it’s a huge passion of mine... The mayor of my town, María Mayita Meléndez, she immediately said, “Whatever you need.” I also contacted the head of education from my town to get the numbers of the teachers on waiting lists by subject matter and by grades. With that information I sat with Lynne Hardin [then OKCPS school board president] and I told her, “You know we have these many math teachers, English teachers and on and on, you know.” And I’m talking about the South Region of

Puerto Rico. So, the mayor and the head of education of that region helped me organize. (The Oklahoman Video Archive, 2018)

Nadal, even as a lesser-known celebrity, is the unlikely relational link between the mayor of Ponce (Nadal's hometown) and the school board president of Oklahoma City Public Schools (her temporarily adopted small-city home). The routes that are key to labor relations of empire are, in part, existing political and social relations that create new ones. "Labor mobilization created a range of new relationships, including and beyond the relation of employer and worker" (Bender & Lipman, 2015, p. 2). It is to these constantly co-producing new and old relations—that shape empire across scale and so form the stuff of forgotten places—that our attention is drawn. And, with them, we are interested in labor relations that are and reveal colonial configurations.

Having explained to me that she had not considered leaving Puerto Rico before the Oklahoma option, Marilyn thought for a moment about how to respond to the question of how her move ultimately came about. Then, excitedly, widening her beautiful smile, and with a playful lift of the eyebrows, she asked excitedly, "¿Te cuento?" "Tell me!" I eagerly encouraged, as we laughed at our shared humor. "Te cuento. Yo trabajaba en una escuela pública." As she spoke, she leaned forward, her arm covering her copy of the research participation consent form. She tapped her fingers against the table top as she spoke, expressing a pointed precision in her story. The form and the formality faded away from our attention.

Mi directora me dice, "Marilyn, me mandaron un email que van a haber entrevistas para buscar maestros bilingües en Ponce. Van a estar viernes, sábado, y domingo." Y yo le dije, "No, no me interesa. It's okay." Ella me dice, "Marilyn, es una buena oportunidad para ti. Yo sé que, con tu capacitación, como tú eres, te van a coger rápido." Y me dice, "Necesitan maestros bilingües. Tu eres perfecta." So, mi directora me dijo. Y yo, "No, no estoy interesada." Y ella siguió insistiéndome.

Marilyn's story continues, and we detail some of it later. Here we are interested in how the points of entry that shape migrations in real lives can be unspectacular and affectively contoured by indifference or uncertainty. These points of entry often illuminate longstanding forces and conditions, rather than eventful ones, and point to methodologies that map the normalization of the enduring conditions of forgotten places, the relations between them, and the possibilities for rupture (Haley, 2019). Such methodologic approaches co-constitute the re-conceptualization of education as one center in a network of forces. They draw from standing traditions of excavating the scalar relations of coloniality through the quotidian and mundane.

Although crisis is often the symptom that connects forgotten places, we emphasize here that this professional educational labor migration predates recent events that might be understood as crises in or on the social order: Hurricane María, red state teacher strikes, and Puerto Rico's debt default, for instance. Yet, 2014 and 2015 mark the height of public narratives of the dire state of the Puerto Rican

economy and the escalation of migrations (Guzman, 2015). This chronology is noteworthy, as we posit that colonialism itself is the baseline, ongoing, and catastrophic disruption of social relations (Alagraa, 2021; Maldonado-Torres, 2021). We underscore Gilmore's assertion that the form and modality of crisis that links forgotten places are indexed not by singular events but rather by the unsustainable reproduction of the social organization. Our argument is that this migration highlights the normalization, or consecrates the fiction, of stable, *post-colonial* conditions through education. Crisis, we know, is also an index of power's vulnerabilities (Gramsci, 1971). So, in this "fly over state" and this occupied territory, in the relations between them surfaced by this teacher labor migration, how might we also observe potential sites of transformation for remapping a world of educational relations forward?

Our ethnographic stance and practice are purposely aimed at illuminating a scalar network of colonial forces through quotidian life (Colón & Vaught, 2022). Feminist anthropologists (Craven & Davis, 2013; Davis & Craven, 2022) in particular help us move toward methodologies that might disrupt common conceptual insularities. In the colonial context in which the hiring of teachers was described in equal parts through capitalist measures (market, surplus, jobs) and educational ones (bilingual teachers, training, certifications, cultural familiarity), and in which repetitive coverage, loud headlines, and circulating discourses tended to center the market, the market is a taken-for-granted space that presumably, inherently, and automatically afforded the perennial, always elusive, "better life." For instance, Marilyn's principal encouraged her to interview for a teaching job in Oklahoma because she felt Marilyn wasn't getting what she deserved, with which Marilyn agreed. In fact, Marilyn was under- and irregularly-paid in Puerto Rico.

But that measure alone indexes very little about the colonial network at which education is the center or the life of educators who migrate. For instance, what might it mean that in order to get this "better life," Marilyn also chose to move away from her high school-age son, who stayed in Puerto Rico with his paternal grandparents? As with other migrant laborer recruiting, teacher laborers are treated solely as individuals and only their needs or expenses are addressed (if at all). Moreover, the necessity of leaving for legitimate and reliable pay raised additional questions for Marilyn about where it was best for her son to attend school and what relationships were immediately important to him. These difficult questions are a widespread dimension of labor migration for Puerto Ricans considering leaving the archipelago for any period of time.

How does this consistent colonial method of family separation complicate the study of education? Pushing us beyond a unitary framework for understanding global labor dispossession anchored in property, Carbonella & Kasmir (2014), invite us to consider a "holistic notion of dispossession that expressly refers to the varied acts of disorganization, defeat, and enclosure that are at once economic, martial, social, and cultural" (p. 7). What might such an approach reveal about the workings of dispossession beyond land and into family relations in the name of education? What web of conditions and consequences does being a "rock star" across forgotten places map? Forwarding a framework of feminist ethnography, Davis and Craven (2011) emphasize methodologic practices that disrupt unitary

narratives or singular conceptual foci, and also “uncover solidarities and tensions across borders, and reference a wider range of sites where politics, economics, and culture bear the weight of neoliberal ideology, practice, and policy” (p. 194). Resonant with the call to develop methodologies that support conceptual, analytic plurality and through the insistence on the particularities of people’s experiences as not only portals to structural understandings but substantive in and of themselves, and with countless similarly disposed ethnographers (Berry, 2025; Pérez & Chávez, 2022; Perry, 2013; Sojoyner, 2022), we conceptualize the study of scalar dimensions of a colonial labyrinth, methodologically moving across vectors of colonial life and structure, heeding quotidian perception, feeling, or affect as conceptual ligatures (Million, 2009; Simpson, 2020; Thomas, 2019).

The Piano: Archives

Our archival methodology, conceptually aligned with our ethnographic methodologies, is designed to observe and analyze the network of colonial forces colliding and co-constituting through one professional educational labor migration. We draw substantively on Trouillot (2015) in this regard, whose theorizations of history and the archive as productions of absence and presence encourage a stance on laborers as historical narrators and subjects:

Workers work much more often than they strike, but the capacity to strike is never fully removed from the condition of workers. In other words, peoples are not always subjects constantly confronting history as some academics would wish, but the capacity upon which they act to become subjects is always part of their condition. This subjective capacity ensures confusion because it makes human beings doubly historical or, more properly, fully historical. It engages them simultaneously in the sociohistorical process and in narrative constructions about that process. (p. 24)

Accordingly, we undertake a grounded archival approach engaging this dialectic confusion, by which we draw from the always-emerging and affective consciousness of workers—teachers—in place and across forgotten places and with multiple subjectivities: colonial subjects, racialized subjects, family members, and so on. Specifically, we seek out the archivally unpredictable, unconventional, and overlooked (Hartman, 2008, 2019; Johnson & Vaught, 2025). We do not expect Puerto Rican teachers in Oklahoma to possess trenchant historical insight into the network of conditions that shape their own locations nor do we expect them to agree with our identifications and analyses of those—although this is an important dialectic to leave as unresolved considerations—but we also believe they have experiential, affective, ideological, and material knowledge that articulates apertures into networks for us to examine and that themselves constitute an affective archive (Thomas, 2019). People have lives that extend well beyond our narrow analytic of laborer or worker or migrant or teacher (Miraftab, 2016).

And yet, people are fodder for the colonial narratives that normalize anthropic conquest and occupation as if the innate order of things, as if sociogenic

forces, are matters of nature (Fanon, 1952/2008; Wynter & McKittrick, 2015). For instance, the Oklahoma Historical Society digital archives holding “Latino History in Oklahoma, 1939–1979: Puerto Ricans” is a simplistic colonial narrative that situates Puerto Rican migration into the state through an endemic interplay of war and economy:

World War II also introduced diversity into Oklahoma’s Latino population. The war produced the first communities of Puerto Rican families in the state. Puerto Rico became a part of the United States as a result of the Spanish-American War. The United States established birthright citizenship for Puerto Ricans beginning in 1917, fostering large Puerto Rican communities in the continental United States and a high degree of participation in the military. Over 65,000 Puerto Ricans served in the military in World War II. This tradition of service, veteran status, and bilingual ability made them strong candidates to fill roles on the growing number of military bases after the war. In 1950, United States and Puerto Rican leadership embarked on an ambitious program to improve the economy on the island called Operation Bootstrap. For a long period of time, this process created a lack of opportunity on the island and many Puerto Ricans decided to move to the continental United States for better employment. Many Puerto Ricans found that opportunity in or around the military bases in Lawton, Midwest City, and Enid. (paras. 3–4)

Of note, wars and economies are described in historically neutral terms—their causes and devastations wholly disregarded. Moreover, they are ideologically merged, such that war is understood to have “produced” (an essentially capitalist action) “families” (rather than destroying, separating, or dislocating them as wars do). The nation-state itself is credited with “fostering...communities,” doubling down on statist, war machine, capitalist benevolence.

Without segue or explanation, the entry concludes with an image of Rachel Rodriguez (Figure 2), about whom we learn nothing, except her name and the brief photo description below.

Figure 2

*“Rachel Rodriguez, from Puerto Rico, an Oklahoma City resident in the 1950s”
(2012.201.B1134.0161)*



Note. Reprinted from Oklahoma Publishing Company Photography Collection, Oklahoma Historical Society (n.d.). Copyright Oklahoma Historical Society.

We assume Rachel to be the standing figure (though she is unidentified in the archive), resting her arm comfortably across a full piano (fundamentally antithetical to unnaturalized mobilities) and smiling down at another woman whom we might be expected to assume or imagine is also Puerto Rican. Rachel Rodriguez, in crisp, modest dress, is presented as an elegant, cultured figure suggesting that Puerto Rican arrival to Oklahoma via war, citizenship, military service, and employment, is a natural, mutually agreed upon part of an uncircumscribed, civilized process. Her apparent class and gender status signifiers of a natal order aligned with empire prefigure the logics of future professional migrations and cement the benefits of war, militarism, and capitalism.

As if to point to this seamless merger of favorable forces, the entry highlights Operation Bootstrap. Here we observe militarism not in its most evident, stand-alone forms—armies, bases, forts—but in its equally pervasive scales and expressions. Militarism fuses with bourgeois liberal social orders, the arts (the piano, in this image), and even appropriate gender (Lugones, 2016; Teaiwa, 1994). As a contextual given in the archives, it produces derivative norms as background for the social organization of professionalism, migration, and more. Entitled in the convention of military operations but aimed at a virulently individualistic, industrialist notion of bootstrap labor ideology, Operation Bootstrap—Operación Manos a la Obra, or Let’s Get to Work—was a program characterized as “ambitious.” It incentivized business investment in the archipelago, certainly provided individuals with factory and other jobs, and brought infrastructural

improvements across Puerto Rico. It also ultimately resulted in high unemployment, because private investors simply left when the incentives were discontinued. Consequently, “Under the auspices of the U.S. government and transnational U.S.-owned corporations, Puerto Rico underwent a significant change in its political economy, institutionalizing migration as a survival strategy for Puerto Ricans across social classes” (Toro-Morn & García, 2024, p. 34). Concurrent with Operation Bootstrap, the government conducted population control through a twinned campaign of mass sterilization (Briggs, 2002). Such economic, biopolitical arrangements cater to capricious, extractive U.S. capitalist investment interests, generating dependent economies, and can—as a practice of organized abandonment—auction an economy to colonial capitalism and increased plunder (Bonilla & LeBrón, 2019; Cortés, 2018). While we understand all capitalism to be structures of plunder, we do not seek to contest or override people’s individual understandings of their own experiences. People may understand themselves to benefit materially from various programs or projects. And yet, capitalism is plunder and is inseparable from colonialism and militarism. We offer Vieques as an example. Perhaps the base and connected industry there temporarily generated jobs. Yet those emerge through a system of land usurpation, ecocide, reproductive genocide, and expansion of the war machine (Cruz Soto, 2020).

We approach the archives to observe people who labor and migrate in ways that challenge unitary and derivative understandings, leaving open-ended the dialectic tensions that shape migratory life (Trouillot, 2015). This archive encyclopedia entry works to factually historicize Puerto Rican labor migration to Oklahoma along vectors of military-driven opportunity, marketable bilingual skills, and a failed Puerto Rican economy, resulting in the image of an elite woman engaged in cultured leisure. What we observe is a conspicuous resonance between the narrative and material conditions of the teacher labor recruitment and migration that would take place over half a century later and the assemblages of state and proxy colonial institutions (schools, corporations, and military bases) unable to sustain their own labor needs in service of their bloated bureaucratic projects. They must draw from the people of those places the state colonially occupies, subjugates, and abandons in order to maintain adequate labor pools. And these same institutions are part and parcel of the production of surplus people in those same contexts through military occupation, economic pillage, and educational imperialism. Like prisons, military bases, both make and link forgotten places and their people.

In the chronologically subsequent “Latino History in Oklahoma, 1980-2020: Puerto Ricans,” entry, the narrative continues, merging the encyclopedic genre with the human-interest news media category:

Military bases in Oklahoma continued to serve as a magnet for Puerto Rican communities. One long-time Puerto Rican resident of Oklahoma, Lino “Taino” Roldan, learned how to operate radio equipment in the military. In retirement, he began a popular internet radio program named Radio La Brisa Tropical. He also founded the Puerto Rican Foundation of Oklahoma in 2012. This program and organization offer Puerto Ricans a way to share their culture,

celebrate together, and help students through scholarships. Some Oklahoma businesses and school districts viewed Puerto Rico as a promising place to recruit bilingual workers. Advance Foods in Enid offered cash bonuses and free airfare to relocate to Oklahoma and work in their meatpacking plant. Due to the large Latino population, Oklahoma City Public Schools began a campaign in 2014 to hire Puerto Rican teachers in the district. (para. 1)

Through the brief biography of “Taino” Roldan, military service is transmuted into cultural programming, community, and financial educational meritocracy. War-to-bootstraps repeats itself narratively and with protagonists. And as factories evacuated and abandoned the archipelago, Oklahoma meatpacking plants and school districts moved in with recruitment, opportunities, and campaigns.

These brief archival entries work to cement the colonial melioristic fantasy that contextualizes labor migrations as helpful to the colonial subject and situate education as a junctural site and process of multiple colonial forces. Fascinating to us, this colonial archive elevates a minor figure whose name is Taino but fails to understand his name. We pin this here to observe the loud silences and very present absences of Indigeneity, self-determination, anti-coloniality, and sovereignty in the archive. Though we are curious, regardless of Taino’s personal political stance or historical sense-making, regardless of when he adopted this nickname and why, his eponymous presence is rife with Indigenous refusals and anti-colonial possibilities (Simpson, 2016b).

“The presences and absences embodied in sources (artifacts and bodies that turn an event into fact) or archives (facts collected, thematized, and processed as documents and monuments) are neither neutral or natural,” writes Trouillot (2015). He elaborates:

They are created. As such, they are not mere presences or absences, but mentions or silences of various kinds or degrees. By silence, I mean an active and transitive process: one “silences” a fact or an individual as a silencer silences a gun. One engages in the practice of silencing. Mentions and silences are thus active, dialectical counterparts of which history is the synthesis...Inequalities experienced by actors lead to uneven historical power in the inscription of traces. Sources built upon these traces in turn privilege some events over others, not always the ONES privileged by the actors. Sources are thus instances of inclusion, the other face of which is, of course, what is excluded. (p. 48)

Although the Oklahoma Historical Society’s second entry spans to 2020, (the entirety of which we do not include here), it narratively ends in 2017 with Hurricane María and is fraught with wild exclusions. It is to those exclusions that we turn, and with which we experiment to model Trouillot’s methodologic impact on educational inquiry that exceeds education. Moving from historical archive to colonial presidential narratives to news media, we pay special attention to the

installation of a fiscal control board to govern Puerto Rico's debt and other fiscal considerations: those elements of geo-political entities that are of interest to the colonial capitalist regimes. Borrowing from Carbonella & Kasmir (2014) we observe that what we identify as a colonial analytic, "can explain both the crossing of borders and the creation of new migratory circuits alongside the politics of exclusion" (p. 9). Adopting Trouillot's archival disposition helps us align with and generate a grounded anti-colonial analytic by which we understand this teacher labor migration as embedded in connections and exclusions.

Promises and Solidarities

Without irony, and with the hallmark brutality and banality of empire, President Barack Obama (2016) introduced formalized federal fiscal oversight of Puerto Rico in 2016, as it faced debt default and economic collapse: the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA). He ushered in the logics of PROMESA with the following installment of his weekly address:

Hi, everybody. Today I want to talk with you about the crisis in Puerto Rico and why it matters to all of us. Puerto Ricans are American citizens, just like folks in Maine or Oklahoma or New Mexico. And over the last decade, Puerto Rico has suffered through a deep and painful recession, but unlike the rest of the United States, it hasn't recovered. Today, the island continues to face a crippling economic crisis. Schools are closing. Power is being cut off at homes and hospitals. Teachers have to choose between turning on the lights or turning on the computers. Doctors can't get medicine to treat newborns unless they pay in cash. (paras. 1–2)

Obama begins both paragraphs with mutually redundant sentences, discursively binding Puerto Rico with crisis. He doubles down on Puerto Ricans being like everyone else—ensuring they are not at all like everyone else, as they are deliberately measured against "folks" in recognizable but also forgotten places (Carbonella, 2014)—and also being somehow incapable of handling an economy independently. Here Obama almost does the work for us of creating unlikely analytic connections among forgotten places. In need of colonial rescue, but also citizens, Puerto Ricans are manufactured as perfect dependent subjects. And yet we note that the imposition of this complex condition is both particular, in its expression, to Puerto Rico but not unique as a colonial practice: dependent citizenship is imposed and enforced on many peoples, including Indigenous Nations in Oklahoma.

But the clincher is in Obama's first illustrations of this inevitable "crisis:" schools and teachers are suffering. The bureaucratic tentacles of occupation that come with the collusion of elites in Puerto Rico and wealthy political heavy-hitters in the diaspora (such as Luis Miranda, founder and first president of the Hispanic Federation) to create further dependency in the wake of deliberately silent corporate abandonment ride in on the waves of education. In this he narrates Puerto Rico's care-based professionals as suffering, if valiantly, in the context of their failed

government. Puerto Rican teachers and doctors are positioned as in need of the support, even the rescue, of the occupying state.

Predictably, the announcement and installation of PROMESA was protested in Puerto Rico by many groups, including educators (LeBrón, 2021). English language leftist and labor news media highlighted some of the resistance movement. A set of interviews with Puerto Rican Teachers Foundation (FMPR) president Mercedes Martinez in *Labor Notes* (Brophy & Furman, 2018) begins with this context note to readers:

You've read about the teacher strikes in West Virginia, Arizona, Oklahoma, Colorado... but what about Puerto Rico? Fighting to keep the island's public schools open in the wake of Hurricane Maria, teachers there are boycotting standardized tests and even teaming up with parents to occupy their schools. The cutbacks and anti-worker attacks in Puerto Rico kicked off well before the hurricane, when an act of Congress in 2016 handed dictatorial powers to an unelected Fiscal Oversight and Management Board in the name of debt restructuring. (paras. 1–2)

Contravening the Oklahoma Historical Society archival entries' absences as well as Obama's overt proclamation, *Labor Notes* identifies the colonial legislation and administrative board as culprits in the attack on Puerto Rican education. Their framing remains mimetic of colonial narratives, however, by insisting on identifying singular origins rather than situating those events within larger and longer structures of occupation.

It is the interviewee in this piece, Mercedes Martinez, who offers an anti-colonial analysis, describing the board as dictatorial, critiquing reform, delineating a more robust history:

We have faced attacks against our education system for many years. They want to divert public funds to private schools. We were able to stop the bill at first, but now we are facing the same attack again. They want to fire thousands of teachers, close hundreds of schools, create a voucher program, and privatize the schools. (Brophy & Furman, 2018, para. 21)

Martinez references Law 85 (Ley de Reforma Educativa de Puerto Rico), approved just six months after Hurricane María's landfall and with so many Puerto Ricans, including educators, still fighting for life (Ortiz-Guzmán, 2023), which exposed then-Governor Rosselló's and then-Secretary of Education Kelleher's strategic plan to fast-track reforms under cover of emergency (Agamben, 2005). Making use of "natural" disaster to reformulate systems of plunder is an old strategy, but the use of educational economic experiments is a more recent enactment of organized abandonment and can be observed in the rapid corporate-state restructuring of schools in New Orleans in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, for instance (Buras, 2013). Moreover, Martinez situates these attacks within a larger

set of attacks against workers writ large, undertaken by the conglomerated efforts of corporations and colonial agencies. Martinez narrates an historical context for understanding Puerto Rican teachers as subjects in a larger set of colonial labor networks of power and draws directly on analytic frames such as Naomi Klein's *disaster capitalism* (2007) to help make sense of these in the contemporary moment.

Perhaps most importantly, Martinez also situates Puerto Rican teachers as subjects in a larger set of labor solidarity networks. Among other examples, she says,

The Movement of Rank-and-File Educators caucus from the New York City teachers union has been very active. They have sent us a lot of donations. They have been helping explain in the United States about what's happening in Puerto Rico—and we have been doing the same by asking how we can help the fight in New York. (Brophy & Furman, 2018, para. 29)

By attuning to the absences, silences, and traces in the state or statist archive, and the Obama weekly address, we can push our inquiry to exceed isolated configurations of statecraft and notice education as both broader and as fully conjoined to the central colonial, occupational mechanisms of the United States. Martinez moves us from the archive that is functioning to make real and valuable the state of Oklahoma to actual relations and solidarities across forgotten places and their possibilities and existing practices of anti-colonial work. She inverts inherited frameworks of class “opposition...frequently traced on to all-encompassing distinctions between skilled industrial workers in the global North and racially marked and super-exploited laborers of the South” (Carbonella & Kasmir, 2014, p. 4). Martinez elevates a grounded solidarity that itself upends the production of colonial subjects. Solidarity requires mutuality. If the president of the Puerto Rican teachers union is offering help to the New York teachers union, despite dire circumstances that are animated to formulate all Puerto Ricans as innately dependent subjects who are without resources and so unable to give help, the colonial archive is disrupted.

Martinez's assertion of reciprocity also makes space for observing complex solidarities across labor. Through three very different colonial subjects—Martinez, Marilyn, and Nadal—we observe the drive to support labor through networks of mutuality. Yet these networks of mutuality are emergent, and as of yet not concretized. Indeed, as Carbonella & Kasmir (2014) contend, “new, transnational class formations are not wholly apparent. We are confronted instead by a world of labor, in various stages of the making, unmaking, and remaking of class” (p. 4). While Martinez understood herself as able to help while located in Puerto Rico, Nadal and Marilyn imagined helping through migratory systems. All three imagined a mutuality that extended beyond Puerto Rican educators; however, Martinez was committed to labor liberation and organized mobilizations while Nadal was interested in co-coordinating labor displacement through a market-aligned approach to solving economic problems. We find Marilyn's efforts compelling because they come out of her individual experience.

She tells me that this particular labor migration yielded multiple and contradictory experiences, and that I will hear very different stories from different teachers who participated. Nonetheless, Marilyn wanted to relaunch the program: “A mi me gustaría volver a implementarla. Yo he tratado de buscar gente y nadie. Dicen que sale muy caro. I’ve already tried.” However, the initial program was a partnership among private donors, a local university that donated dorms for summer housing, and the OKCPS. As with such privately underwritten projects, there is almost never sustainability, nor is there often meant to be (INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, 2017). So, Marilyn was told “it was too expensive” to relaunch.

We hear: it was an experiment, a typical one-off, and worth or value is not permanently attributed to migrant educator laborers or to their students in OKCPS. Such flash-in-the-pan, private, venture philanthropic initiatives with state entities are a dime a dozen in Oklahoma. Despite Marilyn’s efforts at a labor solidarity that is within the tradition of Latina educators across North America (Rodriguez, 2023)—in this case, getting jobs for people in Oklahoma—it is still within the colonial networks that systematize removal and disposability. No level of professionalism, education, or service protects this labor migration or the workers from the disposability that plagues so-called non-professional labor migrations, such as those for factory work. The colonial layers of the labor relations between these forgotten places remain intact regardless of the temporary rock star status of the laborers.

The state archive presents a smooth, unitary, but also abstract and uncomplicated view of Puerto Rican migration. The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture entry “Hispanics” reads:

Puerto Ricans...usually come to the state as members of the armed forces or civilian employees at such places as Fort Sill, Altus Air Force Base, Tinker Field, and Vance Air Force Base and have remained after completing their enlistment period or upon retirement. Others migrate to pursue educational, professional, or business opportunities. Reflecting their largely military connections, Puerto Ricans reside principally in Comanche, Oklahoma, Tulsa, and Cleveland counties. Their status as U.S. citizens with full political rights markedly differentiates them from all other Hispanic newcomers. (para. 4)

Belying the proverbial wave metaphor to be instead riptides, Marilyn’s experience of migration introduces complexity into how we might seek to understand education, labor, migration, and all their contextual forces. These migrations are fraught, bumpy, sporadic, and more. Affect, too, is avoided—even unknown—in the digital telling of Puerto Ricans to Oklahoma. Yet, it emerges at the crux of credentials and community, of gains and ruptures.

The Binder: Professionalism and the Affect of Labor Migration

Back home in 2014, after repeated encouragement from her principal, Marilyn decided to go ahead and do the interview. She recalled leaving work at noon, with her mother along as support and her professional binder in hand (Figure 3). “It’s not a little folder,” she made clear, her qualifications deserving of appropriate space. As if retracing the feeling of urgency of the drive from the Northwest to the South, she said, “Llegué casi, casi a las 3pm...Esto estaba vacío, era que ya habían entrevistado casi a la mayoría de la gente.” Invited into the interview room by one of the OKCPS Latina representatives and educators, Dr. Rose, Marilyn continued: “Entonces pasé y me entrevistaron dos personas. Y nada, me hicieron todas las preguntas que te hacen en una entrevista normal. Las hicieron en inglés. Vieron mi professional binder y ellas estaban like super en awe.”

Marilyn’s story was not only about her capabilities, but also about the surprising setting she found herself in: “Estaban fotógrafos y todo. Hay una foto, no sé en qué periódico está. Esa es de mi entrevista, like, original,” she ends forcefully in English. “Yo estaba, ‘okay, fine.’ Yo soy bien outgoing. Yo soy bien hyper. Tú ves que yo me muevo mucho. Muevo mucho las manos. Yo siempre he sido así.” Not intimidated by the crews and being herself, she knew she had left an impression: “Y ellas estaban super feliz, super encantadas y yo en mi mente, ‘okay.’”

Figure 3

Marilyn During Her Interview



Note. Screenshot of post from *WAPA TV* Facebook page (October 24, 2014). https://www.facebook.com/wapatv/photos/a.392520697920.161084.61186232920/10152483924087921/?locale=es_LA

Despite feeling she had done well, she was not prepared for what would come next, nor was I: “Me ofrecieron el trabajo there.” I gasped in surprise as I heard her voice strengthen and watched as she tapped on the table saying, “on the spot.” I asked if she was serious. I don’t know why I was taken aback, given my experience listening to people discuss these types of hiring practices. Perhaps it was because it made even more real how the practice is ever ongoing and its temporality so indicative of dependence and disposability within the gains. She explained,

Ellos me dijeron, ‘Necesitamos gente como tú. Te necesitamos. ¿No te quieres ir con nosotros y te hacemos todo el proceso allá?’ Porque mi professional binder, mind you, tengo que si mi Certificado de Buena Conducta, que si mi Certificado de Salud al día, everything.

Marilyn was prepared to find stable employment anywhere given her temporary, contract-based teaching position with the Puerto Rico Department of Education. But being ready did not equate to dispensing with her life as she knew it to immediately solve schooling problems in the United States. She continued explaining the dialogue:

Me dice, “You don’t want to leave with us? Because we really need people.” Yo tengo una maestría en Educación Especial. They really needed people pa’ eso. Yo le dije, “Wow. Thank you, I’m flattered, pero no puedo. Porque yo no voy a dejar mi clase. Yo no voy a abandonar a mis estudiantes que cuentan conmigo este año escolar por una oportunidad de empleo para mí.”

With that, the tone of our conversation changed. What sounded before like a narrative of adventure and achievement was substituted for a pause, a warning, a tear, and her voice cracking. “Me da un poquito de—” “yeah, no, it’s okay,” I tried to assure her, wanting to hold space for her emotions. “Ajá, wooh” she exhaled, in hopes of recuperating words. “Me dicen, ‘Thank you porque no hay mucha gente like you.’” Marilyn was deep in the affective dimensions of the story. She cried while attempting to describe the recruiter’s response: “‘Tú no estás siendo selfish,’” her uncontained tears still flowing, her voice still cracking, “Mind you—aquí,” pointing her finger downward on the tabletop, to indicate Oklahoma, “me pagan triple de lo que me pagaban en Puerto Rico.”

If, as is typically voiced, the economy is the driving force pushing Puerto Ricans out of the archipelago, in this instance, a market-driven understanding of the process cannot account for Marilyn’s decision-making, much less her feelings. All eyes were on her. Her eyes, in turn, were still full of tears. She continued: “Yo le digo a ella, ‘no, yo no puedo dejar a mis estudiantes. Sería un shock, un shock bien grande para ellos.’”

Almost 10 years later, Marilyn was still thinking about having left her school and students. Still in the immediacy of those profound feelings, which

traveled with her, unabated, she said, “¿Cómo yo voy a dejar a unos niños de Kindergarten sin su maestra, en octubre, que acaban de conocer?” Containing the tears and emotions she likely did not have at that moment, firm in her decision and knowing the risk, she spoke to me as if speaking to them. “‘No, no puedo. I’m flattered, gracias. Y si eso les cambia la perspectiva a ustedes de alguna forma, I’m sorry pero no puedo.’” The district employees, she said, responded positively. “‘No, on the contrary. We’re flattered to see que tú eres tan dada a tu trabajo, that you’re not going to leave just because el money que te estamos ofreciendo.’” In addition to the salary increase, the offer included transportation, housing, and food during the summer. “Me dijeron, ‘Okay, no problem. We want to hire you. Tú tienes todas las cualificaciones que nosotros necesitamos y estamos buscando en una maestra.’”

Teachers, as laborers, are expected to be immediately available, as if they exist in isolation, alone waiting for opportunity, with no need to put matters in order, even if they are not asked to leave immediately. But when they are asked to leave immediately, as was the case with Marilyn, the seemingly only justifiable reason to decline would be to show a dedication the recruiters can articulate as aligning with the moral qualities they seek in a candidate. When Marilyn refused to leave, she was praised for staying for her students, not prioritizing herself, and not centering money despite this all being acceptable had she acquiesced. Such recruitment and hiring decisions still fit into the colonial logic wherein any scenario is interpreted to serve the hiring purposes sooner or later and to construct the hired as submissive to colonial moral regimes. The district deployed an age-old colonial tactic of sending representatives they imagined were familiar or similar to the candidates being recruited: in this case, two employees, women with Spanish names. The immediacy in this instance, and arguably in other instances (Ortiz-Guzmán, 2024), fashions people as surplus labor. Additionally, the interview echoed military enlistment fairs, emphasizing the sense that when bodies are needed immediately (such as for war) people are expected to drop everything and go; to serve.

Marilyn’s affective storytelling animates scalar features of education labor migration that invite inquiry into the substantive, lived meanings in worlds configured by militarism and capitalism, including care rooted in community, culture, and family (Aggarwal, 2024). Her care for her students not only temporarily superseded her agreement to enlist for the Oklahoma educational cause and her considerable material needs, it also remains as the most vital felt knowledge over one decade of migratory life.

Flags: Conclusion

In 2024, Marilyn described herself as feeling sometimes “más profesional, más madura.” She is proud of the teacher she was in Puerto Rico and the one she has become in Oklahoma, including being voted by her colleagues as the 2023-24 Teacher of the Year for her school. Marilyn has given complex personhood to the teacher and to the migrant.

In Oklahoma City, both came together at the Fiesta de Las Américas, an annual celebration during Hispanic Heritage Month. On September 28, 2024,

Marilyn invited me to join her float and walk in the parade, having led efforts for her school's participation this year. Assuming we would be representing Puerto Rico as one of the places in *Las Américas*, I stressed about not having a flag as I made my way to the staging area. The closer I walked, the less I found what I was looking for. Then Marilyn texted me a picture of the float. The name of her school was stretched across the full length of the trailer, green letters outlined in black and embellished with vividly colorful handmade paper flowers. I realized I had assumed Marilyn's invitation as one to represent Puerto Rico, and that this assumption had come from our conversations and interactions. In fact, our participation in the parade had little to do with Puerto Rico in the *Fiesta de Las Américas* and everything to do with the school. My excitement dwindled momentarily, confused about what I was part of. This confusion is a part of what schools do: they often replace place by occupying and then signifying location across a network of places. In this way, in colonial contexts, we know the name of the school, but not necessarily the name of a town or the Indigenous place that both might occupy. Then, as I was coming across a bridge, I located Marilyn. She was dressed as a *jibara* in white, with a large Puerto Rican flag draped on her back. The flag hung from her shoulders to her ankles.

Marilyn, it turned out, would not walk. She would be sitting in the pickup truck, much of the focus on her Puerto Ricanness, as most of us walked. Seeing her step onto that school-focused float with the Puerto Rican flag invited me to rethink the float. Who was representing what? Was the school the focus or was the flag? Were both one in the same in that instance, and if so, what might this all mean? Was Marilyn doing the opposite of what Lymari did, placing Puerto Rico—in her flagged body—upon the state, or rather, one of its proxy colonial institutions?

The day after the parade, as we sat at the bar and grill, Marilyn and I laughed about our Puerto Rican pride, manifesting through flags. She shared that she hadn't gotten to that level of hanging her small black and white flag (one of the flags associated with anti-colonialism) from the rearview mirror of her car. Instead, she has it less visible. I asked if the color of this flag aligned with the political resistance generally attributed to it, and she quickly explained it was simply because "*es la que combina con mi carro.*" I was learning so much in these interactions, including an aside she volunteered: "*Yo, en mi casa, tengo una bandera de Puerto Rico al frente. Pero es la mitad de Estados Unidos, la mitad de Puerto Rico. Y hay una mano arrancando la de Estados Unidos y se ve la de Puerto Rico atrás. You'll see.*" There are several reasons for people to have merging flags being pulled back from one direction to another. Marilyn did not elaborate on hers.

Yet, Marilyn's decisions of which flags to have, where, and why refuse absolute determinations of identity or representation. And also, such decisions point to the consciousness of place: where a large flag is expected and celebrated within city limits for an event that can be ignored by others; where a medium-size flag with two places can be read as embracing the United States and, by association, Oklahoma, so that the house need not be targeted; and, where a small flag might still be too big to exhibit in a noticeable way if driving around the state.

But Marilyn's story introduces important messiness into labor relations between Puerto Rico and Oklahoma. In fact, the flags—as artifacts that leave trails

and traces—reveal the confluence of old and emergent colonial labor formations. As Carbonella and Kasmir (2014) remind us, the context for this particular labor migration is one of vast and increasingly violent relations. They write,

Informal, criminalized, military, child, and bonded labors are once again as common as industrial and service sector work in both the global North and South, just as structural adjustment programs, penalization, and military and paramilitary violence serve to differentiate and regulate labor across the world. It is precisely these new or remade relations that compel us to move beyond old antinomies in search of explanatory frameworks capable of making sense of the changing experiences of labor and all they mean for social and daily life. (p. 4)

This educational labor migration might both suture together and shield other migrations and labor formations from view, pointing to both particularities and severe overlaps in scalar colonial forces. Marilyn's story surfaces these complexities.

We were deep into a conversation only interrupted by our server occasionally asking if we needed anything. Cognizant of categories of professionalism and how those track class identifications, I carefully broached the topic of who constitutes a labor migrant. "Muchos puertorriqueños se mudan a Estados Unidos para trabajar, right, como ya tú y yo hemos hablado. Pero no todos se consideran migrantes laborales." I asked Marilyn if she considered herself a labor migrant.

¿Te describirías de esta forma? ¿Sí o no y por qué? Y me explico: muchas veces, cuando pensamos en un migrante laboral, a migrant worker, pensamos en personas que van a trabajar en la fábrica, como me decía tu esposo, right? Su familia. We don't think about teachers. Would you consider yourself una migrante laboral o no? Why or why not?

How Marilyn replied stretched fixed categorical ideas of workers into fluid processes shaped by time and place.

Technically, yes. ¿verdad? Porque yo vine - literal - yo vine para trabajar y yo vine para buscar un nuevo futuro porque Puerto Rico no me estaba brindando el estatus laboral [se ríe] que yo necesitaba. So, yeah, pero it changed over time. Because ya yo no veo que yo me mude más. Sí, en el momento me mudé más que a trabajar, pero now Oklahoma is my home. So, ya cambió mi estatus de migrante laboral. Ya yo no siento que yo soy migrante aquí. Yo simplemente me mudé de sitio y fui un migrante laboral hasta cierto punto, porque ya I made it my home. Entonces, yo siento que un migrante laboral vino, trabajó, y se fue. Does that make sense?

Both surprised and quite clear with what she was explaining, I answered, “Yeah, it makes total sense.” Marilyn expressed a consciousness of the function of education as labor within the networks of migration, but also the leveling function of migration across laboring class. But she also points to the mediating function of time: she does not experience being bound to permanent temporariness, signaling new formations across forgotten places. Marilyn reiterated,

¿Verdad? So, yo no simplemente vine, trabajé y me fui. Hay gente que va, viaja, trabaja, y se vuelve y se va para su país. Yo hice Oklahoma mi lugar y yo pienso que va a seguir siendo mi hogar por mucho tiempo, a menos que mi esposo y yo decidimos movernos a algún otro sitio por alguna otra razón.

Having made a home in a suburb of Oklahoma City far from her home in Puerto Rico, Marilyn transformed herself from an invited imaginary “rock star” into an established Puerto Rican teacher, with her complicated array of flags symbolically suturing (re)emergent colonial and anti-colonial labor and related relations across two forgotten places.

This seemingly small and unusual labor migration provokes scalar questions about the central role of education in the contemporary reformulations of colonial and anti-colonial webs of power. The conventionally isolationist nature of the study of U.S. education defangs its colonial undergirding and proliferate dimensions and severely restricts our intellectual grappling against coloniality everywhere—perhaps most especially in the *Crossroads of America*. Through the research and popular domestication of what is in fact a highly international, colonial military and labor apparatus, we are subjected to the deliberate impediment of anti-colonial analysis and action. To theorize the mobile scalar tethers and ruptures surfaced by our ongoing project, and to exercise fidelity to an anti-colonial stance, we suggest extending these initial theoretical conversations through the nexus of forgotten places in directions we did not address here. Some of those include: Indigenous, anti-colonial theorizations of militarism (Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua, 2019; Trask, 2010); global philosophies and praxes of self-determined education and schooling (Borges, 2019; Romero Gallardo & Gálvez, 2023); histories and analytics of Indigeneity (Harjo, 2019; Simpson, 2014); racial capitalist conceptualizations of labor and carcerality (Gilmore, 2007; Robinson, 2000); and the centrality of gender and racialization to all of these (Ferreira da Silva, 2022).

In this article, we offer just one conceptual, methodological model that annotates our perspectival shift. We ask how education in the United States is at the juncture of a network of colonial forces, featured by labor migration. And we ask this by mobilizing the multi-scalar framework of forgotten places. By convening uncommon dialogues among educational scholarship and these co-constituting traditions, we situate our inquiry and analysis in a larger set of relations, inviting a revisiting of education as central to a global nexus of colonial forces and anti-colonial movements. And, ultimately, we are undertaking these analyses with an eye toward extant and possible self-determined educational projects.

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