



Energy Islands: Metaphors of Power, Extractivism, and Justice in Puerto Rico

By Catalina de Onís, Oakland, CA, University of California Press, 2021, pp. 300, \$29.95 (paperback), ISBN: 9780520380622

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BOOK REVIEW

Energy Islands: metaphors of power, extractivism, and justice in Puerto Rico, by Catalina de Onís, Oakland, CA, University of California Press, 2021, pp. 300, \$29.95 (paperback), ISBN: 9780520380622

Energy Islands is a timely, personal, and well-organized book that studies different levels of resistance to the legacy of racial capitalism and colonialism in Puerto Rico based on years of fieldwork with local coalitions. While this book specifically contributes to environmental rhetoric, Latinx de/coloniality, and Puerto Rican rhetorical studies, some of the biggest lessons may be for argumentation. Since the *Journal of American Forensics Association* became *Argumentation and Advocacy*, the terms “decolonize” and/or “decolonization” have only appeared in four essays. “Decolonial” has not been mentioned once. Is this by accident or could it be that argumentation itself is the thing that needs to be decolonized from the colonial/modern matrix of power that has narrowly defined what, and who, counts as reasonable? Argumentation, especially the Platonic kind, is an engine of coloniality that perpetuates legacies of colonial injustice, but *Energy Islands* shows how it can also be otherwise. Rather than extracting the parts that may speak most directly to this potentiality, I proceed by approaching de Onís’s book wholistically, on her grounds, in the hopes that readers will pick up this important book and learn for themselves the possibilities of decolonial argument and advocacy.

Operating from a space that challenges taken-for-granted logics of colonialism/modernism, de Onís takes what Walter Dignolo calls “the decolonial option” to interventionally disentangle the logics of colonialism, white supremacy, and extractivism that have normalized, and decontextualized, energy injustices in Puerto Rico. The humanitarian crises of Hurricane’s Irma and Maria, for instance, which left millions without electricity and other public services for months, was far from an anachronistic event that accidentally struck the most vulnerable but part of a much larger, and more complex, set of experiences excluded by master narratives of racial capitalism during climate emergencies. For de Onís, these environmental crises, and their “cruel ironies,” are entree points for her “deep dive” into the logics of modernism/colonialism that have reduced this island, and its racialized people, to an environmental sacrifice zone (4, 11).

Energy Islands is organized around metaphors of energy exigencies. These exigencies span different, and intersecting, “archipelagoes of power”—a term that she defines as “a network of entities/islands at various levels and hierarchical and horizontal nodes across and within structures and institutions that enable and constrain agency for diverse actors” (13). In two parts—“Forming Energies” and “Powering the Present and Future”—this book shows how multilayered rhetorics and practices from colonial pasts are animated in the present. Through metaphors of “dis/empowerment,” “experimentation,” “generation,” “(re)wiring,” and “delinking,” de Onís charts the rhetorical and material geographies of energy, power, and privilege that enable and constrain different agencies and “energy actors” (24)— from Spanish and US empires, conglomerate corporations, and their crony politicians, to the many decolonial environmental coalitions disrupting energy colonialities.

Since Spanish colonization, “desires to invade, exploit, import, and export...different energy forms (e.g., human labor, migrations, and fossil fuels)” have created an intertwined

set of “logics of domination, extractivism, disposability, and conquest” that “normalize polluting and plundering” (38). As matters of “energy coloniality”—a term she also discusses elsewhere (de Onís 2018a; for “energy colonialism” see de Onís 2018b)—metaphors of energy exigencies point to different, but connected, forms of domination that stem from modernity’s system of racial classification. In Chapter 2, for instance, entitled “Experimenting Energies of Defense, Disease, Development, and Disaster,” de Onís shows how the logics of energy coloniality have rhetorically coded native Puerto Ricans (Boricua) and their territories as inferior and disposable for dominant US interests through different kinds of experimentation. She traces the “rhetorical energies” that have reduced these people and lands as defense zone for US military; an underdeveloped and diseased population requiring medical treatment; a racialized, gendered, and classed group of overpopulated (and hyper-fertile) persons; and a “disaster zone” that offers US businesses a “blank slate” for research, development, and experimentation (e.g., “opportunity zones;” 69). This last and most recent energy coloniality is made manifest through post-crisis “laboratory tropes” that reduce Puerto Rico to an “extraction zone” in the service of “green capitalism” and its “white saviors” (e.g., Elon Musk, 85).

It would be a mistake to think that this book is just a negative critique of energy coloniality. Part II is committed to the different voices and agencies that disarticulate energy coloniality to imagine new possibilities for energy justice. Chapter 3, for instance, takes up two controversies about methane gas projects (Vía Verda and Aguirre Offshore GasPort) that were thwarted by resistive actors that repurposed fossil fuel space-occupying tropes and interpreted/translated alternatives to expansion. The next chapter “(Re)wiring Coalitions of Radical Transformations” is committed to local coalitional politics and the demonstrated possibilities of (re)wiring as a material and metaphoric concept for building archipelago alliances and telling counternarratives. Emphasizing coalitional enactments, de Onís details her many different experiences with energy actors and collaboratively offers insights for future relationships. In her conclusion, the praxis of this research is made even more explicit as de Onís walks readers through what she calls “the four d’s of energy justice—decarbonizing, decentralizing, democratizing, and decolonizing” (152).

Based on years of fieldwork, networking, and coalition building with local communities and organizations, de Onís “amplifies” the volume of Puerto Rican voices struggling for energy justice. As explicated in her essay with series editor Phaedra Pezzullo (Pezzullo and de Onís 2018), amplification highlights the ways rhetorical scholars and activists create presence and voice for affected communities that may otherwise be “muted” (10). de Onís’s efforts to amplify voices from communality groups is evident throughout her book, as she draws from many interviews with local advocates and coalitions to make them present. Rhetorical amplification is particularly resonant in the second half of the book where de Onís builds insights from comments made during public hearings about energy futures, community activists and artists such as Ruth “Tata” Santiago and Hery Colón Zayas, and community-building initiatives from coalitions such as Iniciativa de Ecodesarrollo de Bahía de Jobos, the Resiliency through Innovation in Sustainable Energy, Convivencia Ambiental (Convivencia), and Coquí

Solar. All of this is evidence of how fieldwork itself, to de Onís, is a place-based “coalitional act” (231).

Further evidence of de Onís’s impressive methodological interventions (and also my favorite parts of the book) are four different vignettes entitled routes/roots/*raíces* that each offer autoethnographic accounts of her personal history, narratives, and involvements with different groups. In her words, these routes/roots/*raíces* “enact the importance of critical self-reflection and to illustrate more vivid, place-based engagement” (26). These

vignettes demonstrate just how committed de Onís is to energy justice in Puerto Rico and offer a refreshing change of pace from work in which authors approach topics from a place of distant removal.

Altogether, *Energy Islands* is a vibrant text that creates openings, or ruptures, for building new worlds through decolonial methodologies in a variety of areas, not least of which is argumentation. There is no doubt that rational argumentation has, and continues to, function as a tool for perpetuating the legacy of colonialism throughout the Americas, especially when it comes to resource colonialism. However, there are also opportunities for thinking, and doing, argumentation in more polyvocal and inclusive ways that account for the range of experiences, languages, and practices that shape what is/is not reasonable, just, equitable. The Argumentation Network of the Americas, for instance—and this journal’s forthcoming special issue with the same name—might be one example of how argumentation might begin to catch up with de Onís and decolonial argument.

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