



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

“It Ain’t Easy Being a Robot in the Caribbean”:

Resisting Utopian Visions of Puerto Rican Techno-Colonialism through Street Art

On February 21, 2016, the Instagram account for the street art project *Shittyrobots*¹ posted a photo of a mural of a silver robot with a heart beating in its chest, glumly attempting to sell one of their detached mechanical arms. The post was notable not only because it did not show the usual scene of the robot stealing, napping, or causing trouble, but also because of the price written on the tag tied to the metallic claw: \$58,000,000 (figure 1). Just months before the post, in August 2015, the Puerto Rican government had defaulted on a bond payment for \$58 million, a warning sign to many that Puerto Rico would not be able to repay their debts (Kuriloff). The striking image of a robot, often a symbol of efficiency, ingenuity, and the possibilities of futuristic technological advancement, selling off its own limb to pay off state debt highlights the connection between labor, progress, and power. As Rocío Zambrana (2021) writes, “Debt actualizes, updates, reinstalls the colonial condition...the operation of debt involves expulsion, dispossession, and precarization through which race/gender/class

¹ www.instagram.com/shittyrobots



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

hierarchies are deepened, intensified, posited anew” (10). Instead of modelling accepted forms of productivity, the robot shows the social and economic costs of colonialism, along with the ways in which the harm done and prices paid by unpayable national debts are pushed down the hierarchy and onto the most vulnerable. By showcasing this imagery on a city wall and online, *Shittyrobots* offers a visual reference for the ongoing conversations about debt, colonialism, technology, and work in Puerto Rico.



Figure 1: @shittyrobots post from February 21, 2016

Shittyrobots is a street art and virtual project started in San Juan in 2012 by an anonymous Puerto Rican artist. The robot is often shown drinking, smoking, spray-painting walls, or imitating popular culture icons. The series offers a timely critique on



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

the history of and narratives surrounding techno-colonialism in Puerto Rico. From Operation Bootstrap to post-Hurricane María attempts at bitcoin-fueled development, industrialization and technologization have often been at the center of the US colonialism in Puerto Rico, with entrenched narratives of progress, efficiency, and productivity that veil extractive and harmful measures. As an artistic, public, and humorous response to these violent forces, the robot's "shittiness" comes from a refusal to be productive, satirizing robotics' assumed potential to revolutionize labor and challenging the colonizing structures that link technological advancements with economic and social progress.² Just as the artist has chosen to remain anonymous, the robot has not been given a name. As the artist says, "It's too fun seeing what humans call it. The robot's identity situation on its own is very interesting. See, I want humans to identify with the robot's behavior, by leaving name, sex, and voice out of the equation it makes it more effective" ("Questions"). These behaviors, from taking cellphone photos of a plate of food to hoarding toilet paper during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, highlight the robot's humanity and makes human viewers

² Though it is beyond the scope of this paper, the image above and others from the series that feature the robot with detached limbs or head could also be read as a commentary of the ways that capitalism positions disability and productivity as oppositional forces.



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

question how their own actions have been automated. In this article, I analyze the street art series and its corresponding Instagram account to show how it maps technological colonialism and resistance onto both urban and digital landscapes. I argue that *Shittyrobots* illustrates these politics and shows the underside of technological development, creating a public space for critical engagement and alternate understandings of work, play, lawfulness/lawlessness, and what it means to be productive.

The artist behind *Shittyrobots* is one of many that have attempted to rewrite urban and political cartographies in Puerto Rico. Other notable recent works of Puerto Rican political street art include the 2016 black and white flag painted by Colectivo de Artistas Solidarixs y en Resistencia, which represented the collective mourning over the reinforcement of Puerto Rico's status as a US colony through the PROMESA Act and the establishment of the Financial Oversight and Management Board (Muñoz Alvarado, 2016), and the 2015 mural "Paz para la mujer" by Colectivo Moriviví, which denounced gendered violence in Puerto Rico (Colón-Pizzini, 2018; Vaquer Fernández, 2020).³ As

³ As proof of the political potential of these murals, "Paz para la mujer" was vandalized and censored days after its completion—the nude, Black figures were painted over with white underwear—, making clear the "misogyny, racism, and institutional anti-Blackness" still prevalent in Puerto Rico (Colón-Pizzini, 57).



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

scholar Bethzabeth Colón-Pizzini writes, “In a territory of United States colonial subjects, muralism has proven to be a popular method for dispossessed Puerto Ricans to publicly create a political and social legacy that reenacts community hopes and praxis aimed at social justice” (57). These examples and others illustrate the power of street art/urban art/graffiti/public art to amplify social crises and foment solidarity and action. As acts of public art, these interventions reinforce a form of urban citizenship, “resignifying the use of public space” and fueling public debates (Dabène 24). While images of a stealing, drinking, and napping robot may not appear to enact the same kind of politics as these previously mentioned artistic interventions, a closer look highlights how such images challenge techno-colonial histories and presents of industrialization, disaster capitalism, and utopian visions of technological development.

The origins of the *Shittyrobots* project are tied to issues of labor and dissatisfaction. According to the artist, a creative rut and a biting critique from a family member in the early 2010s led them to taking a several-month hiatus from art, as they could no longer find the motivation to paint walls without any purpose or meaning behind it. However, as the artist explains, “One day on my commute to work I saw a graffiti character on a wall and I remember saying ‘man I miss painting, I need to get



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

back on it, all I do now is work 9-5, I feel like a damn robot'... and that's when it hit me" ("Questions"). Surprised by how much a single image had inspired him, the artist set out to do the same for others: "The same way I was sparked to do something through a visual image, I was to create a persona, a character that everyone could relate to. The focus remains the same, to turn gray spaces in the city into funny scenarios" ("Questions"). When asked about how he chooses each location, the artist said, "Depending on the content of the image, some require a scenario or 'special setting,' most don't. Most spots painted have been chosen simply because of the high vehicular or pedestrian visibility" ("Questions"). Despite the stated focus on funniness, many of the examples analyzed in this article show the ways in which wit, irony and play can be used to comment on political and social issues.

Shittyrobots and other artistic responses tap into two main points that reinforce the political potential of street art: the capacity to transform public space and the potential to instantly connect with or relate to the viewer within their everyday lives—working, commuting, inhabiting the city, etc. On the first point, scholar Holly Eva Ryan writes in *Political Street Art: Communication, culture, and resistance in Latin America* (2016) that street art "can disrupt and reconfigure public spaces, playing with the urban



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

aesthetic to probe at existing boundaries and construct ‘anti-environments’ through which new possibilities for thought and actions may be revealed” (141). By transforming the “gray” spaces of the city into something vibrant, funny and thought-provoking, the *Shittyrobots* project pushes back on urban planning and development focused on production, efficiency, and demographic organization or segregation. Ryan also notes that unlike most museums and galleries, where “interactions with artworks are carefully managed so that artifacts might be preserved for the long term,” street art has the ability to form instant connections, can appear to be “moving along with the times,” and can connect with viewers in spontaneous and surprising ways (4).

Shittyrobots brings these two points together, placing the recognizable and relatable symbol of the robot in highly visible locations in ways that transform public space and spark questions and curiosity in those that happen to be passing by. By meeting the viewer in their own lived context, the *Shittyrobots* series can enact a politics that feels immediately relevant and connected.

This article refers to the physical art and the corresponding Instagram account as part of one overarching *Shittyrobots* project. Since physical street art has an inherent connection to localness and the particular urban environment and community in which



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

it is rooted, at first glance the digitalization of the medium on websites or social networks would seem to erase or obfuscate that essential context. For example, the fact that most of the captions accompanying the *Shittyrobots* Instagram photos are in English raises questions as to who the presumed audience of the series is. (The comments sections, on the other hand, feature a more even mix of Spanish and English.) However, the relationship between physical street art and virtual representations of that art is more complicated, multidirectional and productive than that. As scholar Tracy Bowen (2010) shows, the internet expands the fluidity and “mutability” of graffiti: “The Internet is a repository of information that is mutable in so far as it enables collaboration, rewriting, archiving, re-organizing the archive, and public exposure that both marks territory through the documents housed within the archive, as well as transcends territorializing when the archive is opened up across boundaries” (89). Rather than a loss of context, that “opening up” offers more opportunity for connection, reference, and collective action. At the same time, this convergence of graffiti and social media shows the ways in which street art can rewrite and remap virtual territories, in the same way that it affects its physical ones. As scholar and filmmaker Noelia Quintero (2007) writes, “Graffiti inhabits digital media in an unconscious and agonistic manner. In a



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

sort of reversed process, graffiti organizes space and turns street wall data and structure into a flâneur-user experience. Graffiti's techniques and tools are challenging the spatial and temporal boundaries that define offline physical space" (11). Rather than losing a connection to localness, projects like *Shittyrobots* that combine painted walls and social media posts transform the viewing experiences for both. The individual mural becomes a hyperlink to an online body of work, while scrolling through the timeline transports users to the geographical, political, and urban contexts within which the artwork appears.

Just as *Shittyrobots* and other street art projects impact the environments (both physical and virtual) in which they are rooted, they can and should also be viewed through the lens of the historical, political, and social contexts that surround them. In the case of these robots, it is difficult to separate images of specifically non-working robots from the history of US techno-colonialism in Puerto Rico. The most notable example of this is Operation Bootstrap, a series of post-World War II policies focused on "modernizing" the Puerto Rican economy through industrialization (at the expense of the local agricultural industry) and attracting foreign investment through loans and tax breaks. While there were some advancements made in terms of GDP growth, the



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

dependence on exportation and foreign capital was unsustainable (Fusté 104). Despite these limitations, the concepts of industrialization and modernization became dominant narratives. As Déborah Berman Santana (1998) writes, “Industrialization was considered by development economists to be a necessary prerequisite to building a modern, developed nation, in the western sense, and required massive capital investment. ‘Third world’ economies are characterized, among other things, by a low level of capital formation, relative to ‘advanced’ industrial states” (93). The colonizing nature of this project was highlighted by the fact that Puerto Rico was being used as a sort of laboratory for economic policies, with the hopes of exporting these methods to other less-developed nations around the world and strengthening US economic influence across the globe.

Operation Bootstrap was *by design* not focused on helping working-class Puerto Ricans, as unemployment skyrocketed and largescale economic development plans hinged on “the emigration of the ‘surplus’ Puerto Rican population to the mainland, not only in order to help meet U.S. needs for cheap labor but also to rid the island of a large segment of its working class - and hopefully prevent popular unrest from threatening the stability of the government and its programs” (Berman Santana 104). For those



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

working-class Puerto Ricans that managed to stay, the enrichment of US investors and local elites depended upon maintaining a “cheap and docile labor force” (Berman Santana 93). The rhetoric of industrialization and modernization spilled over into labor relations and the production expectations put onto the already-extended workers. As Pedro A. Cabán (1989) has explained, since Puerto Rico could not charge industry-protecting tariffs, growth could only be maintained through increased worker productivity, or an increase in the “capital to worker ratio” (567). The idea that labor productivity can be simply increased, especially in the absence of an increase in incentives or compensation, is an exploitative and dehumanizing narrative, blurring the line between the worker and the machines they are operating in the newly-industrialized factories. In this way, Operation Bootstrap sought to not only automate and mechanize the Puerto Rican economy but also the Puerto Rican laborer, attempting to transform them into efficient, obedient machines within a larger colonizing process.

It is within this historical, political, and social context that the playful figures of *Shittyrobots* stand out. Refusing to be productive, make sacrifices, or subscribe to a colonizing narrative of modernization, the robots push back on legacies of techno-colonialism in Puerto Rico. As Jennifer Rhee argues in *The Robotic Imaginary: The Human*



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

and the Price of Dehumanized Labor (2018), the image of the robot has long been used to highlight the connection between labor exploitation and dehumanization (18). In the same way, images of robots that refuse to be exploited or disobey orders or programming remind the viewer that humans have the capacity to do the same. The robot at the center of the *Shittyrobots* series is almost never depicted performing a “productive” function; instead, they are more often seen stealing, napping, or consuming alcohol or drugs, all acts that push back against ideas of efficiency and industriousness. This could also explain the occasional parodies within the series of other pop-culture robots that exemplify service to humans, including C-3PO and R2-D2, a translating droid and a maintenance droid from the *Star Wars* sagas, and Rosey, the robot maid from *The Jetsons*. As Erin Burrell (2021) has pointed out, Rosey’s conditional place within the Jetson family reflects the ways in which servile robots and their labor contributions can be both gendered and raced in popular culture (34). The image of these obedient robots in contrast to or being corrupted by the primary *Shittyrobots* robot underlines the rebellious nature of the robot that refuses to be productive or carry out its programmed social function. The artist does also depict the robot alongside Bender



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

from *Futurama*, a similarly rebellious robot that famously refuses to perform their original function and spends its time drinking, smoking, and gambling.

The *Shittyrobots* series highlights the gap between the attractive symbols of development and any real progress made in terms of social justice or equity. As sociologist Zaire Dinzey-Flores (2018) has shown, economic policies and urban planning have left Puerto Rico in a developmental paradox, left vulnerable by the US but not as seemingly “underdeveloped” as its Caribbean neighbors (167). These policies were passed under the guise that economic reform and industrialization would inherently lead to social progress, despite the fact that “development and its relationship to progress is an imprecise calculation in policy, practice, and experience” (Dinzey-Flores 166). The signs of Puerto Rico’s twentieth-century urban development and planning—including “fast roads, cable TV, the largest mall in the Caribbean...fast-food companies, investors, multinational companies, and reliable electric power”—are put up against a backdrop of high unemployment and an unpayable national debt (166). These histories of development and the ways in which the repercussions are felt in the present add important context to individual pieces from the *Shittyrobots* series, such as when the robot poses with a new cellphone or sits down to eat a Happy Meal.



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

The ubiquity of cellphones in the series—for example, in a post from September 25, 2016, of the robot standing on top of a table to snap a photo of its meal, or a post from March 12, 2018, of the robot staring down at its screen while surfing—also suggests a connection between social media-obsessed “hipster” culture and gentrification in Puerto Rico. As Marcano (2017) has written, the project to turn the neighborhood of Santurce into a creative, tourist-friendly Puerto Rican “Williamsburg” has made visible the intersections between foreign investment, development, displacement, and even street art, which is used to attract outsiders to areas that they would previously never visit (98).

The artist behind the *Shittyrobots* series has put his art in specific locations in an attempt to connect the promise of shiny symbols of progress to the ruins left behind by its failed potential. For example, an Instagram post from June 30, 2016, shows a mural at the abandoned Hotel Ponce Intercontinental of the robot dressed in a bellboy uniform but sitting on a stack of suitcases and playing on their phone. The caption reads “Minimum Wage. Minimum Effort.” (Figure 2) The hotel, also known as El Ponce, was opened in 1960 and lauded for its modern amenities but closed after only 15 years. The image and location highlight the ways in which modernity and progress are often



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

directed at foreign investors or tourists instead of being focused on those who work and live in the area. It also links the robot's "shittiness" to a lack of compensation, instead of blaming refusal to work on a design flaw or factory defect. The date of the posted photo and its caption also corresponds with effective date of PROMESA and the implementation of Section 403, which lowered the minimum wage for Puerto Ricans under 25 to \$4.25/hour for the first 90 days of employment ("PROMESA").⁴ It was announced in August 2020 that El Ponce would be reopened in 2022, with a casino, pool, and luxury suites and villas, restarting the cycle of uneven development ("Former Hotel").

⁴ In the US, this same youth minimum wage of \$4.25/hour can be paid to workers under 20 years old for the first 90 days of employment.



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022



Figure 2: @shittyrobots post from June 30, 2016

A large part of the politics behind the *Shittyrobots* series is the visual impact of a machine presumably built for work not only doing non-work activities, but actively enjoying and flaunting both play and rest. A robot fishing, gardening, skateboarding, or napping in a hammock pushes back on common ideas around leisure and its relationship to work. According to scholars Laura L. Ortiz Negrón and Anayra O. Santory Jorge (2013), conceptualizations of work and productivity in Puerto Rico have commonly structured what it means to do leisure and be leisureful (94). The common association of the label *ocioso* for poor or unemployed Puerto Ricans transforms leisure



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

into a personal or moral failing, ignoring larger socioeconomic structures and popular prejudices based in racism and classism. They write:

Este imaginario que desvaloriza el ocio y exalta de manera acrítica el trabajo, falta, además, al debido reconocimiento que tiene el ocio para la calidad de vida en el País y sus posibles contribuciones a la socialización, la elaboración de sentidos, la convivialidad, la cooperación, el desarrollo de la solidaridad, la creatividad y la crítica, entre otras capacidades humanas. (Ortiz Negrón and Santory Jorge 96)⁵

Play thus serves as a counterbalance and even a challenge to exploitative narratives of work and worth that are embedded into society; understanding leisure as productive and essential to self-growth, more than just a break to recover from the physical and mental tolls of working, is key to this critique of social alienation through labor exploitation (Blackledge 485). The *Shittyrobots* robot, who is rarely ever seen working, inhabits this critique as one that enjoys their time, prioritizes play and rest, and appears

⁵ Translation: “This imaginary that devalues leisure and exalts work in an uncritical manner also lacks the due recognition that leisure has for the quality of life in the country and its possible contributions to socialization, the elaboration of feelings, conviviality, cooperation, the development of solidarity, creativity and critique, among other human abilities.”



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

unaffected by any imposed labor/leisure binary. It should be noted that in the specific context of Puerto Rico and the Caribbean, the political potential of play juts up against colonizing and touristic fantasies. As Mimi Sheller (2004) writes, “Places to play are continually reinvented, respatialized, and remobilized through the structuring narratives of colonial histories, through the legal frameworks of postcolonial law, and through the international frameworks of neo-colonial governance” (21). However, the critiques of foreigner-focused modernity projects and the references to past and present techno-colonialisms throughout the *Shittyrobots* series grounds these moments of play and rest in opposition to touristic and ahistorical visions of Caribbean paradises.

While many of the actions performed by the *Shittyrobots* robot could be classified as play or rest, it should also be noted that they are also engaging in (and flaunting) unlawfulness. By showing the robot mugging unsuspecting tourists, consuming illegal drugs, and even meta-narrative images of the robot spray-painting walls, this imagery connects a refusal to be productive to a rejection of authority. There is also a pushback on dominant commercial or economic practices, such as when the robot is seen stealing Amazon packages from front steps or selling counterfeit watches that hang from inside its coat. Ignoring social and technological programming, these moments underscore



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

debates over who controls technology and the historical violences written into its code.

As Nakamura (2002), Benjamin (2019) and others have shown, new technologies are coded with the same racialized, gendered, colonizing, heteronormative, and ableist structures, despite the promises that technological development will bring about social advancement. This lawlessness is also extended to popular understandings of robot obedience, such as Isaac Asimov's famous laws of robotics, which claim that robots should not harm humans, should obey human orders, and should protect themselves (40). When considering the ways in which robotics, drones, and artificial intelligence are used in war and policing, it no longer seems possible for a robot to be simultaneously obedient, self-preserving, and do no harm. That a robot could be deemed "shitty" or unlawful for committing public displays of intoxication or cracking open an ATM machine highlights the fact that another robot could at that very same moment be used to drop bombs civilians from the air in a way that would be deemed legal in terms of both international law and the technology's internal coding. The commentary on the arbitrary and harmful nature of this lawful/unlawful divide is even clearer when these murals appear on the streets of Puerto Rico, where the people governed by laws and the



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

rulings passed down from the US Congress and the Financial Oversight and Management Board despite a lack of true or meaningful representation in either body.

Just as *Shittyrobots* questions the supposed link between technological and social progress, some works from the series specifically take on the harmful idea that technology could be used to create a more objective form of policing. In one example, the robot parodies the idea of artificial intelligence-based policing by dressing up for Halloween as Chappie, the police robot-turned-criminal from the 2015 film of the same name. The series' most biting critique of techno-law enforcement shows the robot playing fetch with one of Boston Dynamics BigDog machines, a canine-like robot developed for military and policing purposes (Figure 3). Despite viral propaganda videos that have shown these robots dancing or doing gymnastics in an attempt to soften their image, their brief appearance alongside the NYPD have cemented some people's fears about the further militarization of local police forces, especially as researchers have shown that AI-based policing continues to put people of color at greater risk (Scannell 2019). As the artist said, "That Boston Dynamic war robot is TERRIFYING. Painting him as an adorable puppy just seemed funny and ironic to me" ("Questions"). The Instagram post depicting this artwork features the scene of the robot



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

and BigDog playing fetch, along with a video of two more BigDogs menacingly marching forward. This juxtaposition suggests to the viewer that they shouldn't forget the original purpose of these robots, while also highlighting the fact that robots in particular and technology in general are not inherently violent or dangerous but are subject to the violent human biases and structures that are written into their programming. The technologization of policing in Puerto Rico is also intertwined with US colonialism. As Marisol LeBrón (2019) has argued, the practice of and justification for militarizing the police has bounced back and forth between the US and Puerto Rico, as ex-Governor Rosselló's "mano dura" anti-crime plan was deployed alongside increased use of military technologies among US police forces (158).⁶ While not all examples of techno-colonialism have to be as blatant as roboticized war dogs, the *Shittyrobots* series touches on these extreme images in an attempt to bring attention to the ways that narratives of technological progress can help reinforce state and colonial violences against the most vulnerable.

⁶ It should also be noted that the *Shittyrobots* Instagram account posted a photo of the robot sticking pins into an effigy of a man in a business suit and red tie on July 17, 2019, the day of massive anti-corruption protest in Old San Juan that called for Rosselló's resignation; this could be read as a message in support of the protests, a call to action, or a way of informing non-Puerto Rican Instagram followers about what was going on.



Figure 3: @shittyrobots post from February 10, 2015

The political potential of the *Shittyrobots* series is most apparent when scrolling through the few images that touch on the aftermath following Hurricane Maria. On September 23, 2017, just three days after Hurricane María first touched down on Puerto Rico, the *Shittyrobots* Instagram account posted a picture of one of its signature robot murals. Instead of the usual framing and bright colors that highlight the robot as the main character, this grimly lit photo showed the painted robot lurking in the background, with the foreground filled with fallen tree branches and wrecked building materials. The caption reads, “A bit shaken up but i’m good. It ain’t easy being a robot in the caribbean [sic]” (Figure 4). This short text forces viewers to both question what it



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

means to be a Caribbean robot and forces them to recognize the destruction of Hurricane María within a pan-Caribbean historical and sociopolitical context. Though still feeling the immediate impact of the devastating hurricane, the image of a robot overlooking the destruction can also be seen as a precursor to the ways in which post-Maria art took on issues of destruction, infrastructure, and the broken promises of progress. In her 2020 essay on “Postdisaster Futures,” political anthropologist Yarimar Bonilla argues that Hurricane Maria in uncovered the failures of the postcolonial experiment and postwar decolonization in Puerto Rico. As Bonilla writes, “This is why at present you will find more signs, slogans, and hashtags denouncing colonialism and the debt than the inefficiencies of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. It is also why you will find signs placed on crumbling infrastructure clarifying that the damage was not caused by Maria” (147-8). The essay’s accompanying images show two examples of this reflected in local street art: a light meter with a stenciled “EL DESASTRE ES LA COLONIA” (“THE DISASTER IS THE COLONY”) stenciled onto it, and a small sign with the hashtag #MaríaNoFue (#ItWasn’tMaría), marking the destruction that predated the 2017 hurricane season (Bonilla 148-9). All these examples push back on the coopting of urban art for beautification or gentrification purposes,



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

instead reframing the social and material impacts of natural disasters as objects that cannot be ignored.



Figure 4: @shittyrobots post from September 23, 2017

Another notable photo was posted on February 17, 2018, nearly seven months after the hurricane first hit Puerto Rico, and featured the robot slouching over with its eyes closed and an empty battery, waiting for a generator to bring it back to life. Much different from the usual images of the mischievous robot with a heart beating from its metal chest, this entry was accompanied by the caption “Still without power. We good on paper towels though.” (Figure 6). A reference to the failures of the recovery effort and the US’s cruel response in the months following Hurricanes María and Irma,



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

including then-President Trump's much-criticized tossing of paper towels to onlookers upon visiting Puerto Rico, the robot's reliance on a diesel generator highlights the ways in which techno-colonialism promises hyper-technological futures while neglecting those living in a present that does not meet their basic needs.⁷ Generators became a symbol of the income inequality and failed infrastructure management uncovered by Hurricane María devastation, as the rush to attain portable power sources as the electrical grid remained offline converted Puerto Rico into something of a "Generator island" (Acosta). Noxious fumes and loud noises from the generators have also made experts question the environmental and social harm done by these necessary temporary solutions (Santiago). By broadcasting these failures onto city streets and Instagram feeds, *Shittyrobots* maps this critique of utopian visions of technological progress, reminding viewers to be skeptical of presumably easy solutions that obfuscate larger social issues. This is particularly important as billionaires offer to play savior by fixing

⁷ Trump cut funding to and publicly spoke out against providing disaster aid for Puerto Rico until just before the 2020 presidential election (Blake).



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

an outdated electrical grid and foreign cryptocurrency investors attempt to take advantage of Puerto Rico's recovery.⁸



Figure 5: @shittyrobots post from February 17, 2018

The *Shittyrobots* series and other artistic responses that have explored the structural inequalities exposed by and lasting aftereffects of the 2017 hurricane season raise questions about the role of art and artists in post-María Puerto Rico. As executive director and chief curator of the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico Marianne Ramírez-Aponte (2019) writes:

⁸ For more on cryptocurrency colonialism in Puerto Rico, see: Brusi, 2018. For more on Elon Musk's attempts at green disaster capitalism, see: De Onís, 2018.



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

With the island's true situation revealed as never before, art—whose remarkable capacity for interpretation makes it a space of democratic participation—has been fundamental in creating a counternarrative, outside the ambit of officialdom, that is essential for understanding Puerto Rico after María. Artists have responded with images that not only capture the destruction caused by these meteorological events but also make visible circumstances, conditions, racial and economic legacies, and communities that have long been invisible or silent. (162)

Art has the capacity to offer extra-institutional perspectives that are essential to truly understanding the struggles, traumas, and resistances that arise from such devastation, an especially important project when supposedly objective official figures cannot be trusted.⁹ What street art adds to this equation is the ability to enact and perform politics from outside artistic institutions like museums and galleries. Recognizing that the line between street and museum art has been blurred and made porous, and that street art can be and has been commercialized both inside and outside of galleries, there remains

⁹ For an overview of the controversies over the official death count in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria, see: Méndez-Tejada, 2019.



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

in theory a freedom for the urban artist to both create what they want and engage their audience in innovative and interactive ways. *Shittyrobots*, whether it is found on canvas, concrete, or screen, pushes conversations about what politically engaged art could look like.

The relationships and interconnections established in this article—street art and digital media, art and social justice, technology and social progress, climate change and disaster capitalism, unpayable state debt and individual repercussions—are all very much in flux. While dominant narratives of technological advancement and economic development aim to decontextualize and dehistoricize the technology that surrounds us, it is essential to analyze these processes within their respective legacies and presents of techno-colonialism. Street art projects like *Shittyrobots* broadcast these social histories and politics of technology onto city walls and social media timelines, resignifying and remapping physical and virtual landscapes. The forces of and responses to techno-colonialism and its corresponding resistance in Puerto Rico are only intensifying. As the Fiscal Oversight and Management Board privatizes the electrical grid and hands it over to the Luma corporation, as protestors and police clash in response to a mega-hotel being built on an ecologically significant public beach in Carolina, as the NYPD and its



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

counterpoint in San Juan sign an agreement to bring controversial crime prevention programs and “Community Policing” to Puerto Rico, and as social media influencers immigrate to Puerto Rico to take advantage of tax breaks, understanding the role of technology in establishing and maintaining violent structures will be key to imagining freer and decolonized technological futures.

Samuel Ginsburg

Washington State University



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

Works Cited

Acosta, Deborah, Richard Fausset and Frances Robles, "Minus Electrical Grid, Puerto Rico Becomes Generator Island" *New York Times*, 7 Oct 2017.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/07/us/puerto-rico-power-generators.html>

Asimov, Isaac, "Runaround," *I, Robot*, Doubleday, 1950.

Benjamin, Ruha, *Race after Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*, Polity Press, 2019.

Berman Santana, Déborah, "Puerto Rico's Operation Bootstrap: Colonial Roots of a Persistent Model for 'Third World' Development," *Revista Geográfica*, no. 124, 1998, pp. 87-116.

Blackledge, Paul, "The Dialectics of Work and Leisure in Marx, Lukács, and Lefebvre," *The Palgrave Handbook of Leisure Theory*, edited by Karl Spracklen, Brett Lashua, Erin Sharpe, and Spencer Swain, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 473-486.

Blake, Aaron, "Trump's Puerto Rico aid reversal is very conveniently timed — for Trump" *The Washington Post*, 18 Sept 2020.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/09/18/trumps-puerto-rico-aid-reversal-is-very-conveniently-timed-trump/>



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

Bonilla, Yarimar, "Postdisaster Futures: Hopeful Pessimism, Imperial Ruination and *La futura cuir*" *Small Axe*, vol. 24, no. 2. July 2020, pp. 147-162.

Bowen, Tracey, "Reading Gestures and Reading Codes: The Visual Literacy of Graffiti as both Physical/Performative Act and Digital Information Text," *Mapping Minds*, Edited by Monika Raesch, Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2010, pp. 85-93.

Brusi, Rima, "Críptidos," *80grados*, 23 Feb 2018. <https://www.80grados.net/cryptidos/>

Burrell, Erin, "Race, Class, and Rosey the Robot: Critical Study of the Jetsons," *Popular Culture Studies Journal*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2021, pp. 25-43.

Cabán, Pedro A. "Industrial Transformation and Labour Relations in Puerto Rico: From 'Operation Bootstrap to the 1970s," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1989, pp. 559-561.

Colón-Pizzini, Bethzabeth, "On the Wings: Muralism as Feminist Political Praxis by Afro-Puerto Rican Women," *Black Resistance in the Americas*, ed. D.A. Dunkley and Stephanie Shonekan, Routledge, 2018, pp. 55-63.

Dabène, Oliver. *Street Art and Democracy in Latin America*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

De Onís, Catalina M., "Fueling and delinking from energy coloniality in Puerto Rico," *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, vol. 46, no. 5, 2018, pp. 535-560.



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

Dinzey-Flores, Zaire Z., "The Development Paradox," *NACLA – Report on the Americas*, vol. 50, no. 2, 2018, pp. 163-169.

"Former Hotel Ponce Intercontinental to Reopen Under Marriot Flag," *The Weekly Journal*, 6 Aug 2020. https://www.theweeklyjournal.com/business/former-hotel-ponce-intercontinental-to-reopen-under-marriott-flag/article_e16f47c2-d7f4-11ea-949b-4f1a2137bb04.html#:~:text=It%20is%20projected%20to%20open%20by%20March%202022.

Fusté, José I., "Repeating Islands of Debt: Historicizing the Transcolonial Relationality of Puerto Rico's Economic Crisis," *Radical History Review*, no. 128, 2017, pp. 91-119.

Kuriloff, Aaron, "Puerto Rico Defaults on Most of \$58 Million Debt Payment," *The Wall Street Journal*, 3 August 2015.

Lebrón, Marisol, *Policing Life and Death: Race, Violence and Resistance in Puerto Rico*, U of California P, 2019.



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

Marcano, Chayanne D., "'Santurce is Our Williamsburg': Analyzing the Politics of Reinvestment and Revitalization in Santurce, Puerto Rico," *The Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship Journal*, 2017, pp. 94-101.

Méndez-Tejada, Rafael, "An Analysis of Deaths Reported by Hurricane María: A Mini Review," *Journal of Scientific Research and Reports*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2019, pp. 1-6.

Muñoz Alvarado, Julieta Victoria, "Monoestrellada blanca y negra: 'No es luto, es resistencia,'" *80grados*, 25 Julio 2016. <https://www.80grados.net/monoestrellada-blanca-y-negra-no-es-luto-es-resistencia/>

Nakamura, Lisa, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*, Routledge, 2002.

Ortiz Negrón, Laura L. and Anayra O. Santory Jorge, "El ocio: apuntes sociohistóricos y desacatos teóricos para su estudio en Puerto Rico," *Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, vol. 26, 2013, pp. 80-101.

"Questions." Received by Samuel Ginsburg. 6 April 2021. Email Interview.

Quintero, Noelia. "The Screen on the Street: Convergence and Agonic Coincidences between Graffiti and New Media Objects," *Artnodes*, no. 7, 2007, pp. 1-16.

Ramírez-Aponte, Marianne, "The Importance of Politically Engages Artistic and Curatorial Practicies in The Agermath of Hurricane María," *Aftershocks of*



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm, Edited by Yarimar Bonilla and Marisol Lebrón, Haymarket Books, 2019, pp. 161-177.

Rhee, Jennifer, *The Robotic Imaginary: The Human and the Price of Dehumanized Labor*, U of Minnesota P, 2018.

Ryan, Holly Eva, *Political Street Art: Communication, culture and resistance in Latin America*, Routledge, 2016.

Santiago, Ruth, "Reflections on the Power Grid Debate, 'Generator Island' and the Telecommunications Failure in Puerto Rico" *Latino Rebels*, 15 Oct 2017.

www.latinorebels.com/2017/10/15/reflections-on-the-power-grid-debate-generator-island-and-the-telecommunications-failure-in-puerto-rico/

Scannell, R. Joshua, "This Is Not *Minority Report*: Predictive Policing and Population Racism," *Captivating Technology: Race, Carceral Technoscience, and Liberatory Imagination in Everyday Life*, edited by Ruha Benjamin, Duke UP, pp. 107-129.

Sheller, Mimi, "Demobilizing and remobilizing Caribbean paradise," *Tourism Mobilities: Places to Play, Places in Play*, edited by Mimi Sheller and John Urry, Routledge, 2004, pp. 13-21.



Volumen 13, Número 1

Spring/Primavera 2022

Shittyrobots [@shittyrobots]. Photo of mural- robot with generator. *Instagram*, 17

February 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BfUGkxPgpmt/>.

Shittyrobots [@shittyrobots]. Photo of mural- robot with fallen trees. *Instagram*, 23

September 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BZYU3Ogceu/>.

Shittyrobots [@shittyrobots]. Photo of mural- robot as bellboy. *Instagram*, 30 June, 2016,

<https://www.instagram.com/p/BHSHXvgB5fO/>.

Shittyrobots [@shittyrobots]. Photo of mural- robot selling arm. *Instagram*, 21 February

2016, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BCEBap0JFkl/>.

Shittyrobots [@shittyrobots]. Photo of mural- robot with robot dog. *Instagram*, 10

February 2015, <https://www.instagram.com/p/y8BT6fpFhG/>

Vaquer Fernández, Kadiri J., "Los muros hablan: Protest and Provocation in Puerto

Rican Feminist Muralism," *Camino Real*, vol. 12, no. 15, 2020, 153-169.

Zambrana, Rocío, *Colonial Debts: The Case of Puerto Rico*, Duke UP, 2021.