Article

“Soy La Tierra!”: Climate Justice and Anticolonial Struggle

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Josee Molavi’s film explores the unbreakable connection between a land, its people, and the spiritual world

In September 2017, Hurricane Maria ripped through the Caribbean. Of the 3,059 deaths caused by the storm, 2,975 were suffered in Puerto Rico. When the United States government dragged its feet in getting humanitarian aid to the island, it laid bare multiple historic wounds felt by the people. After winning the Spanish-American War in 1898, the United States essentially became the second colonizer of Puerto Rico. The government’s neglect and mismanagement in the immediate aftermath of Maria reanimated the specter of that exploitative relationship. Just as importantly, the hurricane was a stark reminder of the effects of global climate change—a crisis caused by the most powerful governments and corporations in the world but suffered most acutely by its most vulnerable populations.

For Robert Mukaro Borrero, a chief and human rights activist among the Taino people interviewed in the film *Soy La Tierra (I am the Land)*, Maria was a reminder of the need for the people to stay connected to the spirit world. In particular, he was reminded of the spiritual entity known as Guabancex.

Guabancex and Humanity's Spiritual Disconnection

> ***We had to sing to her. We had to engage that energy. There's only very few people nowadays who sing to the hurricanes and engage those energies. Now we see an increase in the intensity of hurricanes . . . . Now we're scared of them. In those days, we weren't.***
>
> ***—Robert Mukaro Borrero***

Guabancex is a *zemi* (spirit or deity) of chaos and transformation according to the Taino people's religion. She is known to unleash powerful storms when she is angry—but her anger can be allayed by communicating with her and by maintaining a reverent relationship between the human and spirit worlds. In the film, Borrero refers to the fury of Guabancex as one manifestation of the growing disconnection between humanity and the natural world. Climate change, seen through this lens, can be understood as both an environmental and spiritual crisis.

Filmmaker Josee Molavi uses many other voices to illustrate this idea: Po Arani, a healer and educator; Daniel Silva, an artisan and architect; student-activist Alaihia Lloret and other activists who fight to protect the land from environmental damage by private real estate developers.

The Spirit of the Land versus the Ghost of Colonialism

> ***I feel Taino. I live like a Taino in many aspects of my life. Our Indigenous cultural heritage comes transmitted—protected, I'd say; encapsulated—over 500 years after the conquest began. We have that genetic continuity in the population of Puerto Rico…Much of our culture has been transmitted as well.***
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> ***—Daniel Silva, Taino architect and artisan***

Under US rule, Puerto Rico was one of the many nonwhite populations targeted by the federal government's sterilization policies at the height of the eugenics movement. Furthermore, the US Navy used the Puerto Rican island of Culebra as a military weapon testing zone. In the 1960s and 1970s in particular, the region was subject to intense bombing and shelling. The military's abuse of the land as a testing area affected the population's quality of life, damaged the environment, and even led to accidental deaths. Luis A. Ferre, the commonwealth's governor at the time, wrote to then President Nixon, "Puerto Ricans universally see in the Culebra question an issue of colonialism." To this day, Puerto Rico is considered a territory or commonwealth of the United States. This means they do not have full representation in the US government.

Molavi's examination of the Taino's struggle directly addresses this colonial history. Pointedly, the film notes that Spanish colonizers declared the Taino "extinct" in the 1500s. But the underlying theme of Molavi's film attests to the opposite, showcasing the indomitable will of the Taino to keep their people, their culture, and the land alive.