(S1) On June 28th of 2015, the now out-going governor of Puerto Rico, Alejandro García Padilla, declared that the municipal debt of the island was unpayable. Perhaps in order to justify the need for immediate debt relief, the Governor also stated that the island was close to a “death spiral” to signal both the threat of a municipal bond default and the threat of mass-migration that would reach beyond the local economy of Puerto Rico to the larger economy of the United States. The threat was not only in the form of toxic municipal bonds, but it was also in the form of waves of migrants that were considered unpalatable in the current political climate.

This is an argument based on premises that could have been lifted from Achille Mbembe’s article “Necropolitics.” In that essay, Mbembe argues that we live in a post-human sustained state of exception, where unpayable debt unties the social bonds and undermines the status of whole populations, which in turn can be disposed of as mere slaves, pawns, or [defaulting] clients by a sovereign state with the right to kill. Mbeme’s necrotic argument turns on the cruel objectification of subjects and on the fetishization of their unpayable debt by vulture-like subjects whose sovereignty (or right to kill) is guaranteed and maintained by a so-called naturalized state of exception.

The characterization of Puerto Rico’s debt has undergone mutation in legal circles, particularly by Natasha Lycia Ora Bannan an Associate Counsel at Latino Justice for the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. In her article titled “Puerto Rico’s Odious Debt: The Economic Crisis of Colonialism,” she resuscitates an old doctrine that dates back to the Spanish
American War, whereby “debt accumulated by an odious regime [in that case Spain] that burdens rather than benefits the people of that nation should not be repaid.” In essence, she turns this dogma of the United States, which forgave the debt claimed by Spain for the management of its colonies, against the United States. She argues that the latter is a mere extension of the former Empire, and that the current debt is similarly an extension of an odious debt that goes back to 1493. She concludes that justice requires two seemingly contradictory actions from the United States. First, it must forgive the odious debt. And second, it must grant sovereignty to Puerto Rico because only a sovereign island can remedy its debt. Like Mbembe before her, Ora Bannan naturalizes the condition of what I will call necrotic sovereign debt. She reifies sovereign subjects who are in a position to mercifully forgive the abject debt of people who are reduced to objects.

(S2) Puerto Rican writer Eduardo Lalo drives home the point of the ambiguity of what I will call apo(p)totic debt in several of his books including Los países invisibles (2008), and most recently Necrópolis (2014). More precisely, I will argue that writing for Lalo, is a form of maternal erosicism understood by the French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva as a form of apo(p)totosis. (S3) Apo(p)totosis is a technical term from cell biology opposed to necrosis. Lalo’s apo(p)totic writing redefines and reconfigures debt. It helps to overcome what I will call the necrotic reaction to the Puerto Rican debt or the claim that the debt is not only unpayable, but that it is in fact odious and abject. The corollaries of this reaction are that such debt must be forgiven and that the unpayable debt is a necessary condition for Puerto Rican sovereignty.

Kristeva defines maternal erosicism as a condition which both embodies the cellular process of apo(p)totosis and refuses to collapse in its face. In other words, maternal erosicism insists on holding on to apo(p)totosis until the end of life. She defines apo(p)totosis as “the natural,
regulatory death of cells, which shapes or sculpts the living body…a process that begins with life at conception, indicating the originarity of the negative.”

To analyze apo(p)totic debt in the writings of Lalo, I also draw from Nietzsche’s definition of pregnancy as an illness. According to Nietzsche, pregnancy, poetry and philosophy bear witness to the bodily faculties at the origin of our social practices. Specifically, for him eating and purging are at the origins of our primary faculties of oblivion, forgetting and memory. We become animals that can make promises, and thereby civilized, by chewing the cud like cows. For Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, to be pregnant with future is to overcome the illusion that both our economic transactions, and the justice systems that enforce them, are disembodied ideals, and to realize instead that our economic and judicial systems are extensions of our bad conscience, a defensive mechanism that turns inwards our tendency to preserve at all costs our so-called humanity, and to deny the vexed animal origins of our social practices.

Lalo’s writing, understood as Kristevan maternal eroticism or as Nietszchean pregnancy, is an antidote to necrotic sovereign debt. Lalo’s Los países invisibles is a critical response to an earlier moment of the Puerto Rican crisis when the debt amounted to 42 billion dollars in 2005. Rather than continuing to deny the economic crisis, Lalo takes a tour of the abandoned and unincorporated territory, and practices a form of negative and sensory writing that can be traced back to Nietzsche. Lalo’s writing is open to the sights, to the smells, and to the tastes of his decaying surroundings even as he transvaluates them. Lalo makes several references to Nietzsche’s Twilight of the Idols in Los países invisibles. One reference is to his famous quote whether “wisdom appears perhaps on the earth as a vulture who is inspired by the smell of carrion.” He quotes Nietzsche after eating the “trash-fast-food” that is served everywhere on the
island. He philosophizes that one can glean the meaning of life from this inedible food, rather than from the so-called modern malls and walk-ups that line both sides of the Interstate.

Close to the end of the book, while sitting at the counter of a famous eating establishment in Old San Juan, Lalo writes that he notices an old woman, rail thin, next to him who reminds him of his mother. The woman sits quietly next to him as Lalo, on a strict budget, waits for a meager meal of bread and water. The waiter summarily ignores him but serves the woman a cup of coffee without waiting for her to ask. The woman defends the “irresponsible” waiter against Lalo by quietly helping with the place settings. The scene is an epiphany. For Lalo, the emaciated woman is pregnant with a Nietzschean future: “Siento, por un instante, que puedo percibir igual que ella esa inevitabilidad de la vida que sabe que no tiene futuro…Desde el fin, en espera del fin. Me emociona esa mujer que es ya solo huesos y un hilo de voz. Esa mujer que puede permitirse cualquier cosa.” She turns necrotic sovereign debt into apo(p)totis or the debt of life as a form of uncanny hold.

(S4) In his book Necrópolis, Lalo elaborates the uncanny maternal hold at the center of apo(p)totis into three stages, which I will call poetic apo(p)tosis. Cellular apo(p)tosis is characterized by a first phase of shrinking, when the chromatin condenses; by a second phase of blebbing, or mitosis, when the nucleus begins to break apart and the DNA breaks into small pieces not unlike single-cell reproduction; and finally by a third phase of phagocytosis, where the apo(p)totic bodies are ingested by means of the local unfolding of the cellular membrane. Unlike cellular necrosis, cellular apo(p)tosis is characterized by organelles that remain functional throughout their deconstruction until their incorporation into a new body. The classic example of cellular apo(p)tosis happens in the womb when our budding webbed appendages gradually become hands and feet with fingers and toes. (S 5,6,7)
The poem “He conocido el universo” is an example of the stage of shrinkage and condensation in *poetic apo(p)tosis*. (S8) Like many of the poems of *Necrópolis*, “He conocido el universo” is characterized by an absence of all punctuation marks. But here, the typographical differences are reduced to only one, the capital letter that begins the four-verse poem. Also similar to other poems in *Necrópolis*, “He conocido el universo” relies on apophasis, inversion, paradox, and dark humor for the twist that reduces its grandiose original claim to the humble feet of the poetic voice. (S9) A drawing that comes earlier in the book could be its companion piece. It has three main biomorphic figures: on top, one large open eye with what appear to be eyelashes; in the middle, a cell-like form, made up of many smaller circles with dots in their center resembling eyes with pupils; and off to the bottom left, a shrunken version of this form. The larger form floats in front of what appears to be a diffuse hole and radiates thin lines that reach both the larger eye and also its shrunken version. The composition leaves an impression in the reader similar to that of the poem: the disorienting sense that we are held in a process of condensation or shrinkage that is the first stage of *poetic apo(p)tosis*.

(S10) The poem “Papel del donde donde” is a reference to another book by Lalo (*Donde*, 2005), and like that book it refers to an uncanny place of origin, marked by absence and negation. It is a poem about an in-definite place (donde) where the word (donde) is not spoken but where its place of in-definition never the less exists. This indefinite place is associated with the page: a place that both is and is not the place of birth: “que es y no es el lugar / que te parió.” The poem simulates the second stage in apo(p)tosis: the stage of blebbing, or mitosis. This displacement or reproduction is dramatized in the second strophe that repeats and mutates the meaning of the first “donde” into an “attractive scar of origins” compared to “stars and molecules”, and to a displaced place that we always hope to reach. (S11) Lalo illustrates this
second stage of *poetic apo(p)rosis* in a drawing that repeats the uncanny amoeba-like forms, here reduced to only two and in a state of blebbing, mitosis, or displacement. The two forms resemble two open eyes that stare back at the reader like a mirror, tipped on its side. They also resemble the process of cellular reproduction that generates a duplicate cell. The straight lines of the black frame suggest a death notice, but the busy lines that saturate the drawing give the form a strange life, a movement and vibration, that simulates the busy interaction and perhaps the displacement of two cellular bodies.

(S12) The poem “Necrópolis” turns books, pages and ink into dis-counted organic material (animal backs and ribs in butcher shops), all of which is nevertheless valuable to the poetic subject. He carries their weight wherever he goes, and returns to them over and over again. The poetic subject identifies with a composite of the Nietzschean vulture and cow: “Mastico palabras que son versos capítulos convertidos en / pedazos de cadáveres.” The image describes the reader as an animal chewing living words that have been turned by *others* into dead matter. The metaphor of the reader as an animal who chews words that have been digested and transformed by others resembles the third stage of cellular apo(p)rosis: phagocytosis, or the incorporation of organic material that already has been decomposed into a new body. *Poetic apo(p)rosis* is the negative of the inclination to map, to describe and to quickly write everything out, which Lalo compares to poetic metastasis, or the voracious consumption of cancerous cells in the poem “Occidente”. (S13) The incorporation and transformation of this third stage of *poetic apo(p)rosis* is illustrated by the companion drawing to the poem “Necrópolis”. It shows a composite and amoebic figure drawn with nervous and rapid strokes of a pen that is constricted (again) by a black ribbon similar to the black frame of a death notice. Despite its frame, however, the figure appears to be full of life, and communicates an intense energy. It also creates the
outlines of a form with an open mouth that appears to be incorporating or abjecting minuscule versions of itself.

(S14) Lalo’s writing represents poetic apo(p)tosis as an antidote to our inclination to reduce our relations to others to necrotic sovereign debt, to a debt that is calculable and that must be cancelled, either payed or declared unpayable by sovereign subjects. Lalo’s writing instead suggests redefining debt as apo(p)totic debt, which is far from sovereign, and which is based on relations that are as asymmetrical as they are incalculable. Lalo does not just take the long view of 500 years to refer to Puerto Rican debt. He also takes the cellular view. (S15) This is the view of the other that is both inside and outside ourselves. We can benefit from Lalo’s poetic apo(p)tosis to redefine debt as our vexed relation to our uncanny material.

(S16) Whether you are from the island or not, we are all touched in one way or another by its 72 billion dollar municipal debt. Like many of you, I am affected by the broad economic, social, political, historical and psychological consequences of Puerto Rico’s debt. But I am also touched by Puerto Rico’s debt in a more narrow and personal way. It is, literally, my inheritance after the death of my mother earlier this year. As such, my comments today are inflected in ways that I cannot fully understand or anticipate. What is clear to me, though, is that debt is neither merely un-payable nor simply odious. Debt is not necrotic or sovereign. Debt is our inheritance. And like all gifts, debt is both toxic and life-giving, it is apo(p)totic. Perhaps Puerto Rico’s debt crisis offers us another opportunity to understand this paradox.
Works Cited


