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*Energy Islands: Metaphors of Power, Extractivism, and
Justice in Puerto Rico* by Catalina M. de Onís (review)

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BOOK REVIEW

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

By Catalina M. de Onís. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2021; pp xvii + 278. \$85.00 hardcover; \$29.95 paperback; \$29.95 ebook.

As we write this, California is being ravaged by the second worst wildfire in its history (Dixie) and our fellow Utahns have experienced some of the world's worst air quality due, in part, to the smoke traveling east from the Dixie and other fires in the west. These consequences are just a few of the many ways in which the ongoing climate crisis is a threat multiplier: worsening extreme weather, droughts, wildfires, and, most significantly, the disproportionate inequities historically marginalized peoples experience as a result of the chaos resulting from human-caused climate change. The climate crisis is here; actions to justly and equitably transition away from fossil fuels are crucial. Although the climate crisis acts as only one backdrop to *Energy Islands: Metaphors of Power, Extractivism, and Justice in Puerto Rico*, Catalina de Onís's book turns our attention to the significant but often less visible role of energy systems not only in the climate crisis but also in what she terms *energy coloniality*, or systems of power that maintain *energy privilege* for some and perpetuate energy injustices for many.

Energy Islands enacts a decolonial approach to offer a deep and rich analysis of dominant and resistive discourse about energy politics in Puerto Rico. De Onís highlights the importance of a just transition away from fossil-fuel based energy toward centering decarbonization, decentralization, democratization, and decolonization. She argues that *energy actors* can create decolonial energy futures that support the intertwined wellbeing of people and the planet. De Onís's book "documents, assembles, and evaluates various discourses, narratives, naming practices, and metaphors" to research "the rhetorical efforts of energy actors [in Puerto Rico], particularly by drawing critical inspiration from individuals and groups communicating more sustainable existences."¹ In a rhetorical version of an energy ethnography, the book documents the metaphors that circulate in the discourse of both privileged and marginalized energy stakeholders.

Energy Islands is a brilliant example of community-engaged rhetorical fieldwork that makes a difference in scholarly conversations and in ongoing energy transition. In addition to being theoretically keen and methodologically innovative, the book highlights the stories of successful energy justice practitioners in Puerto Rico and documents de Onís's extensive contributions as a scholar-activist to energy politics in Puerto Rico. The book makes significant contributions to conversations in rhetorical methods, decolonial rhetorics, environmental and energy communication, and Latinx rhetorics. It also makes important contributions to interdisciplinary energy studies, energy humanities, environmental justice, and Puerto Rican studies, demonstrating the importance of rhetorical energies in any analysis of Puerto Rico's energy past, present, and future.

The introduction outlines the book's theoretical, methodological, and political commitments. Specifically, de Onís theorizes *archipelagoes of power* "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."² The archipelagos of power heuristic developed in the book robustly theorizes power vis-à-vis the various rhetorical energies and metaphors that animate resistance to colonial formations. In doing so, de Onís challenges normative definitions of energy as technology and contributes to ongoing theorization of rhetoric as energy. She writes: "this book seeks to convey capacious understandings of energy beyond a narrow focus on powering individual dwellings and workplaces, by addressing and amplifying the human energies required to create and challenge energy infrastructures and technologies."³ Subsequent chapters focus on particular metaphors in this archipelago of power that enable and constrain energy justice.

The main chapters of the book are interspersed with "Routes/Roots/Raíces," interludes that focus on positionality, methodology, and narratives. The first interlude tells the story of de Onís's familial connections to islands and Puerto Rico and seeks to break down binaries between conquest and resistance and colonizer and colonized.

In chapter one, de Onís lays out four key concepts in Puerto Rico's archipelago of power: energy coloniality, energy privilege, energy justice, and energy actors. These constitute a rhetorical matrix "that provides a vocabulary for studying and communicating different energy controversies in Puerto Rico and Beyond."⁴ Energy coloniality is a major theoretical contribution; though related to forms of resource colonialism, it hones in on the importance of energy technologies to relations of power within colonial systems. Another

valuable contribution is the introduction of *energy actors*—a term used by one of her colaboradores—as a frame for understanding Puerto Ricans’ agency in energy politics.

In the second interlude, de Onís narrates her encounter with the Commonwealth Oil Refining Company (CORCO) on Puerto Rico’s southern coastline (between Ponce and Mayagüez) as an early example of energy coloniality. She links the closure of the refinery and its lingering economic and environmental impacts with an art installation created out of the abandoned remnants.

Chapter two traces colonial relations between the U.S. and Puerto Rico by focusing on metaphors of experimentation—“discourses of defense, disease, development, and disaster”—grounded in, and reinforcing, a view of expendability.⁵ The legacy of, and ongoing struggles under, experimentation are linked to embodied experiences, emplaced politics, and exigencies for resistance. De Onís concludes the chapter by documenting historical resistance to experimentation discourses while also highlighting how contemporary organizations like Casa Pueblo and Coqui Solar appropriate experimentation metaphors to refuse domination and enact transformations towards more just and equitable futures.

Chapter three focuses on spatial metaphors related to methane gas (counter-)advocacy. De Onís focuses on the Via Verde Gasoducto Project and Aguirre Offshore Gas Port, both of which have since been defeated by energy actors. These resistances occurred prior to and during de Onís’s fieldwork and are introduced into her fieldwork via colaboradores’ reflections and de Onís’s emplacement. While proponents framed the projects as ostensibly cleaner fossil fuels serving as supposed bridges towards technological change, resistive energy actors used “tropes of way, path, expansion, and hub [to offer] an alternative focus.”⁶ The chapter highlights how energy actors can successfully resist energy coloniality and energy privilege, including by appropriating metaphors to open new ways of thinking.

In the third interlude, de Onís shares how she grappled with writing about Puerto Rico as a member of the diaspora living at a distance. She argues that critical reflexivity about power relations, engaging collaboratively, admitting mistakes, and making amends are necessary to avoid replicating oppressive dynamics while performing much needed critical research.

Chapter four offers a significant methodological intervention. De Onís conceptualizes the need to (*re*)wire one’s alliances, preconceptions, and dispositions in the context of a place experiencing “extreme shocks [e.g.,

Hurricanes Maria and Irma] with already ongoing everyday stressors.”⁷ This (re)wiring is vital for successful coalitions among diverse actors to constitute a decolonial archipelago of power that can span across geographic locations and cultures. De Onís extends co-presence⁸ to “offer *e-advocacy* as both a concept and a practice for working coalitionally in electronic spaces.”⁹ The family of islands trope, she argues, holds promise in conceptualizing coalitions that span across geopolitical bodies.

The final interlude articulates the interlinkages between mangrove habitats, historic Afro-Caribbean resistance, and ongoing community organizing based on *convivencia*. This interlude illustrates the value of archipelagos of power as an analytic to cut across time, species, art, and activism to compose a nuanced understanding of resistance in Puerto Rico.

Building from energy coloniality, energy privilege, energy justice, energy actors, archipelagos of power, rhetorical energies, and the metaphors developed across the chapters, de Onís uses the conclusion to discuss the “four *d*’s of energy justice.”¹⁰ Decarbonizing, decentralizing, democratizing, and decolonizing, she argues, are key components of delinking from energy coloniality and enabling energy justice.

Energy Islands’ foremost contribution is *archipelagos of power*, a theoretically rich heuristic that can energize and empower future analyses of energy politics, energy coloniality, and energy justice. The heuristic accounts for the uniqueness of Puerto Rico as an island and archipelagic formation in the Antilles but also exceeds a potentially limiting focus on Puerto Rico. Building from Tiara Na’puti’s foundational work on archipelagic rhetoric,¹¹ de Onís’s *archipelagoes of power* can be used to analyze relational/technological energies across a variety of sites of energy struggle. This heuristic enhances the field of rhetoric’s ability to engage with and sustain research that begins with the affordances of thinking archipelagically.

Energy Islands is an exemplar of rhetorical fieldwork. De Onís seamlessly integrates textual analysis, interviews, ethnographic participation, *e-advocacy*, and critical self-reflexivity into a masterful documentation and amplification of energy actors, including herself, making meaningful change in Puerto Rico. The most explicit contribution to rhetorical fieldwork is the development of *e-advocacy* as a mode of sustaining ethical and political commitments and contributions when one cannot remain perpetually emplaced in the field. In a pivotal moment, de Onís narrates her hesitancy about writing this book due to concerns about speaking for *colaboradores* from the perspective of a diasporic Puerto Rican living in the U.S. and her ethical commitment to

supporting Puerto Rican people in telling their own stories. This and other moments exemplify how de Onís models an ethical, participatory, and community-based methodology that puts care for the community first and challenges extractive models of research. Rhetorical scholars, even those who do not use fieldwork, would benefit from the methodological approach modelled in this book, as it can urge the field rethink dominant norms about the goals of publication, research, and advocacy.

Energy Islands is provocative, suggesting future possibilities for research at the intersections of energy, race, and technology. It offers a substantial contribution by presenting a heterogeneous, complex, and nuanced picture of power relations in Puerto Rico. The book challenges homogenous generalizations about Puerto Rico by tracing how colonizer/colonized, north/south, privileged/underprivileged, and mainland/island relations work within Puerto Rico, not just between Puerto Rico and the U.S.; de Onís's analysis engages inequities within Puerto Rico based on, for example, class, location, race, and access to governmental power. Scholars seeking to expand on de Onís's research might consider, for example, how Blackness, stemming from Afro-Caribbean roots, relates to resistive energies in the archipelago; how inter-Island and inter-archipelago race relations relate to energy coloniality and energy justice; and how racial formations intersect with colonial formations. Furthermore, tracing the material forces that energy technologies themselves have in Puerto Rican energy politics would expand de Onís's focus on the rhetorical energies of decolonial energy actors.

Energy Islands is a significant offering to rhetoric and public address scholars. It demonstrates how energy (in)justice is rhetorically constituted through the rhetorical energies of many actors and positions analysis of discourses of just transition, climate justice, and energy colonialism as central to rhetorical studies. In a world that is already suffering from the inequitable impacts of climate change, this book highlights the ongoing relevance of rhetorical scholarship to meaningfully addressing the climate crisis amid intersecting political instabilities, economic pressures, and coloniality. *Energy Islands* is essential reading for scholars across the broad field of rhetorical studies not only because of what it contributes to our understanding of

rhetorical energy but also for how it demonstrates that rhetorical scholarship matters in creating a more just and equitable world.

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NOTES

1. Catalina M. de Onís, *Energy Islands: Metaphors of Power, Extractivism, and Justice in Puerto Rico* (University of California Press, 2021): 3, 153.
2. de Onís, *Energy Islands*, 13.
3. de Onís, *Energy Islands*, 4.
4. de Onís, *Energy Islands*, 60.
5. de Onís, *Energy Islands*, 72.
6. de Onís, *Energy Islands*, 98.
7. de Onís, *Energy Islands*, 135.
8. Phaedra C. Pezzullo, *Toxic Tourism: Rhetorics of Pollution, Travel, and Environmental Justice* (University of Alabama Press, 2007).
9. de Onís, *Energy Islands*, 131.
10. de Onís, *Energy Islands*, 153.
11. Tiara R. Na'puti, "Archipelagic Rhetoric: Remapping the Marianas and Challenging Militarization from 'A Stirring Place,'" *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 16, no. 1 (2019): 4–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2019.1572905>.