

The Breach 301: How and Why Trump Is Screwing Over Puerto Rico

- Lindsay: Welcome to the first episode of season three of The Breach, your deep dive into authoritarianism and corruption in the era of Trump. I'm your host Lindsay Beyerstein and my guest today is Dr. Adia Benton, who's here to talk about the Trump administration's response to Puerto Rico where nearly half the island's 3.4 million American citizens still lack access to clean water 17 days after hurricane Maria made land fall, a potentially life-threatening situation. Adia's a medical anthropologist, and a professor of anthropology at Northwestern University. She studies global health, bio medicine, development, and humanitarianism and she blogs at ethnography911.org. Adia, welcome to the program.
- Dr. Benton: Thanks for having me.
- Lindsay: If you were to give a letter grade to the US government's response to hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, what would it be?
- Dr. Benton: Wow, I'm really grade agnostic but I think I would guess maybe a D. Residents probably think an F is what I would guess.
- Lindsay: And what are the ways in which they fell short?
- Dr. Benton: Well, from my understanding, so I should begin by saying I'm not a Puerto Rico expert but have lots of anthropologists, friends and colleagues who do follow what's going on in Puerto Rico for family reasons, and so I've been watching very closely, and I think what seems to have gone wrong was the preparation. So, knowing much about the path of the storm and all of these things and what people would actually need and the impacts particularly on islands, one needed to think about food, water, and certainly shelter and all of these other water and sanitation issues. So where the US fell short was in actually using the foresight that they had to plan properly for people to sustain their lives.
- Lindsay: And what are some of the special challenges that Puerto Rico had in terms of a disaster response?
- Dr. Benton: So it seems to me that when you're an island, and when you're a colonial island which most of my friends want me to always emphasize when you're a colonial island you're dealing with many of the restrictions and challenges of being a part of the US without some of the benefits, and so we're talking about whether ports are open, how things move from ports inland to different cities and towns, we're talking about infrastructure problems that preceded the storm, so one of the problems that Puerto Rico had was its really deep debt, actually a debt crisis, and usually under these kinds of crisis situations infrastructure is failing, poor, in disrepair and so we have this problem with the electric grids, we have this problem with telephone lines and communications, so those are some of the problems and then we have these health problems, Puerto Rico is a sort of tropical island and so one of the things I think people are concerned about are water borne illnesses, the failure of hospitals to actually generate power and to keep people alive and mosquito borne illnesses which are quite prevalent on the island so ones like

dengue, zika, chikungunya.

Lindsay: The last time I checked the stats on the government website it said that 50% of Puerto Ricans have access to drinking water, what does that mean in practice? Does that mean 50% are somewhere near where they're handing out water or what?

Dr. Benton: That's a really great question. And I think the other question that you want to ask is not only are they close to it but do they have enough of it, right? So one of the standards in humanitarian emergencies, there are these things called spear standards that are supposed to be sort of the bare minimum that people need to survive on a day to day basis. I haven't looked at the spear standards in a while but it used to be that you needed five gallons per person per day to be able to carry on sort of the basic functions of day to day living. And so I'm seeing people handing out tiny water bottles, I'm not sure what that actually means. I do know that the navy has the capacity to pump water out of areas and then filter it and send it back. So that's a really great question, water access may also mean 50% of the population is within a certain distance of a water point.

Lindsay: And how are they actually handing out, do you have to go and physically stand in line is what I'm saying? Because that seems to be what I'm reading. Because I'm concerned that maybe people who are already disadvantaged whether they be really young or really old or have some kind of disability might be falling through the cracks?

Dr. Benton: And that actually is a concern. I've heard that people have to stand in line. I'm not sure, I'm sure that's a regional difference, right?

Lindsay: Yeah.

Dr. Benton: I'm sure people who are very close to ports and very close to the big city, close to San Juan are fine. Or by fine I mean maybe have better access points. I mean I do know that people are standing in line for gasoline and by the time they actually get to the front of the line you've run out. And so there's probably a triaging process for that kind of thing. It's really hard to know, I feel like what I've seen and what I've heard is that up until a few days ago people were at crisis points for most of the things that they need. So it was lucky that people were actually able to leave once the airports were taking people in and out which was another challenge actually.

Lindsay: Can you elaborate on what happens medically speaking when a population loses access to clean water?

Dr. Benton: Yeah so I was actually on the CDC's website just to see if they've been able to collect data. But usually what happens is diseases that are already endemic, so diseases that are already making people sick, outside of a crisis, tend to ramp up in some ways. So in Puerto Rico, there had been hepatitis A outbreaks, there have been Typhoid outbreaks, that's a drinking water problem. And so under these kinds of circumstances those are the kinds of sort of water and sanitation concerns that people might have. One of my friends was telling me that her mother said they were seeing more conjunctivitis, so more pink eye essentially, and so they were trying to figure out if that's something that's

fairly common, and it is and it's in these situations where you don't have a lot of access to water to wash your hands and sort of a hygiene issue. So it starts to spread much more rapidly in these kinds of conditions. So I'd be worried about diarrheal diseases like Typhoid and Hepatitis A and the mosquito borne ones because those, obviously when you have those breeding grounds all this water you're also going to have a sort of uptick, in sort of inadequate shelter you're gonna have these uptick in these mosquito borne illnesses.

And like I said, Dengue's very serious and so it's not simply just sort of the public health stuff, there's also the treatment part. So if hospitals don't have ready access to water how are they going to perform surgeries, minor or otherwise. Births, deliveries, labor and delivery is going to be compromised, so there are a whole bunch of things, cleaning sheets and mopping floors requires all of these things. Maintaining a basic sanitary setting is going to be quite difficult under these circumstances.

Lindsay: How are people with chronic illness coping if they have to go for, say, dialysis?

Dr. Benton: Yeah so if you don't have, if you don't have enough electricity. So that, I read a story or I actually saw a report about a hospital that was, they were doing surgeries, they had sort of enough power and then their generators ran out. They ran out of fuel. Their power went out, the generators had run out of fuel so they had no way of actually doing things like dialysis. They can't do, I mean you have to also think about people who have diabetes who have to monitor their sugar, the kinds of monitors they use, the needles, it's like a whole scale, people who are probably on a chemotherapy. So I don't typically talk about people like Pitbull when I'm talking about humanitarian relief, but Pitbull was actually known, he took a bunch of cancer patients, he sent a private jet to pick up cancer patients so that they could come and do their treatments. So yeah, I think basically when hospitals have little access to those sort of basic infrastructural things, they can't do their work. So of course there are a whole range of chronic illnesses that requires ongoing monitoring and if the kits aren't there and the electricity isn't there and all of that other stuff it just sort of destabilizes the health situation in a place.

Lindsay: If you've got potentially millions of people who don't have potable water still, are those people, is it a life and death emergency for a lot of those people, or some percentage of them still?

Dr. Benton: I mean I would say yeah, think of all the things you can't do with that water, you need it to live, you need to drink it, you need to bathe in it. It's an unfortunate thing, like I said it sounds like the navy is trying to help that situation and in fact that is one of the capacities of US armed forces. I've been thinking a lot about the fact that there are all of these bases on Puerto Rico like military bases on Puerto Rico but those weren't immediately useful if I'm gonna take Trump's word for it – weren't immediately useful for deploying aid. And so that's another thing that I think is a part of this kind of strange colonial relationship between Puerto Rico and the main land is how these places become staging grounds for all kinds of managing strategic risks except for the place where they're actually based. So I had this interesting conversation once with this guy was driving me around Philadelphia and he said you know what? I work for the military and he worked in the former Yugoslavia and he was talking about, he says and I had told

him about the Ebola outbreak.

And he said you know, when the US military says that it can't do something, it's lying. You know we can create whole new water systems in places. We can sit down, purify water, we can build shelter we can do this we can do that. You know, when you hear that that is not possible in a certain amount of time they're lying, it's because they don't want to do it. And I'm ... that's the sense that I get from this kind of situation which is that there's military capacity but there's not the political will to deploy those at the capacity to which they can actually work.

Lindsay: I mean the numbers last I looked at them today are really striking the difference is there have been 14000 people deployed according to the government website for Puerto Rico compared to 31000 for Harvey and 40000 for Irma.

Dr. Benton: Hmm, that's telling. And I'm not even sure what it's telling me except ... except that it probably says something about the value of lives and how those are kind of ascribed to certain people and not others. And the Puerto Rico situation sounds pretty dire to me still. There are quite a few grass roots organizations working in fact that was the only sort of good list that I could get. I was not sure what the US government was doing with those people that they deployed which I think is a really important point and again if I go back to the Ebola outbreak you know US promised 3000 troops and what I learned over time is that those 3000 troops were not providing health care, they were trying to minimize their risk, they were building facilities that ultimately weren't used, and so I would wonder not just -- sheer numbers tell me so little if I don't know what it is that they're trying to do, what their strategic objectives are for trying to make life livable for people who had to remain on the island.

Lindsay: General Honore who headed up the relief efforts after Katrina said that he would have put 50000 men on the ground in Puerto Rico if it were up to him.

Dr. Benton: Wow. So I think that's ... I think that does tell you something. Because Katrina wasn't a success either right?

Lindsay: No.

Dr. Benton: And I mean hindsight is 20/20. But Honore has actually been pretty outspoken as you know, and I think he actually hit the nail on the head by talking about this colonial relationship. I also thought it was very interesting given his own positioning as I think he's from Louisiana, if I'm not mistaken, and identifies as an African American Creole person which is, so I'll step back a second and say why I think it's interesting. One of the big debates, sort of rhetorical debates going on is whether you should be talking about Katrina and Puerto Rico at the same time or this, the Caribbean and New Orleans at the same way. And many scholars of the region say absolutely yes, these are entangled geographies. These are places that have shared history in terms of how they've been positioned as, in the colonial era.

And so for him to kind of point out that hey this is a situation in which the sort of I guess the lower status of people living in these coasts in the gulf or in the Caribbean sea have

a particular shared relationship of being devalued in this sort of global brotherhood of sovereign states. Puerto Rico is obviously not a sovereign state. And neither is New Orleans, but there's certainly a connection and it's ongoing and it's a long one that sort of has a long history.

Lindsay: That's a really interesting point, you're saying it's a debate, there are some people saying that they shouldn't be spoken of together, what kind of arguments are they advancing?

Dr. Benton: Well some of it's like well, New Orleans or Louisiana or that Gulf Coast is in the states, it's on the main land, it doesn't have the same kind of history, it doesn't have the same problems. Or it doesn't have the same relationship. And so in terms of sovereignty that may be true, but the way slavery native movements and genocide, all of those things are all connected, the French, the Spanish and the English kind of colonial legacies persist in those places. And so, I think there's also something about kind of Gulf areas and islands that share, I guess they're trying to say that there's a movement of capital and people has been kind of happening for the same time. But yes the people against are saying these are different places with different populations, the relationships are very different.

And I find that they probably have more in common than we'd like to think. It's a hard debate to have because ultimately what ends up happening is people wanted to kind of rank them in significance whereas I think thinking them together and thinking about what they tell about the history of the region, what they tell about the politics what they tell about the potential to intervene in these kinds of crisis is important.

Lindsay: It just seems that they're, even if you don't take into account the shared history and geography they've got something in common which is official neglect.

Dr. Benton: Yes. That's a brilliant way to say it, my friend Yarimar Bonilla who's a Puerto Rican anthropologist and kind of political historian, she talked about this as the archipelago of neglect. All these sort of spots of where people just don't care. And the crisis is when it really shows its face. So these situations have been happening, they've been ongoing, the crumbling infrastructure, the debt all of those things have been happening for a while. And so in some ways Puerto Rico's been in sort of I think, I can't remember the guy's name, the reporter from CBS I think, when he talks about this endless emergency he's talking about Maria but people who were observers of the region are calling it the endless emergency that's basically been going on for decades.

So disaster study scholars or critical disaster study scholars are quick to point out that existing inequalities and rifts are intensified in crisis like these where infrastructure is destroyed, where access to basic necessities is limited.

Lindsay: And Puerto Rico like the rest of the United States has some very glaring inequities.

Dr. Benton: Absolutely. I think you could see it in who was able to rebound quickly. Who didn't ...

Lindsay: But Trump could go to that Evangelical church and throw his towels like footballs.

Dr. Benton: I still don't get that, the image of that is in my head and he was doing this sort of basketball thing, it was pretty sad. And there were people who were very happy to take video and smile with him. And those are probably the people who rebounded quickly.

Lindsay: I mean the weirdest part about that was the story that said that Trump was about to throw tins of chicken into the crowd before the crowd was like no man, I don't think that's very safe. Our lives matter, remember.

Dr. Benton: Lives matter, please don't kill us with a can of chicken. Please tell me, were they whole chickens or were they just sort of shredded chicken, do you know?

Lindsay: I don't know, they were like, they were ... I think they were sort of spam like meat tins.

Dr. Benton: Oh nice.

Lindsay: Like throwing a can of tomatoes into the crowd, not super safe.

Dr. Benton: Imagine that Twitter storm. I'm a little bit depressed about what's going on. So it's been a really, it's actually been a really difficult time watching all of this unfold. I've been kind of watching from behind my hands just sort of ... I just cannot fully, fully invest because it's every day there's something else. And this was one of those crisis I think could have been, I won't say it could have been averted but certainly there could have been a way to dull the impact and it's remarkable how long it took for that response. Again, knowing full well that it was going to hit. We didn't mention the Virgin Islands, right?

So there's also that. I'd say a good number, and you know I was thinking a lot about this military issue, so many Puerto Ricans, so many people who were from the Virgin Islands serve in the military with what kind of rights as citizens? So those are the things that I think about too, all of these ways in which people sacrifice for the country and the ways that their citizenship is somehow second class. In literal terms. Puerto Rico they don't have to vote, they don't have congress, representation in the same way, right?

Lindsay: Do you feel like there's this terrifying disconnect between the tone and the media that before Trump's visit the media seemed to be taking very seriously the fact this was a life and death issue and then Trump showed up and the mass shooting happened and now it seems like the tone has just relaxed completely even though the official statistics are telling us some really dire things.

Dr. Benton: Hmm that's interesting I hadn't ... though you know so there's a little bit of political theater. So one thing that I remember about Katrina and I think was this whole idea of going there, because the going there is part of the, I mean I hate to call it political theater but that's what it is, it's performative, it's supposed to be about intimacy and witnessing and Trump finally got there which I think is, we're operating at we're bare minimum presidential behavior. Is like okay now we're at this point where we're like well at least he didn't press a button that set off a nuclear war. And so I would actually say I think part of it is that he actually did those sort of part of the political, he willingly joined in the political theater. Yes he looked absurd doing it, but that witnessing piece

was really crucial. And I sadly think that that level of political theater appeases some people. I think the shooting, it had, I mean, probably drew attention away from what's going on in Puerto Rico.

Lindsay: And of course they put him in the absolute best case scenario place so the cameras had to follow him there so the people that were watching the president got to see something that was much less dire than what was happening maybe even a few miles down the road. And for a lot of people seeing is believing.

Dr. Benton: Right, and I think that was definitely something that people were saying. Oh I saw that he went to this place but he certainly didn't come into this place. I mean, granted, he wouldn't have been able to pass some of those places probably. But he also has access to a private plane and a helicopter so many of those places were probably best accessed those ways. If he were to do that, it probably would have changed a whole lot, changed the perspectives. I don't know if you, actually I'm pretty sure if you remember this there's all those pictures of George W Bush staring out of the window of his plane. So he doesn't land but he's sort of looking at it from above, the sort of god perspective. And I believe Trump had a similar kind of perspective but it's not an iconic one. But it made me wonder what would have happened if we could see what they see when they're overhead.

And we did get that from CBS, we got that from NBC, and so forth. But I think it's lessened, I think it has reduced.

Lindsay: And also in Trump's own mind, I mean even with George W Bush you had some sense that he was hip to the idea that his people were taking him to the nicest place for a photo op if that's what was happening, whereas Trump it's like he is now seeing things not so bad. I think in his own mind it may have deescalated the sense of urgency.

Dr. Benton: Oh my gosh. Yeah he's literal minded, you're right. He's like not able to draw large connections amongst, between things. So I mean in that case are we starting to see how he sees? In that case, are we subject to this sort of apathetic, dumb way of looking at the world, I don't know. Am I going to get in trouble for calling our president dumb?

Lindsay: No.

Dr. Benton: I mean, seeing is believing and he didn't see what he needed to see. And I'm not sure that he cared, and I believe that upon more than one occasion he told us that he didn't care. And when people tell you that they don't care, we just have to believe them. I think that's where we should be right now.

Lindsay: Yeah he said that it wasn't a real crisis like Katrina.

Dr. Benton: He said it wasn't a real crisis, he also said we're doing a great job, you guys look great, stop telling us that we're doing a bad job, we're amazing. That's what he's telling us. That's what he wants us to believe, it's what I think he believes. I would say we should just trust that what he's saying is what he actually believes. We can no longer pretend to

want to read his mind and to imagine a better Trump. A deep down good hearted Trump. It's not there.

Lindsay: Or even a craft Trump with an 11 dimensional plan.

Dr. Benton: An evil genius with his PHD in evil. I just say, I don't see it. I don't think that if anyone, if one has an evil genius plan that they would be the president of the United States of America. To be perfectly honest, I mean why not just be a billionaire, it seems like you can do much more that way.

Lindsay: Speaking of evil billionaires, what effect is the debt crisis gonna have on the recovery, because it seems like there's both, this is terrible, they can't pay anything back, but then also both wall street and conservatives in the main land US are thinking, well we don't want it to totally implode.

Dr. Benton: So Larry Summers came out and said he did come out and say we should cancel the debt, which kind of made me wonder, I mean he considers himself to be a liberal I think. His economic, I mean in economics terms which is a different sort of thing. I think there's probably going to be some relief. I'm not sure how it's actually going to manifest. So in other words, what I'm suspecting is we have to think of who has a stake in Puerto Rico and it's in the moment of crisis. So who, and in other words who can capitalize, who can best capitalize on Puerto Rico and then argue that it will somehow improve this debt situation. My feeling is that it's going to be land investor types, sort of developers, right? Because that's the island thing. The island where you don't need a passport is quite attractive in the tourist industry. I believe there's also been a pretty sort of, with privatization of education, healthcare, all of those things. But same stuff that's happening on the main land. You've got this group of US based or main land based folks who are going there to set up charter schools and run, so I think what's going to happen is there may even be a sort of mass migration and land grab amongst wealthier people from the mainland is what I would guess.

Does that answer your question? Because I feel like if there's a way to make that look like a way to ease debt, sort of change tax revenue base, consider investments in the island. I think that would probably be the way this goes. Just as the gun manufacturer, gun selling folks, their stocks go up after a mass shooting, I believe after a crisis, if you own stock in Home Depot, if you own stock in a bunch of things that help to rebuild, then you're probably going to benefit. In fact that's what a friend told me, she said she was leaving a place in Puerto Rico and this financial advisor said oh the best thing that could happen to us right now is a hurricane.

Lindsay: Oh that's dark.

Dr. Benton: It's pretty dark. When she told me this I was actually like, wait what? And then she said something like, oh and buy stock in Home Depot. Which was, she said she kind of stopped in her tracks and then this hit. And she kind of was like, oh, so basically this is this disaster capitalism, this is what happens, you have a blank slate, it opens the gates for all of these other sort of neoliberal projects. Privatization of social services, the development of land, urban development for tourism. It's going to be, it can be a free

for all if people aren't ... so basically what's happening in terms of aid and relief is lawyers are actually a part of relief efforts now because they're trying to help people figure out how they're going to make claims, how they're going to make claims, how they're going to maintain their land, whatever ownership right. These are the things that are going to be negotiated in the aftermath.

People are still settling for Katrina. Lost their houses, and so these are the kinds of ... so it's not just engineers, health workers, it's lawyers who are trying to help people keep their homes, keep their land, and get and actually be compensated for damage.

Lindsay: I wonder if there might be some kind of unholy alliance between congressional conservatives, the White House is already in favor of multi-billion-dollar bail out, but Congress would have to approve it and I sort of wonder if the threat of 100,000 or more Puerto Ricans coming to the US mainland might scare conservatives enough to want to vote for it.

Dr. Benton: That's a really interesting question. I mean there's so many Puerto Ricans in the mainland already. So I think if they're thinking it's going to change voting patterns they might.

Lindsay: I think it might actually do that because somebody calculated that if a significant percentage of those people went to Florida and they vote democratic at the same rate that they've been voting democratic on the island, that that could be the victory that won Florida for Trump this time around.

Dr. Benton: Yay, bring them on. No so, I mean then I would bet, then you'll see Marco Rubio, that's another ... well I would suspect that there's probably that and then there are also financial interests, I mean most of our congress people or a good number of them are wealthy. A good number of them probably have investments that would benefit from, well maybe debt repayment, but probably also from development of the island. So I guess like I said it depends on what people's stakes, which stakes are higher. Which stakes have the best payoff. They can't really argue it's an immigration issue, right? Because it's people moving.

Lindsay: Unless they just want to drop the pretense and say immigration means race.

Dr. Benton: Yeah they would have to do that. And you know they're probably not gonna all deny that. I mean, it's actually shocking to me how many people again did not want to believe Trump when he told them what he believed. So now that they're seeing, and actually people are seeing it and still not ready to believe it, so I'm not sure what that means but it's definitely something that's troubling in so many ways. So we will see. It's very depressing.

Lindsay: Adia, that's all the time that we have for today, thank you so much for coming on the program.

Dr. Benton: No problem, I really appreciate it.

Lindsay: You've been listening to my conversation with Dr. Adia Benton, a medical anthropologist from Northwestern University. If you'd like to help our fellow citizens in Puerto Rico, you can donate to the Hispanic Federation by going to HispanicFederation.org/donate and choosing Puerto Rico hurricane relief from the dropdown menu on the bottom right.

And now it's time for recommended reading, a hand-picked selection to deepen your understanding of our bewildering political moment. It's called "alt white, how the Breitbart machine laundered racist hate," and it's by Joseph Bernstein of BuzzFeed. To make a long and very juicy story short, some e-mails of former Breitbart editor and right wing provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos leaked to BuzzFeed. They show Trump strategist and Breitbart news executive Steve Bannon making Milo the public face of Breitbart's all-out assault on liberalism which stoked the right wing populous anger that helped sweep Trump into office. There's a lot of great stuff here, like the time Milo sang America the beautiful at karaoke, while white nationalist Richard Spencer and his buddies did Nazi salutes in the audience. But to me, the most interesting thing about the story is what it shows about Bannon's attitude towards the ruckus left wing protests that often broke out at Milo's college talks.

Breitbart sent Milo on a tour of college campuses in the run-up to the 2016 election. There was a big debate on the left about how to respond to these events. Should activists try to physically shut them down? Some argued that force was necessary to stop Milo's racist rhetoric but others countered that force only played into Bannon's hands. In May of 2016, activists rushed the stage at a Milo talk at the Paul University in Chicago ending his presentation. BuzzFeed said that Milo wrote to Bannon to say he feared for his safety and wanted more security. Bannon wrote back, "agree 100% we want you to stir up more." For Bannon, the disruptions were the whole point. Anyone who helped shut down a Milo talk became a bit player in Bannon's political theater. That's it for recommended reading.

The breach is produced by Nora Hurley for rewire radio. Our executive producer is Marc Faletti, our theme music is dark alliance performed by Darcy James Argue's Secret Society, and I'm your host Lindsey Beyerstein. Tweet your suggestions, comments, and questions to @beyerstein B-E-Y-E-R-S-T-E-I-N on Twitter. See you next week.