

Intersections of Puerto Rican Activists' Responses to Oppression

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This thesis titled
Intersections of Puerto Rican Activists' Responses to Oppression

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ABSTRACT

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As a result of European, followed by U.S. colonization perpetuated over the past five centuries, there has developed a diverse population in Puerto Rico that is united as well as divided by dynamics of social and environmental oppression that accompany colonialist rule and expansion. As in many places where a power structure oppresses people, Puerto Ricans have demonstrated their agency to fight against multilayered forms of injustice that find their roots in the imposition of Euro-American ideals and practices. These injustices include, but are not limited to, gender oppression, racism, heterosexism, classism, and environmental degradation. The concept of intersectionality serves to demonstrate how these forms of oppression unite to create a system of injustice. In order to combat one form of oppression, all others must be taken into account. This thesis project examines the intersections of activism which respond to the interlocking forms of oppression. By recognizing that Puerto Ricans have been physically and mentally subjected to colonialist infiltration in a myriad of ways, a study into the different responses that protest this infiltration proves crucial.

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giving into to the white washing pressures that successfully influenced so many of my first generation cousins born outside of Puerto Rico.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The island, once called *Borikén* by indigenous inhabitants, Puerto Rico is the smallest island in the Greater Antilles, yet it is one of the most populated countries in the Caribbean sustaining nearly 4,000,000 people. The island's humid tropical climate and diverse eco systems offer abundant and lush vegetation and other natural resources (Marrero 12). Puerto Rico's exceptional natural environment has supported its human population since indigenous people's sustainable practices; then throughout centuries of colonization beginning with Cristobal Colón's arrival in 1493, and the conquest ensued by Ponce de León and Spanish soldiers in 1508 (Wagenheim 15). Today, the United States' driven tourist and consumer industries, upon which Puerto Rico's economy depends, carry severe consequences for the natural environment and impact Puerto Ricans' diverse lived experiences and cultural dynamics which will be explored throughout the subsequent chapters of this thesis project.

Former chief justice of Puerto Rico, José Trías Monge, once referred to the island as the "oldest colony in the modern world" (Negrón-Muntaner, None 1). According to Aimé Césaire, colonization functions as "[...] a form of civilization which, at a certain point in its history, finds itself obliged, for internal reasons, to extend to a world scale the competition of its antagonistic economies" (33). Antagonistic economies are produced through a patriarchal and racist hierarchal class system, and function to stigmatize individuals who do not conform to heterosexual gender norms, subordinate women to men, force the submission and labor of non-white races, and subject the natural earth to the exploits of human consumption and expansion. Césaire goes on to explain the

colonizers' justification for the extension of their rule quoting European Christian Reverend Muller: "Humanity must not, cannot allow the incompetence, negligence, and laziness of the uncivilized peoples to leave idle indefinitely the wealth which God has confided to them, charging them to make it serve the good of all" (Césaire 39). In the case of Puerto Rico, the initial colonization ensued through the attempted genocide of indigenous groups like the Taínos, and the forced enslavement of Yoruba, Bantu, and other West African peoples (Martínez 7). These groups of people comprise those described by Reverend Muller, whom Europeans considered in need of salvation and civilization, in other words, colonization. The processes of colonization founded the racially and ethnically diverse make up of Puerto Ricans (Indigenous, African, and European), as well as the patriarchal and racially based hierarchal class system that thrives to this day.

European conquest paved the way for the U.S. to carry out a "neocolonial relationship" initiated in 1898, to which all Puerto Ricans and their natural land are subjected. The U.S. legitimized its colonialist agenda claiming to "ensure the progress of the tropical regions toward a larger population and a higher civilization" (Césaire 57). The U.S. proves successful in continuing Puerto Rico's colonial legacy through capitalistic expansion, maintaining the economic dependence of the island. This hierarchal relationship is strengthened by the antagonistic struggles among Puerto Ricans that reproduce the sexist, heterosexist, racist, and classist dichotomies prevalent since European conquest. As Spain modeled its hierarchal society to develop the structure of its colonies, the forms of oppression in the U.S. reflect those perpetuated in Puerto Rico.

Colonizers utilized the term oppression to describe the experiences of Native peoples within their cultures prior to colonial intrusion; while social movements since the 1960s designated the term to describe “the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer [...] because of the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society (Young 41). Iris Marion Young in *Justice and the Politics of Difference* divides oppression into five major conditions: “exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence” (40). The U.S. effectively perpetuates these five categories: exploiting Puerto Rico’s natural resources and people’s labor, marginalizing the island’s population from accessing the wealth acquired through colonial enterprises, attempting to leave Puerto Ricans powerless to make their own decisions concerning the development of their society, inflicting cultural imperialism through tourist and consumer industries, and imposing violence through the destruction of the natural landscape and military testing on the island.

The U.S. utilizes a colonialist hierarchy to oppress Puerto Rico as a whole, while such hierarchies function among people on the island of different social and class statuses to foster the oppression experienced and/or perpetuated by Puerto Ricans in their everyday lives. The interconnected relationship between different forms of oppression can be understood through the concept of intersectionality as introduced by critical race theorist Kimberlé W. Crenshaw. In her critique of feminism, antiracist politics, and public policy’s failure to recognize Black women’s multidimensional experiences, Crenshaw explains: “Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot

sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (Crenshaw 140). In this sense, a patriarchal and racist society binds the gender and racial oppression that it inflicts on Black women. Black feminist and sociologist Patricia Hill Collins elaborates Crenshaw’s theory, explaining how “Intersectional paradigms view race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and age, among others, as mutually constructing systems of power” (11). The components of oppression named by Young that emerge from these intersecting systems of power “do not function independently of one another, but must be understood (and dismantled) together” (Harris-Lacewell 1). This thesis examines the ways in which heterosexism, the control over gender identity or expression, sexism, racism, and classism, in tandem with environmental degradation, influence the ways in which Puerto Rican activists respond to, and resist, one or more interlocking forms of oppression.

The idea of activism, as it will be used in this project, resonates well with bell hooks’ description of feminism: “A commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels - sex, race, and class, to name a few – and a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires” (194-195). Puerto Ricans carry out these “commitments” attempting to eradicate forms of oppression faced by people at different levels of society, and promote the uplift of oppressed individuals and the natural environments. Uplift in this sense speaks to activists who work with and for people as they to alleviate the oppressive burdens that suppress their self-development. This does not imply that every Puerto Rican must carry

on their back the innumerable forms of societal oppression, but does emphasize the recognition of how Puerto Ricans in different ways help alleviate one or more components of intersectional oppression.

This thesis argues that the concept of intersectionality can apply to the activism which respond to interlocking forms of oppression, that Puerto Rico's colonial legacy reproduces the forms of oppression against which the activists work, and that the intersectional connections and differences among the activists' responses enhance the possibilities to envision a more inclusive anti-oppressive movement. This project does not claim to offer solutions to the extensive and complex effects of colonization and oppression, but does bring to light experiences and perspectives given by Puerto Ricans that are necessary to formulate possible solutions.

Chapter two of this thesis provides a historical and an analytical context that traces Puerto Rico's colonial legacy, the forms of oppression which manifest, intersect, and persist as a result, and the diverse ways in which people have resisted colonial oppression at different points in history.

Chapter three offers an account of how the research process developed: it introduces the different types of activist work enacted by the participants whose oral histories compile the findings of this project, the methods used in conducting and compiling those oral histories, as well as the obstacles and limitations faced during the research process.

Chapter four introduces the individual activists and presents the findings and analyses of their oral histories. The chapter argues that intersectionality connects the

participants' diverse responses and recognizes each different form activism takes. To support this argument, the analyses examine three components which emerge from each participant's oral history: the conditions motivating activist responses, the formation of the participants' identities, and the current obstacles that necessitate the activists' continued work. The conclusions offered in the final chapter bring together the outcomes of the arguments introduced here.

CHAPTER 2: ACTIVISMS IN CONTEXT

To interpret the activists' oral histories presented in this project one must situate their work and experiences within the historical and contemporary contexts where forms of oppression manifest, intersect, and reproduce to sustain Puerto Rico's colonial legacy. The activists work against some of the major consequences of colonization that persist in Puerto Rico, including the colonialist and patriarchal control over people's gender and sexuality, women's bodies, the natural environment, and access to resources. By working against the residual forms of oppression inherited from colonization, the activists and this project represent a movement towards decolonization with regards to people's lived experiences and the natural environment.

In order to contextualize the findings and analyses surrounding the activists' perspectives and effectively portray decolonial struggles, explicit connections must be made between the atrocities of European conquest and the oppression recurring today. As Franz Fanon describes:

Decolonization, we know, is an historical process [...] it can only find its significance and become self coherent insofar as we can discern the history-making movement which gives it form and substance. [...] Their first confrontation was colored by violence and their cohabitation—or rather the exploitation of the colonized by the colonizer—continued at the point of the bayonet and under canon fire. The colonist and colonized are old acquaintances. [...] The colonist derives his validity, i.e., his wealth, from the colonial system (Fanon, Wretched 2).

During European colonization the mechanisms of control used to enslave and massacre African peoples and groups indigenous to the island were violently overt. Throughout Puerto Rico's colonial legacy the mechanisms embody countless forms of control: sexist and racist oppression, poverty, industrialization, to name a few. Beyond the physical consequences of colonization, the ideological tools used to condition peoples' minds developed in large part due to the colonizers depiction of history, legitimizing or overlooking their violations.

This chapter works through a decolonial process that begins at the foundation of Puerto Rico's colonial legacy. As Walter D. Mignolo asserts, it is necessary to "understand the past in order to speak the present" (Darker xii). Puerto Rican writer Aurora Levins Morales supports this idea: to understand the past and present requires a deconstruction of colonialist history supported by "The 'false memory' movement that seeks to deny authority over memory" (Medicine 13). The "false memory movement" Levins Morales describes serves to deny the true atrocities of the past, and worse yet functions to cover up the colonization perpetuated today by the U.S. in the minds of colonized peoples. This chapter makes connections between the past and present in opposition to the false memory movement. It historically traces some of the fundamental colonialist European processes and how they tie into the forms of oppression reproduced today. Just as multiple forms of oppression currently intersect, the European conquest intentionally utilized intersectional mechanisms of colonization to assume control over different people and the land simultaneously. Most importantly, as long as colonization has existed so has the resistance of colonized people. The activists represented in this

thesis are left with the burdens of Puerto Rico's colonial legacy, but also inherit the agency and strength of Puerto Ricans who worked against colonization and oppression in previous generations.

The following historical contextualization begins with the initial years of European conquest from the 1492 into the early 1500s when colonizers first imposed the physical and ideological constructions that developed into intersectional forms of oppression throughout the subsequent centuries. In addition, this chapter looks at a significant moment of Indigenous resistance to colonization during those preliminary years. Although this historical tracing lacks specific examples of colonial procedures and peoples' resistance from the later 16th century to late 18th century, it highlights slave revolts of the 19th century leading up to the U.S. invasion in 1898. From there, it traces crucial moments throughout the 20th and early 21st century in which Puerto Rico's colonial legacy prevailed, as did Puerto Ricans' diverse responses. It focuses heavily on the colonialist abuses committed against women's bodies during the mid 1900s as they exemplify historical atrocities incorporating class, gender, and race, as well as the severity of the consequences caused by U.S. colonial rule.

A more complete exploration of the impacts of European colonization would look at the cultural dynamics existing before colonization among the indigenous groups on the island and African peoples forced into slavery. However, for the scope of this project the historical contextualization begins with the European intrusion into Indigenous and African cultures and lands. To foreshadow the foundation of Puerto Rico's colonial

legacy, Aurora Levins Morales uses the Taíno Goddess of wind and hurricane to describe the build up of the European colonizers' invasion:

Guabanex, whose skirts are the swirling winds of hurricane, is cooking up a mother of all storms. It is springing up in the crowded, disease ridden streets of Sevilla and Lisbon, Liverpool and Marseilles. It is gathering speed down the coast of Africa, knocking down branches in Canarias, gusting over Elmina, shaking the great trees of Kongo. [...] The splay-fingered leaves of the papaya have begun to quiver. Any time now the storm will break on the islands. Guabanex stirs the great blue pot of the Atlantic until the bitter saltwater breaks on all its shores (Remedios 53).

The storm metaphorically describes the atrocities of Indigenous genocide and African slavery, inflicting physical and mental abuses and control upon the colonized women, men, and their land. These mechanisms of control serve as precursors to the interlocking forms of oppression and environmental destruction that persist to this day.

European endeavors to assume control of the colonized lands and exploit their natural resources relied on the enslavement of Africans and attempted genocide of Indigenous people on the island, in addition to the displacement of their sustainable use of the land. Taínos, a group indigenous to the island, rebelled against colonizers in a 1511 multi-village revolt lead by *caciques* (local chiefs), like Agueybana II, against Spanish troops (Wagenheim 26). Aurora Levins Morales reveals that the ill-fated battle failed because a Taína *cacica*, Guanina, warned a Spanish soldier with whom she was in a relationship. She did so in an attempt to prevent the war from taking place fearing the

bloodshed of her people, but the soldier betrayed her trust and countered the uprising (Remedios 75). The sense of camaraderie among members of different villages manifesting the revolt foreshadows the necessary solidarity in future struggles for Puerto Ricans toward liberation. The relationship between a colonizer and an Indigenous woman exemplifies the complexity fostered by colonization that inhibits efforts towards decolonization. After successfully opposing the resistance of Indigenous peoples, Spanish colonizers proceeded to establish their colonial enterprise, imposing a patriarchal and racist class system on the backs of Indigenous and African peoples, and eventually mixed race Puerto Ricans, as well as the land.

Cherokee anti-violence feminist activist and writer Andrea Smith expresses that colonizers viewed colonized peoples and their lands as “inherently violable” to justify the exploitation and destruction that ensued during European colonization. Smith goes on to explain: “The connection between the colonization of Native people’s bodies—particularly Native women’s bodies—and Native lands is not simply metaphorical. [...] The colonial/patriarchal mind that seeks to control the sexuality of women and indigenous peoples also seeks to control nature” (55). Women forced into slavery were subjected to the sexual violence of colonial masters, while the land suffered the effects of expansive agriculture it had never experienced before. Similar to ways in which foreign colonizers utilized rape as a mechanism to control Indigenous and African women, the practices enforced by colonialist developers physically exploited natural resources beyond the sustainable capacity of the land.

Colonizers claimed “indigenous peoples did not properly subdue the natural environment” to legitimize their assumed control over the land, relating to their justification that their colonialist atrocities were mandated by God to “civilize” colonized peoples (Smith 56). In other words, colonizers used their environmentally destructive agricultural practices as a mark of their superiority to non-European cultures. Europeans positioned their supposed mental capacity as superior to the physical strength of those colonized. This hierarchal division impacted colonized women and men differentially, as Andrea Smith explains, “[...] while enslaving women’s bodies, colonizers argued that they were actually somehow freeing Native women from the ‘oppression’ they supposedly faced in Native nations” (23). In order to expand patriarchy and white supremacy simultaneously, colonizers marked African and indigenous men as “sexually aggressive creatures.” In doing so, European men masked the rampant sexual violence they committed against African and indigenous women, and assumed the authority to subordinate and animalize African and indigenous men.

The heterosexism and homophobia in Puerto Rico also find roots in European colonization. Patricia Hill Collins effectively analyzes the historical bond between racism and heterosexism initiated through colonialist discourse and practices. Her analysis helps make sense of the homophobia in Puerto Rico that fosters the need for LGBTQ activism. In *Black Sexual Politics*, Collins explains how “Western religion, science, and media took over 350 years to manufacture an ideology of Black sexuality that assigned (heterosexual) promiscuity to Black people and then used it to justify racial discrimination” (98). She traces the development of this racist stigmatization that

categorizes Black women and men as inherently fueled by “excessive or unrestrained heterosexual desire,” and the oppositional stigma attached to LGBTQ people of “unrestrained homosexual desire” (97). With this, colonization seeks to control all forms of sexuality in Puerto Rico. The patriarchal heterosexist hierarchy governing sexuality marks heterosexual men as sexual aggressors and posits women and LGBTQ individuals as submissive and subject to physical violence.

Since the first diaspora, many slaves of African descent actively resisted the atrocities of slavery that included the physical abuse and ideological stigmatization inflicted upon them. Often collaborating efforts among slaves from different estates, through uprisings and conspiracies slaves revolted by burning plantation crops, escaping to the mountains and, in some cases, successfully murdering estate managers (Baralt 122). Strongly influenced by news of slave revolts in Haiti during the Haitian Revolution from the end of sixteenth and throughout the seventeenth century, key slave rebellions occurred in Puerto Rico, including a revolt in Aguadilla in 1795 and later uprisings in Vega Baja in 1831 and Ponce in 1833 and 1835 (Levins Morales, Remedios 146-47). Though eventually stopped and punished for defending themselves by colonial law enforcement agents of the time, the agency of African slaves to collaborate and revolt represents the liberating fervor of future movements.

Shortly prior to the abolition of slavery, which occurred in 1873, Puerto Ricans ignited a landmark armed rebellion against Spanish colonial rule. Though halted by Spanish military after only a day, *El Grito de Lares* (Cry of Lares) in 1868 gave the working class *jíbaro* (non-Black, mountain dwelling fieldworker) population more rights,

partly contributed to the abolishment of slavery, and demonstrated the strength and determination of Puerto Ricans to demand their freedom (Wagenheim 66). The national spirit expressed by leaders for the *jíbaro* working class was: “*Arriba* Puerto Ricans! Let us show the rabble, who rob and insult us, that the *jíbaros* of Puerto Rico are neither cowards against their executioners, nor assassins against their brothers” (60). This proclamation of solidarity and resistance exhibits a formula crucial to decolonial movements and community uplift needed for the struggles faced under Puerto Rico’s present day colonial ruler, the U.S.

As a result of the Spanish-American War, the U.S. invaded Puerto Rico in 1898 and assumed control over the island, enforcing a new brand of colonialism that took environmental destructions to greater heights and solidified Puerto Ricans’ colonial dependency. The U.S. modeled the penetration that Europeans had inflicted upon the island and its people reproducing the patriarchal/colonial ideologies to legitimize their authority. Kevin Santiago-Valles notes the propaganda of politicians and travel documents during the preliminary stages of U.S. control in the early 1900s: “Puerto Rico came to us voluntarily and without bloodshed. She welcomed us with open arms. [...] Her people welcomed the armies under Miles as deliverers and benefactors” (127). The U.S. expressed such exaggerated sentiments to cast itself as a hero against Spanish rule and position Puerto Rico in a submissive dependent position reflective of women’s status in a patriarchal society.

One of the first prominent and radical feminists in Puerto Rico during the early 20th century, Luisa Capetillo preached for a liberatory ideological reconstruction. As an

advocate for women's rights and a labor union organizer, she opposed the independence movement, proclaiming that it would only guarantee freedom for the elite members of society (Valle-Ferrer 38). Capetillo identified herself as an anarchist who objected to any authoritative control over Puerto Rico that would further embed the oppressive hierarchy of colonial rule. Biographer Norma Valle-Ferrer relays Capetillo's convictions expressed in her essay *La humanidad del futuro* (The Humanity of the Future):

For her, anarchy is a lifestyle where each being is responsible for his or her own existence, while at the same time concerned for the welfare of the collective, thus eliminating the need for rules imposed by a superior power. Each human being is considered a separate entity, entering into voluntary and individual association with thousands of other human beings, always respecting the rights of others as if they were their own.

For her, anarchy is the supreme organization of the universe. (41)

Although anarchy would not ensue as easily after a century of complex colonialist expansion, Capetillo's beliefs are still relevant as the residuals of colonization still deprive people of their rights and foster disrespect among Puerto Ricans. She acted strongly against gender norms which dictated women's behavior and advocated for honest and effective sexual education for the island's youth (42). Both struggles still prevail in Puerto Rico, perpetuating repressive gender roles for women and relinquishing young people's access to safe and effective sexual education. The colonialist foundation of such persistent forms of repression negatively impact Puerto Ricans' self development, and inhibit the potential for anarchist and nationalist forms of political decolonization.

Pedro Albizu Campos, president of Puerto Rico's Nationalist Party from 1930 until his death in 1965, was a prominent opponent to U.S. colonialism and still exists as a symbol of revolutionary pride for pro-independence Puerto Ricans. Taking from the rebellious spirit of *El Grito de Lares*, he mobilized armed attacks protesting for the island's liberation (Suarez 17). Ultimately, his efforts did not succeed as the U.S. continued its assimilation tactics attempting to dictate Puerto Rican cultural dynamics. Furthermore, the U.S. needed to strengthen its control over Puerto Rico's population to ensure the island's economic dependence and expansion of industrial enterprises.

From a colonialist standpoint, the U.S. claimed to benefit Puerto Rico "by bringing public health, technology, and improvements in the status of women to the island" (Briggs 13). This paternalistic stance promoted Puerto Rico's dependency on the U.S. and utilized women as a means to lay claim to the supposed benefits of modernization. Reflective of women's experiences in the U.S., greater mobilization offered to elite women in Puerto Rico relied on heightened marginalization of poor women. Vanessa Bauzá elaborates this oppressive dynamic in an editorial article that traces the relationship between colonialist expansion in Puerto Rico and control over women's reproduction. Bauzá references a letter sent in 1933 from Puerto Rico's U.S. appointed governor, James Beverly, to U.S. feminist and contraceptive pioneer Margaret Sanger. Bauzá relays Beverly's proclamation: "'some method of restricting the birthrate' in Puerto Rico 'is the only salvation for the island.' Any further birth control initiatives, he added, should concentrate on 'the most vicious, most ignorant, and most helpless and hopeless part of the population'" (14). Such colonialist, classist, and sexist sentiments

fueled the subsequent sterilization campaign in the mid-1940s against poor and working class Puerto Rican women.

Organized in large part by Clarence Gamble, the Proctor & Gamble consumer industry tycoon and front runner of the U.S. eugenics board, the campaign initially targeted the involuntary sterilization of women deemed mentally ill by medical establishments. The colonialist logic behind a forced sterilization campaign sought to counter the potential threat of overpopulation of Puerto Rico's lower and working classes in order to ensure the imperialist white supremacy of the U.S. and uphold Puerto Rico's small elite class. "Eugenics and overpopulation [...] told a story of a reformable (white) people, who through a program of right reproduction could become a modern nation" (Briggs 100). In Puerto Rico, tactics of the campaign entailed government health workers approaching women at their homes and work to preach the benefits of sterilization, or "*la operación*" (the operation) as referred to by health workers to minimize the negative implications of the procedure. Furthermore, doctors conducting the procedures often did so without women's consent, claimed sterilization to be reversible, or administered it immediately after childbirth (Bauzá 14). During the mid-20th century, nationalist and independence leaders, as well as Puerto Rican activist groups on the island and in the U.S., like the New York based Young Lords, protested and publicly exposed the atrocious procedures to the United Nations (Briggs 147). Despite their efforts, the U.S. and Puerto Rican governments denied their intentional organization of the sterilization campaign and procedures continued throughout decades following the 1940s.

In 1948, the U.S. government exacerbated the coercion of sterilization by initiating “Operation Bootstrap.” The program propagated to lower and working class Puerto Rican women the pursuit to focus all energy on hard work outside the home, and away from reproduction, in order to mobilize upward in a class system (Colón-Warren 103). Such a colonialist strategy functioned to mask the U.S. government’s population control efforts. Operation Bootstrap also served to portray capitalism as a system in which anyone could succeed with enough work ethic, rather than a class system in which financial mobility could only exist as long as large portions of the population remained economically oppression. Efforts to cover up the corruption of such political and economic systems strengthened after World War II, “as decolonization movements throughout the Third World demanded national autonomy, the United States replaced colonialism with development” (Briggs 110). To extend this disguised form of colonialism required to U.S. to change the political status of the island.

In 1952, the U.S. reacted to the pressures of the Cold War which threatened to expose its corrupt form of democracy (Negrón-Muntaner, Puerto Rican 11). To mask its colonialist treatment of Puerto Rico, it offered an election in which Puerto Ricans voted for a new status: *Estado Libre Asociado* or commonwealth. Essentially still a colony Puerto Rico had its own constitution under scrutiny of U.S. supervision by federal law (Suarez 3). The U.S. continued to exploit the newly entitled commonwealth territory to enhance its imperialist efforts, simultaneously finding new ways to control the island’s population.

In 1956, while forced sterilization persisted, poor and working class Puerto Rican women were subjected to the colonialist, classist, sexist, and racist experimentation of the birth control pill. Margaret Sanger initiated the move to create a more effective form of contraceptive, but scientist Gregory Pincus and physician John Rock, both White males, led the experimentation procedures (“People” 1). They began the unethical testing on non-human animals, then on a small group of women in Boston, and carried out the first large-scale experimentation on women in San Juan. Pincus and Rock fed off the atrocities of forced sterilization in efforts to promote use of the pill, offering poor and working class Puerto Rican women a new form of birth control that was not permanent. Similar to the corrupt tactics used in the sterilization campaign, the medical testers did not inform the women that they were part of an experiment to determine the effectiveness of the pill and its harmful side effects. At least three women died as result of the experiment and many more fell seriously ill (“People” 1). Through a colonialist viewpoint, the pill and manipulation of women’s bodies encompass part of the “anti-poverty development programs intended to stave off communism by transforming backward women” (Briggs 140). Ultimately, the pill served to provide middle and upper class women with a safer and more effective form of birth control. Credited for women’s “Sexual Revolution” in the 1960s, the pill exemplified the privileges offered to the U.S. and the cost of Puerto Rican women’s lives as colonial subjects.

The atrocities of forced sterilization and contraceptive experimentation pay homage to the sexual violence committed during European colonization, and in turn, encourage many nationalists to reject any notion of women’s reproductive control.

The nationalist opposition to reproductive rights rejected the colonialist movements that introduced birth control alternatives through methods of force and deceit, in addition to upholding women's fertility as essential to combating colonialist genocide against Puerto Rican culture. According to this logic, women carry the responsibilities to reproduce the nation and support the men who oversee the development and defense of that nation (Yuval-Davis 3). Pedro Albizu Campos reflected this stance: "The brazenness of the Yankee invaders has reached the extreme of trying to profane Puerto Rican motherhood; of trying to invade the very insides of nationality" (Briggs 74). Many U.S. feminists sided with Puerto Rican nationalists and both groups assumed their efforts were in Puerto Rican women's best interests. In doing so, they supported the Catholic Church's "pro-natalist" doctrine, ultimately projecting a notion of "anti-feminism" that went against the work of Puerto Rican feminists who supported women's reproductive freedom. In this sense, U.S. feminists enacted a colonialist mentality by which "Puerto Rican women are victims and need to be saved" (Briggs 144). As result, Puerto Rican feminists' fights for women's reproductive rights had to contend with U.S. feminists, exceedingly pervasive U.S. colonization, and nationalist ideologies.

Recognizing the capacity for nationalist movements to perpetuate the subordination of women as a mechanism for their political agendas dismantles any notion that Puerto Rican independence would eliminate sexism and its byproducts. An ideological reconstruction must take place before political independence could ever attempt to guarantee liberation to all women and other oppressed individuals. Nevertheless, struggles for political independence seek an alternative in the face of

incessant colonial abuses and serve to demonstrate a nation's fight for self determination. Independence may not guarantee that intersectional forms of oppression in peoples' daily lives and environmental degradation will end with political autonomy. Still, the perpetual atrocities committed by the U.S. demonstrate that Puerto Rico's prevailing colonial status must be eradicated in order to attempt dismantling the colonialist driven social and environmental injustices.

During the second half of the twentieth century, independence movements were targeted by the U.S. government and FBI as viable threats to colonialist control. In the late 1960s Filiberto Ojeda Ríos forged a group that would become the *Macheteros* (deriving its name from the machetes used by slaves' and *jíbaros*' for slashing crops). The clandestine group pursued direct, yet well guarded, attacks against imperial institutions in the U.S. However, as political activist Antonio Camacho Negrón explains, the objectives of the *Machetero* Movement did not expect the impossible overthrow of the U.S. military forces. He expresses the need to keep the movement alive:

We knew that if we let the annexationist, pro-statehood forces that were gathering strength take control, they would carry colonialism to its maximum development, and Puerto Ricans would lose their identity, their language, their culture, and so on. We had a responsibility to the people to maintain a history of resistance struggle. (Negrón 3)

As Negrón emphasizes, liberation movements such as the *Macheteros* are not futile in their purpose. They establish and maintain a sense of resistance in the face of perpetual colonization. Not all Puerto Ricans support independence, nor the groups and

movements historically associated with it, but by the latter decades of the 20th century much the population recognized the dire need for changes to occur on the island.

The lack of faith in any authoritative system, expressed by Luisa Capetillo in the early part of the 1900s, transcends into recent decades in Puerto Rico. After so many years of colonialist exploitation and ineffective attempts for independence, Puerto Ricans showed their distrust in the three major political parties during the 1998 elections. In choosing between the pro-independence, pro-statehood, or pro-commonwealth parties, just over half of the voting population voted: “*Ninguna de las anteriores*” (None of the Above) demonstrating that the options offered no viable solutions to consistent problems of the last half century (Negrón-Muntaner, None 3). In the absence of adequate support from political leaders on the island and colonialist U.S., grassroots activism proves necessary to uplift oppressed Puerto Ricans and decrease the exploitation of the natural environment.

At different point during the second half of the 20th century, feminist movements mobilized in Puerto Rico advocating for the recognition of women’s rights: promoting access to reproductive options and speaking out against domestic and sexual violence, establishing institutions for women to seek reproductive/health services as well as safe spaces for women subjected to physical abuses. At a slower pace, LGBTQ movements are manifesting as well supporting individuals who are silenced and abused because of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. Environmentalist movements have also progressed, ignited by the exceedingly damaging effects on people’s health and endangerment of animal and plant populations caused by industrial

pollution and commercial expansion (Marrero 151). After so many years of colonialist and oppressive struggles, the fragmentation among Puerto Ricans prevails as a major obstacle in mobilizing greater support for social and environmental movements.

Activist movements respond to the fragmentation caused by intersectional forms of oppression as they combat the consequences of Puerto Rico's colonial legacy. The sexual stigmatization against African and Indigenous peoples during European colonization transcends into the contemporary stereotype of Puerto Rican, and other Latin American men, as inherently *machista* (Moraga, Loving 130). This stereotype not only influences White people's racist superiority, but when internalized, influences some Puerto Rican men to claim patriarchal authority over Puerto Rican women. In this way, European colonization succeeds in physically and mentally oppressing Puerto Ricans today. In its present colonial relationship, the U.S. racially marks Puerto Ricans as inferior in the eyes of the primarily White agents of imperialism. In their mainland "independent" setting, these agents reproduce contemporary forms of slavery and segregation, like imprisonment and economic oppression, to perpetuate the racialization and subordination of Black people (Negrón-Muntaner, Puerto Rican 21). This mark of inferiority brings with it the negative stereotype of the "unrestrained heterosexuality" of Puerto Rican men inherited from the stigmas imposed during slavery in Puerto Rico.

As Patricia Hill Collins points out, the attachment of hyper heterosexuality upon the identities of African descendants makes LGBTQ Puerto Rican people's identity "invisible" (106). The mark of sexual deviancy forced upon Black and Puerto Rican men naturalizes hyper heterosexuality and makes non-heterosexual identities seem unnatural.

The added deviancy attached to homosexuality because of this fosters the oppression of homophobia amongst Puerto Ricans and encourages LGBTQ Puerto Ricans to remain closeted. Colonization's use of gender fulfills "the need to endlessly recapitulate the heterosexualized and manly whiteness of the colonial enterprise" (Santiago-Valles 141). This sheds light on the intersectionality in which gender, racial, and sexual orientation oppression mutually function to ideologically uphold colonization. Simultaneously, the "colonial enterprise" depends on the exploitation of the island's natural resources and slave labor for its economic growth. Ideological and physical colonization support one another, bringing sexuality and class into the established relationship between gender, race, and the environment.

Puerto Rico's current state of environmental deprivation stems from those displacements, as the unsustainable agricultural practices used during slavery continued into the underpaid peasant labor on mass crop-producing plantations cultivated to sell and export products, particularly sugar which served as the islands most profitable cash crop until the mid 20th century. In the second half of the twentieth century, with the capitalistic rise of industrialization and urbanization, pharmaceutical and electronics enterprises heightened the environmental damage by generating air polluting toxics and increasing the amount of waste on the island (Colón-Warren 103). Today, the overwhelming amount of consumerism and tourism, on which the island has become dependent for economic stability, creates an even greater threat to the environment. The environmental damage caused encompasses paving over natural habitats for the construction of commercial facilities, killing plant and animal life and generating greater

amounts of consumer waste to be disposed of in surrounding areas. Furthermore, commercial developers increasingly force economically oppressed people from their homes who live in places that the developers view as ideal profitable locations.

The displacement of Puerto Ricans from their living spaces because of capitalist expansion directly relates back to that of Indigenous peoples of the Americas and African peoples forced away from their home environments and subsistence practices prior to 1492. The displacement in its contemporary form reflects the environmental racism and classism that redistributes marginalized peoples to the unhealthiest, most contaminated living spaces: unregulated sites for toxic waste, uranium production, and military experimentation (Smith 58). The intersections uniting racial and class oppression with environmental degradation enable agents of colonization to develop capitalistic enterprises while maintaining the marginalization of people of color and people with limited financial resources. The U.S. utilizes the logic of environmental racism and classism to legitimize the consequences caused by commercial expansion in Puerto Rico.

The historical Vieques protest, from 1999 to 2003, exists as a period in which Puerto Ricans set aside their fragmenting differences and mobilized to resist the U.S. Navy's weapon experimentation on Vieques, a small island off of Puerto Rico. For well over half a century, the U.S. government utilized Vieques as a Marine training and weapons testing center for the invasions of Cuba, Vietnam, Iraq, and Kosovo among other places (Mullenneaux 2-3). After a security guard, David Sanes Rodríguez, was killed and others injured in 1999, Puerto Ricans began to mobilize and continued to peacefully protest against the U.S. government's relentless attempts and financial bribes

to carry out military testing (9-12). Finally, in 2003, the Navy pulled out of Vieques. The projection of war testing increases the potential for human to human violence in society and severely contaminates and destroys the natural habitats subjected to experimentation, once again escalating social and environmental conflicts. Puerto Rican's successful termination of the Naval testing on Vieques proves the capacity of the people to combat both agents of colonialism and the consequential social and environmental injustices.

More recently, the massive layoffs in Fall 2009, due to government cuts in funding, sparked wide spread mobilization of people from all sectors of Puerto Rico, those unemployed protesting along side supporters on strike to demonstrate their solidarity. *Claridad*, a Puerto Rican newspaper known for its social and environmental awareness, cited activist Bishop Juan Vera's reaction to the recent protest in the metropolitan area against the corrupt and reactionary government under pro-statehood, republican governor Luis Fortuño's administration. Vera expressed his admiration in witnessing the active participation of people otherwise not accustomed to uprisings of this sort, who he describes as: "*personas sencillas, del pueblo*" (everyday people) (Franco 1). Similar to the Vieques conflict, Puerto Ricans reacted to injustice felt across a large portion of the population, regardless of one's place in society and relation to intersectional forms of oppression.

Puerto Rico's colonial legacy makes it difficult to define a specific cultural identity. Taking into account Puerto Rican's hybrid racial and ethnic ancestries, class differences, varied perceptions of social categories regarding gender and sexuality, and

different levels of interaction with the natural environment between rural and urban areas, an inclusive national identity proves ambivalent. In a study attempting to gather some consensus about a cultural identity on the island, Nancy Morris came to the conclusion that “Puerto Rican identity is resilient” (155). By resilient she refers to Puerto Ricans’ ability to manifest and maintain cultural dynamics that exceed colonizer’s expectations and resist the coercive efforts towards U.S. assimilation by adapting or resisting colonial influences to suit individuals’ own contexts.

The activists presented in this project live inside that context and reflect the resilience and survival of Puerto Ricans oppressed by colonialist residuals. Though the participants pursue their activist work within different movements in diverse ways, collectively they combat intersectional injustices prevailing among Puerto Ricans. Referring back to Franz Fanon’s discussion of decolonization at the beginning of this chapter, Third World feminist theorist and activist, Chandra Talpade Mohanty enhances his definition to provide a more inclusive framework. She argues:

If processes of sexism, heterosexism, and misogyny are central to the social fabric of the world we live in; if indeed these processes are interwoven with racial, national, and capitalist domination and exploitation such that the lives of women and men, girls and boys, are profoundly affected, then decolonization at all the levels (as described by Fanon) becomes fundamental to a radical feminist transformative project. [She goes on to uphold] self-reflexive collective practice in the

transformation of the self, reconceptualizations of identity, and political mobilization as necessary elements of the practice of decolonization. (8)

Mohanty's decolonial framework makes sense of the need to pursue an intersectional project that speaks to the work of different activists who combat forms of oppression within their own cultural context, placing their own identity directly into the development and outcomes of their activism. Mohanty and Fanon's frameworks of decolonization provide a theoretical base supporting this overall thesis. However, to engage with the participants' responses, the creative non-fiction works of feminists of color, Aurora Levins Morales, Cherrie Moraga, and Audre Lorde, serve as more appropriate tools in the analyses of emotionally driven and inspired oral histories.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

This chapter presents the research practices used to establish the thesis topic prior to the investigative fieldwork in which oral histories were collected from a diverse selection of Puerto Rican activists. It reveals the methods used to choose participants, as well as the processes followed to conduct interviews that compile the case study examined in the findings and analyses of this project. Furthermore, this chapter describes certain challenges and limitations faced while engaging with research subjects in attempting to adhere to anti-racist and feminist methodologies. Lastly, it reveals the methodological strategies used to relay and interpret the participants' narratives.

Crucial elements of an anti-racist methodology ensure a research strategy of respect that resonates well with the concept of intersectionality by recognizing and valuing diverse worldviews. George J. Shea Dei describes strategies grounded in an anti-racist framework as research:

[...] that does not infantilize, patronize, or denigrate subjects. It affirms the knowledge base of the subjects of study as creators of knowledge and also as subjects that resist oppression. It also means working with the idea of multiple and collective origins, as well as collaborative dimensions of knowledge. The approach supports the idea that all parties involved can make substantive contributions to research. (11)

Selection of Participants; Interview Structure

As a researcher, one cannot propose or expect to collect oral histories representative of every type of oppression that exists in Puerto Rico. Nevertheless, an

intersectional approach facilitates a wide scope of participants across lines of sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, class, race, age, among other descriptive factors, who in some way resist one or more forms of oppression. The diversity of the participants reflects the transformative nature of my research process, one that ranges from formal interviews set up months in advance with certain organizations, to chance encounters while conducting field research.

The initial goal of this thesis was to seek out grassroots organizations mobilized by their missions to eradicate some form of social or environmental injustice. Such organization included groups defending women's rights (i.e. a reproductive rights organization and a domestic violence center), groups advocating for LGBTQ individuals or communities, and environmentalist groups. The goal was not to limit the project to these types of organizations, but they served as a starting point.

Prior to traveling to Puerto Rico to conduct research, members of *Nación Unida Pro-Ambiente* or NUPA (United Nation Pro- Environment), an environmentalist group composed primarily of students and faculty at the University of Puerto Rico (UPR), Aguadilla branch, greatly influenced the motives to conduct research centered on Puerto Rican activism. During the three and half weeks from June to July of 2009, in which the field research unfolded, members of NUPA and people close to them were extremely generous with their time and energy, participating in the research by sharing their experiences and providing a network to other activists across the island.

As a project based on the idea of intersectionality, the criteria for selecting participants encompasses a wide range of possibilities. Each participant knew in advance

the nature of the research, whether months in advance via e-mail or immediately before the interview for participants encountered unexpectedly. Thus, another criterion was each interviewee's willingness to discuss one or more forms of oppression in Puerto Rico and their responses to the consequences of those oppressions. Participants were not required to use an intersectional framework in discussing oppression, but most related at least one form of oppression to another before prompted in the interview questions. This encouraged the use of an intersectional approach as the investigative research continued.

Upon conversing with people in Puerto Rico about the intersectional topic, many expressed concern regarding the wide-ranging parameters for such a thesis project. Still, having arrived with only three officially scheduled interviews, the need arose to broaden the scope even more by encompassing people's perspectives who were not necessarily involved in organized activism. With the help of contacts at UPR Aguadilla, interviews were conducted with individuals involved in the arts, athletics, counseling, journalism, small business as well as professors and retirees, who in some way all spoke of their responses to oppression. As revealed through the collection of their oral testimonies, each person incorporated a form of activism into their own work and life by breaking past societal barriers and promoting the uplift of their community and/or natural environment in some way.

As Die's anti-racist research methodology suggests, everyone's experience in an oppressed setting deserves recognition. In tandem with the concept of intersectionality which looks at the relationships between multiple forms of oppressions such as heterosexism, gender inequality, environmental degradation, and economic oppression, it

made sense to utilize a more inclusive conceptualization of activism. An individual's effort to help alleviate the burdens of oppression experienced by people within their everyday life represents an even "deeper grassroots" activism. The ability to confront oppression in one's personal life precedes activism. Furthermore, all participants active in organizations should enact the anti-oppressive and/or environmentally conscious behavior carried out in public into their everyday lives. By considering the diverse forms of oppression that recur in Puerto Rico that impact people's sexual identity and expression, access to resources, and relation to the land, in addition to the even greater differences among peoples' responses to those injustices, intersectionality does not confine activism to a specific category and examines the ways in which responses differ and overlap.

A list of about 10-15 questions was prepared prior to each scheduled interview containing similar questions for each participant, changing slightly depending on their specific type of work. The intention was to open each interview by asking the participants what motivated them to pursue the activism or work in which they participate today. In sharing their personal experiences, most participants extended their responses to great lengths, often answering questions before they were presented, such as what they believed to be the primary causes behind certain forms of oppression and/or environmental destruction in Puerto Rico. In total, 22 people were interviewed, most engaged in dialogue between one to two hours. A few people encountered in passing briefly shared some of their views and experiences. In compiling the oral histories to use in this written product, only 9 out of 20 participants were examined in order to provide more

in depth, effective, and clearly expressed analyses of their perspectives. Still, the oral histories not included in the final project contributed immensely to a more complete understanding of activism and the conditions to which it responds in Puerto Rico. In some instances, the participants excluded from the central analyses supplement the ideas expressed by the 9 activists examined in depth. All interviews were conducted in Spanish, but most participants were bilingual to a certain extent and were able to negotiate through language barriers that potentially inhibited the comprehension of segments within their testimonies. Interviews were electronically recorded and notes were taken simultaneously, while maintaining attentive eye contact.

Participants in Puerto Rico

Of the 9 participants whose oral histories comprise the core of this thesis, 2 are introduced in this chapter to make sense of the intersectional methodology used to compile the diverse perspectives, and the challenges and limitations during the interview process. The other individual participants are presented in the proceeding findings and analyses chapter in which their perspectives are recounted and interpreted. This section briefly presents the different realms of activism in which each participant pursues their work. The forms of activism they enact encompass a wide range of grassroots work and experiences that respond to and resist one or more form of social and/or environmental oppression.

Social studies professor at the UPR Aguadilla campus, Hilda Vera, embodies an activist who works to combat oppressive ideologies and practices through her professional role as a university educator. Several students at the university expressed

the high level of respect they held for her, and encouraged her to participate in this research in attempts to better formulate the project. Her insights offered ways to better conceptualize the compilation of diverse oral histories. As one of the first interview participants, she effectively offered an introductory and theoretical perspective that dealt with the intersections of oppression and Puerto Rican's responses.

There is a tendency in me toward suspicion that makes it difficult for me to insert myself into organizations; this indicates that to some degree it would seem I function in a fragmented and individualistic way in relation to social movements. Nevertheless I feel called upon and urged by social movements. So when I hear about a rally or a movement that involves expanding rights and democracy, I will activate myself at the event.

While trying to understand myself I read some of Italian philosopher Antonio Negri's work, *Multitud* (Multitude), and his description of postmodern movements as fluid and fragmented, that a new social subject doesn't characterize itself by unity or as an entity, like *pueblo* (the people) or working class, rather as a plural movement, an expansive net that calls upon many to voice their complaints and fight. So I said "Hey! I've lived life calling myself individualistic, but am called upon by collective needs, it must have something to do with the era I live in." I have always strongly defended the rights of non-human animals for example, but if you ask me to which organization I belong, to none and to all. I may not officially belong to an organization, but my life at many times is driven mad

(trastornada) by what society does to us. (Vera)

In describing herself, Hilda questioned whether or not her perspective was even useful for a project about activists because of her resistance to join organized movements. On the contrary, her perspective helped to reveal the idea of exploring activism in a diverse and intersectional way that broadened the entire scope of this research. In her everyday life and in the classroom, Hilda works to combat the oppressive ideologies that burden human and non-human life. Others may abstain from organizations for different reasons, but still offer the potential to fight oppression in their own way and when need be in, join in mobilized events for justice.

Relating to Hilda Vera's form of individualized activism as a professor, performance arts also serve as a space in which a less orthodox form activism can respond to and resist, in the case of this project, homophobic and transphobic injustices. Organizational activism represents a more traditionally recognized form of activist work. In this project, organizational LGBTQ activism works institutional entities that foster oppression on the basis of a person's sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. Women's reproductive rights activism, which also responds to mechanisms of gender oppression, seeks to ensure women's access to reproductive health services. Athletics, particularly surfing within this project, also offer the potential to combat forms of gender oppression as well as environmental abuse. Organizational and professional environmentalism entails efforts to educate people and promote sustainable practices, in addition to physically engaging in efforts to protect natural habitats and cleaning up areas polluted by waste. Finally, the field of drug and alcohol rehabilitation counseling in

tandem with services offered to homeless members of society also exist as potential sources of significant activist work. All forms of activism intersect across notable commonalities and differences, and serve as valuable sources of anti-oppressive work. Although the work enacted by the participants' is central to the focus of this thesis, their perspectives do not necessarily recount their activist achievements, but reveal their raised consciousness relating to oppressive dynamics that prevail in Puerto Rico. Their heightened awareness of the ways in which particular forms of oppression manifest and impact people's lives, as well as the land, is fundamental to their work in that the need for activism only emerges in the face of oppression.

Challenges and Limitations in Research

A thesis project that involves relaying and analyzing the perspectives of people living within a context outside of one's own comes with certain challenges and limitations in the ability to effectively and respectfully illustrate their information. George J. Sefa Dei and Gurpreet Sing Johal's *Critical Issues in Anti-Racist Research Methodologies* establishes strategies to maneuver through the potentially problematic issues of inter cultural research.

As Dei and Johal suggest, one must recognize their relation to the research participants and the representation of self within writing that interprets the words of the participants. This is important because the interviewees who voice themselves in this research must be offered the opportunity to access the findings and analyses of their perspectives and understand why particular interpretations were made regarding their experiences. The research arguments and analyses of responses reflect the researcher's

position in society, worldview, and relation to the research subjects. Researcher criterion should include “people with whom the researchers share one or more of such identities as race, ethnicity, country of origin, class, or gender [...] an interview technique that suits contexts of interlocking and intersectionality of oppression/identities” (Dei 242). The most effective way to appropriately analyze a group or individual’s personal narrative is to live within spaces similar to those of the participants, or embody similar characteristics that subject both researcher and participant to experience forms of societal oppression.

In *Feminism without Borders*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques Western feminists’ appropriation, homogenization, and misrepresentation of Third World women’s diverse experiences (17). Her analyses of the risks involved in outsider researchers’ potential “discursive colonization” of research participants requires the researcher to conscientiously assess their relationship to the participants, in this case, as a middle-class man born and raised in the U.S. who can physically pass as white. The unwarranted privileges associated with these descriptive categories provide the option to discursively colonize participants while conducting graduate research in Puerto Rico. Simultaneously, Mohanty’s own self-reflection of her identity that places her “inside” as well as “under” Western eyes speaks to the shifting contours of the researcher’s identity in this project, as a first generation Puerto Rican born in the U.S. (228). The extent of the methodological challenges and limitations as a researcher depends on the colonialist residue carried from a U.S. environment and personal experiences, or lack thereof, with certain types of oppression which manifest themselves differentially among the people who share their oral histories.

Engagement with some participants reveals the ways in which potential discursive colonization was successfully overcome, and also demonstrates my challenges and limitations in attempting to do so. The ability to speak Spanish, enhanced by familial and cultural ties to the island, contributed significantly to the friendships that facilitated access to many of the research participants and subsequently fostered a more open and comfortable dialogues with interview subjects.

One interview, with Desi Luis Soto, who carries out his activism through the performing arts as a *transformista* (transformist), particularly illustrates significant challenges and limitations in the research process. The first encounter with Desi Luis happened completely by chance in Isabela at a gay bar and dance club that was physically isolated on a remote area of the beach. Segregated from “straight bars,” the bar’s location seemed representative of the heterosexist and patriarchal silencing and invisibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer peoples in Puerto Rico. Upon conversing with him, Desi Luis explained his work as a *transformista*, which he defines as an artist of transformation or imitation, and agreed to participate in an interview.

Residual colonialist assumptions, in tandem with exposure to U.S. gender studies as a graduate student, heavily influenced the challenges and methodological flaws encountered with Desi Luis. First, the interview revealed the potential as a gay researcher to elicit heterosexist tendencies. Rather than utilizing the protocol of other interviews, inquiring about the motivations driving him to pursue the work he carries out today, his interview began by asking in which ways he felt oppressed as a gay man and *transformista*. His facial expression upon hearing the broad request reflected his

disconcerted response: “Well great, so you want me to go on like mad man?” (Soto). Although Desi Luis proceeded to eloquently unfold his story, his immediate reaction indicated the methodological fault in such a question. Initiating his interview in this way surrendered to the heterosexist tendency viewing Desi Luis as a victim of oppression, rather than an agent resisting oppression, as other participants were perceived. A more appropriate question consistent with the other interviews should have asked which experiences led him to develop his art as a *transformista*, which did not arise until a subsequent interview.

While discussing with Desi Luis the inclusiveness of movements among members of *el ambiente* (a term used to describe LGBTQ people in Puerto Rico), another methodological challenge surfaced. When asked about his perceptions of “queer” identity and its prevalence in Puerto Rico, Desi Luis expressed that he was not familiar with term. The immediate guilt and unease felt as a researcher for projecting such an assumption prompted a description of the identity, as understood through the researcher’s worldview, and repetition of the question. To this Desi Luis responded: “Queer? Queer? I’m sorry, but this is the first time I’ve ever heard the word, that's why I'm lost right now and may seem ignorant and brute" (Soto). As a researcher, the impulsive reaction to feeling guilty is indicative of residual Western feminism and exemplifies Mohanty’s reference to Western feminists’ ineffective use of guilt in response to their inability to understand non-Western experience. Desi Luis’ interview proved the most challenging for a researcher attempting to adhere to anti-racist feminist methodologies, and for this

required the acquisition of a follow up interview to clarify and elaborate topics inhibited during his first narrative due methodological faults.

In bringing together the oral histories and analyzing the findings, one must be careful not to generalize the participants and Puerto Ricans as a whole. Individual accounts cannot be posed as representative of a groups' experience until overlaps occur in the analyses of diverse research participants (Dei 254). The broad scope of this project ultimately sought to analyze individuals' responses to oppression, and in doing intentionally perceived research participants as potential victims of oppression who may not identity with that perception. Therefore, this thesis portrays each participant as an activist and not an oppressed individual. Intersectionality functions as the driving force of this project through the diversity among participants and also through the concept of oral histories itself. "Oral history is an important source of data, and the researcher deals with the whole person of the subjects, including their spirituality and relationships with others and with nature" (Dei 254). Each interview successfully ended on a positive note asking interviewees about their visions of the future. Though some did not foresee an end to social and environmental injustices in Puerto Rico, each expressed hope and looked forward to personal fulfillment.

Interpretation of Participants' Oral Histories

The participants who share their experiences in this project exhibit their agency in responding to one or more forms of intersecting oppression. The trajectory from agency to activism exists as a fundamental component to understanding each participant's oral history. Agency encompasses the strategies that people use to survive against the

conditions that oppress their lives. Agency manifests itself when individuals take it upon themselves to confront or attempt to escape the obstacles of their everyday life. When these survival strategies move from individual responses to actions that combat oppression, agency unfolds into the potential for activism. Activism then manifests itself as individuals strategize and put into action practices that fight oppression on a larger scale. This can encompass working with others to alleviate shared and individual oppression, as well as seeking fundamental changes in the systems of power and social dynamics that perpetuate struggles for Puerto Ricans and their land.

The findings and analyses of the activists' oral testimonies in chapter 4 introduce each participant within the distinct realms of their activist work. The oral histories are all translated by the researcher from Spanish to English, leaving in place certain words to enhance the narrative voices of the activists and make use of colloquial Puerto Rican dialect. Though intersectional, the categorization separating the activists' responses serves to provide an easier reading of their perspectives.

Hilda Vera's form of individualized activism as a professor opens the categorical sequence. Desi Luis' work as a performing artist follows, preceding organizational LGBTQ activism. From there, organizational reproductive rights activism is explored which leads into the feminist and environmentalist potential of surfing. Then, organizational and professional environmentalism is examined, and finally light is shed on the activism that takes place in substance abuse counseling and homeless shelter organizing. Among these diverse sectors of activist work intersections thrive, which showcase similarities and differences between participants. The recognition of those

intersections provides a base from which possibilities emerge for a more inclusive anti-oppressive movement.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS & ANALYSES

This chapter argues that intersectionality connects the participants' diverse responses and recognizes each different form activism takes. These connections and the recognition of the versatile forms activism takes demonstrate what an inclusive movement needs to consider. This argument offers each participant's experience and response equal consideration. In reference to comparing or contrasting people's experiences with oppression, Cherrie Moraga emphasizes: "The danger lies in ranking the oppressions [...] *in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression*" (Loving 44). The refusal to rank oppressions is a refusal to place one's own experience before that of another. This refusal supports efforts to offer equal worth to each participant's work and perspective in the proceeding analyses. To support the argument that intersectionality connects the activists responses by revealing significant commonalities and differences, three components emerge from each participant's oral history: the conditions motivating activist responses, the formation of the participants' identities, and the current obstacles which make activists' work necessary.

This chapter explains the logic behind utilizing motivations, identities, and obstacles to effectively support the intersectional relationships among the participants' responses. It goes on to on to divide the nine participants' responses into five distinct categories: individualized activism, LGBTQ activism, feminist activism, environmental activism, and addiction/homelessness prevention activism, tracing the three fundamental activist components within each grouping.

Activism: Motivations, Identities, and Obstacles

When asked what personally drove each participant to pursue the righteous role they carry out, responses ranged from adolescent struggles to conflicts in adulthood. This speaks to the idea of working from the ‘inside out’: experiencing or witnessing oppression, responding with agency, and then taking action at a greater level. In order to ever assess effective change, people must recognize the impact of intersecting forms of oppression on the specificities of different peoples’ experiences. This inside out process entails the emotional reactions felt personally by each participant in relation to their struggles and those of others. “Without an emotional, heartfelt grappling with the source of our own oppression, without naming the enemy within ourselves and outside of us, no authentic, nonhierarchical connection among oppressed groups can take place” (Moraga, Loving 44). The emotional sources of activist motivation fundamentally bind the participants to their work and make activism a central force in their everyday lives.

Although these forms of oppression stem from European and U.S. colonization, the effects vary to different degrees according to each individual’s experience. As quoted by Laura María Agustín, in his attempt to locate the cause of homophobia, Jeffrey Weeks explains: “the way to do this is not to seek out a single causative factor [...] what are the conditions for the emergence of this particular form of regulation of sexual behavior in this particular society?” (136). Thus, in addition to taking into account the colonial legacy of oppression that supports recurrent forms of oppression, an analysis of the activists’ responses requires an examination of how oppression specifically manifests and impacts each participant’s life. Similarly, in describing the personal motivations

underpinning their activist work, the participants depict the conditions under which their worldviews began to take shape.

Resonant of the inside out process that fosters agency and activism in the participants' lives, Cherrie Moraga explains the significance of origins in identity formation. "[T]he foundation [of our families] is the earth beneath the floorboards of our homes. We must split wood, dig bare-fisted into the packed dirt to find out what we really have to hold in our hands as ground" (*Loving* iv). Just as uncovering the true history of colonization enables a more complete understanding of the oppressions at work today, confronting one's past is crucial in the negotiation of her or his identity. Each activist must know who they are before attempting to reach out to others. Identities enable activists to understand who they are in relation to the people they seek to help.

In tandem with the varied responses to intersectional forms of oppression, emerge identities that individuals negotiate in order to better understand and represent themselves within their environment. Self-proclaimed identities speak to an individual's recognition of her or himself in relation to their historical, political, social, and personal contexts. The activists whose words compile this project claim identities that are specific to each person, but overlap in their development and attributes. Each participant's multi-faceted identity expression demonstrates another intersection that connects the different forms of activism. The negotiation between distinct, sometimes competing, identities within an individual, reflect the diverse historical, ethnic, and environmental factors that influence the prescription of a Puerto Rican national identity.

The fact that each participant carries out their work in Puerto Rico links their identities as activists who combat the oppression that affects their own people. This speaks to the concept of “identity politics” as described in the Combahee River Collective Statement (a document central to Black U.S. feminism): “We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else’s oppression” (Eisenstein 2). For the voices of that collective statement and the activists explored here, the most effective way to combat oppression and help uplift the individuals affected by oppression is to do so within their own context, a context they know better than any other. The multi-faceted and intersecting identities of the activists in their current work emerge from this identity politic that prevails in the face of constant obstacles geared to inhibit their efforts.

The participants here relate the obstacles they encounter as activists to the systems of education, religion, and government at work in Puerto Rico. Some look at the trinity combining each system as the fundamental cause of the obstacles they face. Backed by the agents of U.S. colonialism, government policies utilize religion to legitimize conservative doctrines that then influence the limits of institutionalized education. This colonial trinity fosters the oppressive ideals prevailing among some Puerto Ricans that cause them to suffer, as well as perpetuate, intersectional forms of oppression.

4.1: Individualized Activism

Hilda Vera feels a close connection to social and environmental movements, but resists participation in any type of organization. Hilda describes this resistance as keeping a “low profile.”

I have a strong aspiration for democracy, a real democracy based on equity. I admire the loyalty of mobilized groups, but will not be inside of any. *Me falta aire* (I can't breathe) with the rituals and tendencies toward hierarchy common in organizations. Perhaps I am anti-organization, anarchist, or individualistic, but I can't do it! (Vera)

Nevertheless, Hilda carries out her form of activism in the classroom and in her everyday life, as will be discussed in the next section of this chapter. Her motivation to seek a "real democracy" developed during her upbringing and as a response to the oppression she witnessed. She recounts how her first instinctive concern was for non-human animals. Unable to pinpoint what initially inspired this concern, she remembers her inclination to save a dead butterfly, the insistence that her parents take in stray dogs after a hurricane, and her "secret friendship" with the big bad wolf from *Caperucita Roja* (Little Red Riding Hood): "How could the wolf be the villain when there was a hunter in the same story? My parents were not environmentalists and did not influence this questioning in me. My first feelings of solidarity, though very primitive and irrational, were with non-human animals." Hilda further reveals how the nuns who taught her in middle and high school served to foster a sense of awareness in her:

I am not religious, I have had mystical experiences, but I have problems with religions, especially if they are fundamentalist. But these three nuns, very non-traditional, and I have to admit *estadounidenses* (from the U.S.), taught me about love with the Beatles [she laughs]. If I raised my hand and proclaimed this life is relative, and that I was in support of abortion,

they wouldn't condemn me as a sinner, but tell me to do my research and bring them my proposal. They opened a space for me and other students to volunteer in hospitals with children. They were vital in helping bring out a potential in me. Aside from their influence, I would say that living through the 1960s, the Vietnam War, and the Peace Movement played a significant role in my life. (Vera)

Hilda realized her personal connection to LGBTQ struggles after her son came out of the closet. She shares how he refers to her as “an abnormal mother” for not passing judgment on his sexual orientation. Hilda calls this her “activism in the home” that goes beyond tolerance. As she expresses: “I can’t stand it when people say ‘Oh, I tolerate the homosexuals,’ or ‘*los homosexuals son tan buenos* (homosexuals are such good people).’ Those comments rob them of their rights and equality!” (Vera). Hilda’s familial connection to her son’s struggle reveals how mere acceptance is not enough in overcoming oppression. To combat homophobia a fundamental shift must be made in people’s minds that view sexually oppressed individuals as abnormalities who must be tolerated or tokenized.

Hilda Vera takes her discussion a step further explaining how Puerto Rico’s colonial relationship with the U.S. increasingly complicates the lives and work of oppressed people and activists:

We are in a constant struggle here in Puerto Rico, there are so many problems that arise from our colonial relationship with the U.S., we are isolated from the rest of the world and forced to depend on the U.S. Over

half of our population needs federal assistance to survive, that means over half of our population lives in the margins, even if people don't understand it in this way. You open the newspaper, and half of it is filled with stupid feuds between political parties, which I hate to death! The problems I have with organizations do not come close to what I feel for political parties. They take our focus away from the real problems we have here. Other societies have attempted to deal with issues like violence, some have made accomplishments, others have failed, but here the colonial vision covers up the factors that cause violence. Other places have legalized drugs for medicinal purposes because they responded to health problems in their society. There is so much resistance here to go *más allá de la colonia* (beyond the colony). I'm not saying that the problems here don't happen in other places, but here the colonial relationship magnifies our problems, complicates our ability to find solutions. They say we live in a democracy, but how could we call this a democracy when the decisions regarding our biggest problems are made in the U.S. congress. They [U.S.] don't give us enough space to make decisions. I'm not saying there is a one right solution, but we need space to determine and attempt solving our problems. We end up working against each other. But see the beauty in dramatic moments, like Vieques or the recent massive layoff, when multiple groups unite. We develop commonalities that show us a vision of what could be. (Vera)

Hilda points to the ways in which the U.S. ensures its superiority and control over Puerto Rico to establish the economically oppressive structure that creates the physical and emotional struggles in people's everyday lives. The U.S. imposes its false sense of democracy onto Puerto Rico's government and makes legislative decisions that do not take into account the lived experiences of colonized people. These legislative decisions refuse to properly allocate the necessary funds and resources that schools and communities need to help alleviate the problems they encounter. The economically oppressive conditions keep the majority of Puerto Ricans below the poverty line causing them to depend on government assistance.

Hilda offers a detailed account of the ways in which Puerto Rico's colonial legacy ties into prevailing forms of oppression, tying together the negative relationship between education and the government. She explains how the effects of colonial dependency on the U.S. inflict and amplifies the social and environment problems the activists work against:

Fundamentally, there is a lack of solidarity. This sounds *cursi* (cheesy), but its *un asunto de amor* (matter of love), a matter of respect, not love as in *feely, touchy touchy*, but respect that goes beyond tolerance. Respect is fundamental and they don't teach us in schools how to respect one another, for this our education system has failed, but the education system is mounted on the socio economic system. If the socio economic system prioritizes capital, the sectors in society with money use their power to influence political campaigns to justify their privilege. Then the people

left in the margins are *jodidos* (fucked). The political and economic structure has stolen our souls. If I want to respect others, if I want to feel solidarity with others, I need to respect myself, I have to feel esteem for my life and for my group. (Vera)

Hilda points out the downfalls of the education system that reproduce oppression with each generation. She makes explicit that the government is at fault for the limitations within the education system. The individualistic political and education structure that fragments the potential for solidarity does not teach people how to respect themselves, much less respect others. Her reference to this goes back to the inside out process essential to pursuing activism, one must first combat the internal struggles of oppression within her or himself before attempting to work with others to fight oppression at higher level.

A more individualized form of activism "called upon by collective needs," as Hilda Vera describes, speaks to the role Desi Luis Soto carries out in *el ambiente* as both individual and artist. Through his artistry as a *transformista*, he engages and mobilizes members of *el ambiente* on a Saturday night or in the annual *Parada Gay* (Gay Pride Parade). Desi Luis shares how the influence of his family in relation to gender categories and heterosexism, which attempted to oppress him in his youth, contributed to his confident stage presence and aspirations to pursue his art as a *transformista*.

I was raised exclusively by women. With the exception of my father, my contact with other men was minimal during my childhood. The name Desi already carries a feminine connotation. The first forms of rejection I

felt from people outside my family targeted my name and the feminine mannerisms I projected having been surrounded by so many women. I never fulfilled what was expected of a “normal” man. This led to discrimination and *burlas* (mockery) in school. But I want to make clear that I was always very open with myself, what other people thought did not make me feel bad. Adolescence was a harder time, but after being labeled feminine for so long I began to interact with a lot of people from *el ambiente*. Then people would ask me: ‘Are you gay? Are you straight?’ I know that I am gay because of my attraction to men, *punto* (end of discussion). I feel gay, but have a bisexual preference. This is where the conflict lies: I picked up the mannerisms of the women that raised me and I am attracted to men like the women I grew up with, but physically I am attracted to both sexes. Rejection gets a lot worse after adolescence in terms of finding and maintaining a job. By the time I was 25, I felt *medio viejo* (like an old man basically) because I had already experienced so much. Now at 37 though, I feel like I’m 27. (Soto)

The agency of Desi Luis’s family nurtured his growth without passing judgment upon his presumed sexuality or feminine mannerisms, and later to support his art as a *transformista*, enabled him to navigate through the oppression at work in his life. He recognizes how homophobia and sexism drove others to mock him, but his family security prevented those forms of oppression from infiltrating his life to the extent of some sexually oppressed people who remain closeted for a lifetime or turn to suicide in

escape. His own agency is emphasized by this unapologetic recognition of the connection between being raised by women and his sexual orientation and exhibition of “feminine” characteristics. He does not reject femininity like those who rejected him for displaying it, and does not consider his attraction towards men a burden.

My family is *muy open-mind*, don’t ask, don’t tell. I never sat down with them to talk about my sex life, but that isn’t something that needs to be discussed with your family. They know what kind of work I do though and have come to support me at my shows. I had a normal upbringing.

It’s because I was raised by women that I did not become a “normal” man.

(Soto)

Based on his own experience, Desi Luis considers family orientation as fundamental in the continuation of, or resistance against, oppression. “Families *están al garete* (are out of control), there is no communication between parents and children. Parents expect school to do it, but education begins in the home [...] Family is your first school; you always carry that school with you” (Soto). In addition to his resilience, Desi Luis acquired the attributes and skills he uses now as a *transformista* performer and activist. He reminisces: “I have studied my art since I was a child. I used to sing into the mirror imitating Iris Chacón. I always loved acting and my mom took me to dance classes” (Soto). Desi Luis brings the talent he learned in the company of his family onto the stage today and reproduces the support they gave him with the young trans performers he teaches today.

Desi Luis explains how his identity as a gay man, with bisexual physical

attractions, and a *transformista*, causes others within *el ambiente* to oppress him. He explains his conception of the differences between transgender, transsexual, transvestite, and *transformista* identities, and how failure to recognize those differences influences others to misjudge his identity. There exist many other gender and sexual identities, and the definition of each varies depending on the individual who chooses to use a specific term to describe their identity, if that person uses female or male pronouns at all. Desi Luis explains how confusion surrounding transvestite identities (for him indicates cross dressing for more than artistic purposes) influences others to wrongfully discriminate against him:

People are very poorly oriented; I feel rejection because so many confuse me with a *travesti* (transvestite). This is especially true in trying to find a partner. If people see me wearing a wig, dress, and high heels, they immediately believe I am *travesti*, and a lot of people assume that if you go out dressed as a woman you are a prostitute. I am marginalized because of this. It has been years since anyone has approached me [with romantic interests] because of his ignorance. The way you see me now is how you will see me tonight and tomorrow, but come Saturday night you'll see me on the stage dressed as a woman [...] What I do is art, not a lifestyle. (Soto)

Desi Luis' experience brings up several issues surrounding the oppression of LGBTQ people. As a gay man he is deprived a romantic partner because of other men's assumptions that he is a transvestite. Along with this false assumption, people who do

identify as transvestites are stereotyped as sex workers. This serves as just one example Desi Luis offers of the discrimination perpetrated among LGBTQ peoples in Puerto Rico.

Desi Luis also enacts his activism as an educator to young artists, some who claim trans identities and other who do not, but perform dressed as women. The group calls themselves New Western Divas (they hail from the west side of the island). Desi Luis assists them in mastering their stage talent and helps facilitate their desired physical presentation. Such a role subverts greatly from the curriculum offered in institutionalized education. Desi Luis' dedication to the New Western Divas reflects in his refusal to give up his art in exchange for the possibility of finding a romantic partner. He proclaims:

Even if I gave up dressing like a woman, I would not be guaranteed a partner overnight. I have been known too long as Desire, the *transformista*. Regardless, I would never give up something I love to do, something I have worked so hard to develop, just to get a partner. More importantly, *mis niñas* (my girls) [the New Western Divas] have worked far too hard for me to let them down now. (Soto)

Desi Luis' refusal to give up his activist role as an educator speaks to his identity politics. Audre Lorde elaborates: "I think that we teach best those things we need to learn from our own survival. So as we learn them, we reach back and teach, and it becomes a joint process. [...] We learn from that interaction that takes place in the spaces between what is in the books and ourselves" (Hall 152). Each activist who incorporates education into their activist identity exhibits the potential for educators to foster radical transformations in the way future generations experience, interpret, and resist oppression. The limits of

the education system exist as one of the major obstacles that confront the activists represented in this project. The persistence of obstacles that complicate their work also necessitates the continuation of their activism.

Desi Luis goes deeper to describe how the fragmentation of oppressed people plays out in the discrimination he receives within LGBTQ movements. He discusses his experiences as a performer at the annual Gay Pride Parade:

This past year we [New Western Divas and him] had a lot of success at the parade, the public loved our shows and we got to work again with the celebrities who support us like La India and Glenn Monroig. However, we decided we will not go to the next parade because of the ways some other gay and lesbian activists discriminated against us again this year. Some years we have had to beg to perform because some activists at the parade claim we contribute to the negative stereotypes of *el ambiente*. When they reject us, they reject our art. Other *transformistas* may have different experiences, but this has been mine. Perhaps some lesbian activists reject us because there end up being more men on stage than woman. Regardless, how can they tell the government they deserve the same rights as straight people, when they treat us inferior and think what we do is wrong? We cannot stop the humiliation or marginalization we experience, when the same discrimination goes on within *el ambiente* for whatever reason. (Soto)

The potential for activists to act out these examples of oppressive discrimination gives into the divide and conquer ideology of colonization that pits people against one another to hinder the solidarity needed to overcome and fight oppression. The belief that trans performers feed into the societal stereotypes held against members of *el ambiente* represents an assimilation strategy used in some social movements. The lesbian and gay activists Desi Luis mentions use such a strategy in attempting to gain legal rights by proving they share similarities with heterosexuals and deserve equal rights. In proving their similarities, the activists he discusses prove themselves capable of discriminating against people they deem inferior. An activist movement founded on such values proves ineffective, fracturing the potential solidarity of *el ambiente* and giving credence to the hierarchal structure of colonization. Desi Luis expresses how the activists, who reject him, reject his art as a *transformista*. For transgender or transsexual individuals, such discrimination rejects their identities and excludes them from the vision of a more inclusive society.

Desi Luis continues his discussion naming the types discrimination that exist within *el ambiente* and reflect the fragmentation among all members of society. He expresses that people reject and discriminate each other on the basis of skin color, body size, drug and alcohol consumption, social status, employment, and material possessions. Desi Luis resists giving into all those motives towards oppressive treatment, but reveals that he is “*straight-fóbico*” (straight-phobic). “It’s a crazy idea, but since homophobia exists I maintain a certain distance from straight people. You never know what to expect from them, one day they are your friend and the next day they won’t speak to you”

(Soto). Though such a sentiment exemplifies a form of discrimination, it serves as a survival strategy against oppression and can not be equated to the unwarranted homophobia people enact without question in a heterosexist society.

Desi Luis' straight-phobia relates to the Pedro's description of the distrust felt by homeless people reacting to their struggles against intense forms of discrimination. These responses speak to the need for heterosexual people, and others alike who have the option to perpetuate oppression, to actively prove their resistance to the social structures and colonial legacy administering discrimination among Puerto Ricans. To effectively combat oppression in its multiple forms, oppressed people should not be forced to prove their ability to assimilate to the dominant culture. On the contrary, authoritative government officials and people in their everyday lives must prove their ability to overcome the colonial influence that tells them to secure whatever form of privilege they hold by oppressing others.

4.2: LGBTQ Activism

Roberto Pastrana Pages, is one of the coordinators for *Puerto Rico para Tod@s* (PRpT), (Puerto Rico for Everyone), an organization born from the need to create a more inclusive society for all Puerto Ricans that is presently focused on LGBTQ activism. The group was founded by Pedro Julio Serrano, an openly gay, Puerto Rican politician who now works for the Gay and Lesbian Task Force in New York City. Roberto describes the struggles he faced due to the rampant homophobia in his Baptist high school. He explained how, in an institution founded on conservative religious beliefs, sexual expression of any kind is considered taboo and how that stigmatization increases tenfold

for homosexual expression. As a young person that was not sexually active or openly gay during his high school years, he described how other students projected their hateful homophobia upon him.

I was labeled a *pato* (Puerto Rican derogatory slang for a gay male) and along with the label came stereotypes that didn't represent what I was like at all. Being taunted as a *pato* inhibited me from being able to understand my own sexual identity because I started believing in the stereotypes myself. It became worse as my own hormones and sexual desires began to develop [...] I was already viewed as gay, discriminated against because of it, and still had to repress my sexuality. It felt like an overdose of heterosexuality all around me. (Pastrana Pages)

Roberto's repression demonstrates how heterosexism and homophobia severely infiltrate teenage spaces in Puerto Rico, reflective of LGBTQ youth's experiences in the U.S. His individual experience carries heavy colonial weight that reflects his place in the colonial history of Puerto Rico. By imposing an identity on him equipped with a name, *pato*, and a set of characteristics that he did not use to describe himself, the students projecting this homophobia were influenced by historical legacies in which agents of colonization felt entitled to rename and define, in their own terms, the identities of people against their will. This relates back to Patricia Hill Collins' analysis of the colonial relationship between racism and heterosexism that perpetuates homophobia among people of African descent (97). The religious teachings of the school also legitimized homophobia, allowing the harassment by Roberto's peers to continue and giving him

more reason to deny his sexuality. As a result, the isolation Roberto felt denied him agency beyond remaining closeted and sexually inactive until he entered college at UPR Río Piedras, a space not burdened with the same religious fervor as his high school and a space where he could explore sources of information in the classroom and through the internet that countered the homophobic discourses prevalent during his adolescent education.

Once at the university, Roberto's agency manifested in his choice to seek out activist groups on campus more open to diverse sexualities. This decision brought him into contact with more like minded people. This facilitated his coming out. Collins' relation of the "prison" to the metaphorical "closet" for LGBTQ people sheds light on the libratory experience of coming out that proves vital to one's activist capability (93). Furthermore, this supports the 'inside out' process to activism: before Roberto attempts to assist other LGBTQ individuals that suffer oppression, both in and out of the closet, he must confront his own sexuality.

After coming out, he took his first steps toward activism when he protested a radio DJ's homophobic remarks: "*La homosexualidad se apaga con la muerte*" (Homosexuality can only be extinguished by death). Roberto wrote a letter to the newspaper *El Nuevo Día* which published his response. In the letter he denounced the DJ's homophobia, taking an active stance that publicly introduced his name with an anti-heterosexist perspective. His motivation to write the letter encouraged Roberto to further step into his activism by opposing homophobia face to face. Roberto took his next step at

a communications forum held at the university that discussed several themes, including homosexuality in the media.

At the forum a journalism professor in attendance expressed the importance of reporting on and respecting all people in the media, including homosexuals. However, he went on to say that he did not condone the 'gay lifestyle' he witnessed at gay pride parades, citing the story of Adam and Eve as justification, and did not want his children exposed to it. As this professor received applause for his staunch homophobia, Roberto stood up. "I felt so indignant, but still not having had much activist experience was nervous, shaking as I spoke: 'It's inconceivable to claim you have respect for anyone when you criticize someone for the way they look or express themselves!'" Roberto too received applause, but as Shariana Núñez (sociology student from UPR Aguadilla) mentions: "It's easy for people to claim they aren't homophobic, but they won't dare be vocal about it. In class they say they aren't homophobic, but when I ask them if they support gay marriage, they answer no!" Such apathy among most students to not speak out against homophobia indicates how silence works as a tool to repress LGBTQ people, as well as inhibit others' recognition of that oppression. Roberto effectively broke his silence by coming out and then voicing his opposition to homophobia. The persistence of silence among much of Puerto Rico's student population exemplifies the necessity for Roberto to advocate for the rights of LGBTQ individuals and communities.

As part of a journalism class assignment, Roberto interviewed LGBTQ rights activist Pedro Julio Serrano (founder of PRpT), about his life, the issues faced by people marginalized because of their gender and/or sexuality in Puerto Rico, and his work as an

advocate for LGBTQ rights. This class assignment led Pedro Julio Serrano to invite Roberto to be part of PRpT. In the organization he became co-coordinator with Nahomi Galindo Malavé whose story also reflects the ‘inside out’ process to activism.

At an early age Nahomi began to question the suffering among the people within her community in Cataño, one of the poorest sectors in Puerto Rico. Nahomi grew up middle class, but living in close proximity to public housing she witnessed many forms of class oppression and the violence that can result from it, including domestic violence. Nahomi’s activism stems from her initial reactions to the injustices she observed and the awareness she generated as a result.

Since very young I saw people, to whom I was close and loved very much, that suffered and lived through discrimination because of their sexual orientation and I questioned that, just as I questioned domestic violence. When you see a woman suffer, when you hear people say she had it coming [...] nobody deserves to be violated against her will, nobody! I saw the contradictions in human beings when people around me claimed to love someone, like a family member, but not accept her or his sexuality. How can you love someone, spend time with them, and still believe that their lifestyle is inherently wrong?

Her awareness of heterosexism developed then, witnessing the contradictory views held by family members about gay and bisexual family friends. These contradictions, resonant of the journalism professor’s comments mentioned earlier, encouraged Nahomi to be a lawyer. Once in college Nahomi discovered that a law

degree did not necessarily correlate to justice, where upon she chose alternatives that spoke more directly to the struggles she witnessed in her youth.

I switched to humanities and directed my studies towards history, which I was very passionate about. I really like to study, understand, and analyze how the power relations are constructed that create the conjuncture with the body and gender. I don't come from an academic family and the development hasn't been easy for a young woman within these spaces, but my efforts have proven worthwhile and little by little many people have come to value and recognize my work. My curiosity for issues surrounding power, the body, and gender influenced my decision to write an undergraduate thesis about same sex marriage. At that time it still was not an issue discussed in public or the media, so I had no real base to begin my research. So one of my best friends, who is gay, set up an interview for me with Pedro Julio Serrano [...] Soon after I activated myself in the organization PRpT. (Galindo Malavé).

Like Roberto, Nahomi became involved with PRpT by way of an interview with Pedro Julio Serrano. Additionally, in response to the oppression suffered and witnessed growing up, both activists used higher education as a space to foster a broader understanding of their experiences at a systematic level. Aurora Levins Morales speaks to this in describing her own agency in recovering from sexual abuse: "I started graduate school and therapy within two weeks of each other because at some level I understood that the two processes were intimately linked. Politicizing the abuse, coming to

understand its social context [...] made it possible to recover (Levins Morales, Medicine 3). Roberto broke down the built up repression that manifested during years of homophobic ridicule and worked to release his own voice in the process. Nahomi consciously chose to study the historical and political factors behind the intersectional oppressions of class, gender, and sexuality that surrounded her youth.

The policing of gender and sexuality contributes significantly to the persistence of oppression for Puerto Ricans in diverse ways. Roberto and Nahomi both identify themselves as feminists, recognizing how intersectionality links women's oppression to that of other trans people and gay men. As a gay man who has been closeted, openly identifying as gay offers Roberto the potential to influence others to confront their repressed sexual expressions and work towards sexual freedom. Understanding the causes of sexual oppression facilitates an even greater sense of liberation by showing how homophobia and transphobia are not inherent cultural components, rather products of colonization and patriarchy that prescribe gender roles. Roberto illustrates this understanding by explaining how feminism became part of his identity:

When attempting to understand what I represent as a homosexual, I looked at all the other gay men I knew and how different we all were from one another, but how each of our different representations involves gender in some way. Fighting against homophobia is fighting machismo, it is a feminist struggle rooted in gender. Gender manifests in your home and on the street [...] the roles in the home, women inside, men outside [...]

Transgender people are the most oppressed in society and the most

marginalized within the movement because of this. Gay and lesbian people have the closet to use as defense; trans people don't have that option. For people who need a sex change, there are no resources. Access to health for trans people must be made a priority. (Pastrana Pages)

Feminist theorizing, which recognizes gender as an oppressive social construct, helped Roberto negotiate that part of his identity. In addition, it fostered a better understanding of the exclusion and struggles of trans people in Puerto Rico. Gay and lesbian people rupture heterosexual gender norms by engaging in same sex relationships. Some same sex couples may utilize the prescribed gender binary in negotiating their own identities, but still threaten the ideological mold of the nuclear family that enforces societal oppression at large for all who cannot conform to its structure. Trans people threaten that oppressive structure to a greater extent by dismantling the patriarchal attempts to equate gender norms with biological predispositions. The incorporation of feminism into Roberto's identity fuels his efforts to fight gender based oppression on several fronts.

Nahomi identifies herself as a queer feminist: "Recognizing *who* creates heterosexuality and homosexuality, queer feminist is the title I can accept at this time in my life" (Galindo Malavé). The "who" she targets are the agents of colonization who extend patriarchal gender norms. The title queer places her activist work in a LGBTQ movement into her identity. Through her own life experiences in Cataño and exposure to the varied types of feminism developed in college, Nahomi has long been aware of the public/private sphere dichotomy used to mandate "proper" roles for men and women.

She expresses how her family origins helped to foster her activism today: “My family was never organized politically or academically, but it is because of them, because of everyday experiences, that I am an activist. In people’s everyday lives there is always resistance” (Galindo Malavé). This resonates with the feminist mantra of the personal as political: “political oppression is always experienced personally by someone” (Loving iv). Her connection to home also speaks to the inside out process of identity formation. Nahomi not only reacts to the foundations of gender roles, but also to her own family foundations as both impact the ways in which she responds to oppression.

Roberto and Nahomi, Puerto Ricans active in their homeland, are part of a developing LGBTQ movement. Roberto explains: “The movement here is small. There are more conservative members that mostly deal with AIDS prevention, as well as more leftist members affiliated with other movements. There is much more mobilization in other parts of the world” (Pastrana Pages). Nahomi further describes how other environmental, feminist, and workers’ movements have all experienced high points in their achievements. “The [LGBTQ] movement has yet to have experienced its peak. The highest point perhaps was the abolition of the anti-sodomy law that made us more ample to mobilize” (Galindo Malavé). The former policy made illegal relationships and sexual activities between same sex partners, existed as another form of government sanctioned justification for the persistence of homophobia (La Fountain-Stokes 93). Still, the abolishment of the anti-sodomy law offers a sign of progress to encourage Roberto and Nahomi’s dedication to reach a peak for the LGBTQ rights movement. The success of

LGBTQ movements in other parts of the world offers Roberto a vision of what he hopes to see in Puerto Rico.

Roberto considers contemporary Christian fundamentalism a dominant force behind the anti-LGBTQ sentiments contributing to discrimination and oppression within Puerto Rico and its schools:

There is a fundamentalist movement here with many ties to the U.S. fundamentalist church. Just like after the 1898 invasion when the Protestants from the U.S. spread across the island and started to evangelize, promoting annexation and assimilation. Since Puerto Rico's legal system is inserted into the U.S. system, we see how a lot of the [LGBTQ] debates here over the past years are the same as those over there [U.S.], debates over anti-discrimination laws for employment, anti-sodomy laws, and same sex marriage. Right now, I believe the fundamentalist movement pushes hardest to maintain discriminatory laws and influence homophobia among people, especially against the rise of LGBTQ movements. (Pastrana Pages)

With this statement Roberto makes explicit how the impact of the Christian fundamentalist movement reproduces the use of religion as a colonialist tool to govern Puerto Rico. The same religious figures who encourage complacency to colonial rule, indoctrinate heterosexism and homophobia as cultural norms supposedly justified by Christianity. By pointing to the similarities present in the mainland U.S. and its colonial

territory regarding LGBTQ struggles, Roberto highlights how the U.S. government perpetuates the oppressive dynamics at work in Puerto Rico.

As part of a broader, still developing, LGBTQ movement on the island, PRpT fights for legislative reform and advocates for the individuals burdened by gender and sexual oppression. Nahomi extends Roberto's discussion by explaining how fundamentalism, patriarchy, and capitalism work together to entrench heterosexism and homophobia in legislation and people's everyday lives.

Neither system [fundamentalism, patriarchy, and capitalism] cancels out the other. Personally, I do not believe in the institution of marriage because of its patriarchal foundations, but I will always support all people having the option to marry. For people with limited financial resources, prohibiting same sex marriage denies them the economic benefits of marriage that a lot of people need to survive. (Galindo Malave).

The intersections of class and sexual oppression that Nahomi points out demonstrate how capitalism enforces the patriarchal, often religious based institution of marriage. Aside from the social and religious doctrines that make marriage seem essential to people's lives, the economic benefits it offers reveal how it contributes to class oppression for partners prohibited to marry because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The U.S.'s jurisdiction over Puerto Rico's legal system presents another major obstacle for PRpT's efforts geared towards legal reform. As long as discriminatory legislation persists in the U.S., the chances for reform in Puerto Rico remain slim.

Furthermore, government and law enforcement officials fail to offer adequate support to LGBTQ people and the few laws that exist to defend their rights, like Puerto Rico's hate crime law put in place in 2002 (Valle). Roberto provides an example of how police corruption works against individuals that PRpT seeks to support.

When a lesbian woman reported to a police officer outside of a bar that her partner had abused her, the police punched her, right in public! We held a manifestation in response to this brutality, but it still wasn't recognized as a hate crime nor was the officer punished. This also shows how the court system denies same sex couples protection under domestic violence legislation.

This experience exemplifies how the government perpetuates oppression for LGBTQ people. The law enforcement official directly and physically enacted homophobic abuse upon the woman. By failing to reprimand the officer for his actions, much less recognize the abuse as a hate crime, the judicial system proves its role in perpetuating homophobia. Such blatant exploitation of power exhibits how members of *el ambiente* are denied protection by each branch of the government.

PRpT actively protested against a more recent hate crime (not recognized as such in court) that demonstrates to a greater extent how the government helps facilitate extreme forms of heterosexist and homophobic oppression. In November of 2009, a 19 year old gay man, Jorge Steven Mercado, was murdered by a man ten years his elder; his body dismembered and decapitated. Juan Martínez Matos, the assailant who confessed to the murder, pleaded "self-defense." Matos claimed that Mercado was passing as a

woman sex worker, and in response to discovering Mercado's biological male sex, Matos proceeded to kill him. The atrociousness of this case is heightened by the way in which law enforcement officials respond. In reference to Mercado, the lead investigating officer announces: "Someone like that, who does those kind of things, and goes out in public, knows full well that this might happen to him" (Valle). With this, the law enforcement official confirms the heterosexist social structure that exists in Puerto Rico, and effectively blames the victim for disobeying the societal restrictions that govern gender and sexual expression. In doing so, the investigator draws attention away from the severity of the crime and shifts the guilt of the perpetrator onto the victim.

In contrast to the encounter Roberto describes in which the police officer physically inflicts the abuse upon the woman, the law enforcement official involved in the murder case contributes to the violence against LGBTQ individuals in a more strategic way. The lead investigator dismissed the murder as an event to be expected given the hetero normative conditions in which the victim suffered the consequences for overstepping his boundaries as gay man, supposedly dressing as a woman and attempting to sell sex. Normalizing such an atrocity in this way enables the development of oppressive ideologies in Puerto Rico. In particular, it serves as a warning to other LGBTQ people of the consequences that can result if they attempt to model Mercado's behavior. With this, the investigator, as a government representative in a position of power, can more effectively reinforce the persistence of homophobic oppression than the murderer himself. "The more powerful the perpetrator, the greater his prerogative to name and define reality, and the more completely his arguments prevail" (Herman 8). As

the oppressive arguments prevail at a political level, people continue to suffer the personally felt consequences such as repression and carrying the threat of violence. For Roberto and Nahomi, these consequences exist as fundamental reasons for their activism. Simultaneously the consequences also generate serious obstacles for their activist work by inhibiting the mobilization of greater amounts of people. Some individuals, for different reasons, find it impossible to express their sexuality and/or gender identity or expression, let alone activate themselves within a confrontational LGBTQ movement.

4.3: Feminist Activism

Similar to the activist collaboration and interactions of Roberto and Nahomi, Martha Gonzáles Simonet and Nydia E. Colón from *Pro Familia* (Pro Family) also share their motivations to pursue work in reproductive rights. In contrast to Roberto and Nahomi, they do not discuss the ways in which their upbringing influenced their current activism. With almost twenty more years of professional work behind them compared to the PRpT coordinators, Martha and Nydia look at the conditions of their earlier job experiences.

The present director of abortion services, Martha worked as a nurse after college and later as a health educator working within Puerto Rican communities in Chicago. She advocated for HIV awareness and prevention which led her into reproductive health, specifically for teenage women. Many of the teenagers were in gangs in contrast to the women with whom Martha had previously worked. The challenges she faced in working with young women gang members exposed her to aspects of reproductive health she had not experienced working with primarily adult women. “Since the services were open to

all young women, members of rival gangs would be there at the same time. If I walked up the steps with one girl, I'd have to make sure a rival didn't see me or she wouldn't want to associate with me, ha ha. In the midst of this *revolú* (chaos), it was really like a school for me" (González Simonet). Martha's work at the teen health center taught her about how to show mutual respect for all women that sought services, even with the risk of facing the antagonism that rival gang members had against one another. In her subsequent work the sense of mutual respect influenced her to ensure that as many women as possible have access to reproductive health services, regardless of their relation to intersectional forms of oppression, in both U.S. and Puerto Rican society.

In 1995 Martha moved back to Puerto Rico with her five children and began to work for the government's *Centro de Ayuda a Víctimas de Violación* (CAVV), (Help Center for Rape Victims). The lessons learned during her prior work and experiences with teenage women in Chicago forced her to question how much of herself she could compromise for this job.

As a governmental organization I was really conflicted by my ideals, especially when the center would not offer abortions to women that got pregnant as a result of sexual abuse. It was covering up Roe v. Wade.

One thing was written, and another was reality. Instead of giving up though, I realized that 'reality' required my work. (González Simonet)

The reality to which Martha refers is the government's ineffective role in protecting women's reproductive rights. Thus, her determination to defend rights not enforced by the laws slated to protect them required her to seek a more effective activist role. Soon

after leaving the center she sent her resume to *Pro Familia* and today works in a space that reflects her ideals and that is extremely important to the community.

Martha would not compromise the potential of her own activism and the agency of a wider scope of women who need reproductive services. As director of abortion services in charge of organizing the clinics and facilitating women's access to abortion, Martha represents the component of reproductive rights demonized most by conservative members of society and neglected by the government. She speaks excitedly about the new abortion clinic set to open in two months from the time of this interview. Martha's enthusiasm highlights her activist strength and motivation. She refuses to surrender to the risk of persecution just as she refuses to work for a government agency that does not ensure access to rights supposedly protected by law, rights she believes all women deserve.

The public relations director of *Pro Familia*, Nydia E. Colón, describes her motivations. She began her career working in public relations at a hospital where her role existed only to reach out to patients of a privileged class and to promote the hospital using a business model. These parameters of her previous work indicate the medical establishment's capitalistic priorities that do not function to ensure offering proper medical care for the needs of all Puerto Ricans. Nydia's decision to depart from a position she deemed corrupt, echoes Martha's restrictive experience at CAVV that prompted her relocation to *Pro Familia*. Similarly, Nydia can effectively use her public relations tools at *Pro Familia*.

I create the window for other non-profit organizations to see what we do. This is how we form sister organizations and coalitions with other groups [...] this is public relations work with a value. We have connections with organizations like *Taller Salud-Mujeres* (Women's Health Workshop), *Casa Protegida de Julia de Burgos* (Julia de Burgos' Protected House), and *Iniciativa Comunitaria* (Community Initiative). (Colón)

In contrast to work centered on publicizing medical service like a profit driven business, Nydia's current public relations role is activist work geared towards coalition building. The groups she mentions demonstrate the intersectional significance of reproductive rights activism and its involvement in other women's health struggles, domestic violence, and community health development in economically oppressed areas.

Martha and Nydia shed light on the oppressive tactics and agents in Puerto Rico that make reproductive rights activism inseparable from the primary struggles combated by other movements with whom *Pro Familia* collaborates. Martha fervently targets the following causative factors: "[...] socialization, conservative religious figures, *machismo*, deep rooted sexual repression, the way we were raised, ignorance, economic limitations, the realities of the political system in this country. All of these fight against everything we do!" (González Simonet). The oppressive social, religious, familial, and political doctrines that govern gender and sexuality, stigmatize women's acquisition of reproductive needs by imposing moral prescriptions.

Martha goes on to say, referring to the oppressive tactics and agents, "They degrade us as professionals, they fight against those of us who are doctors" (González

Simonet). This illustrates Martha's awareness of the intersecting oppressive forces in her life and the lives of the women with and for whom she works. Even within work that grants Martha and Nydia a relative level of class privilege, as reproductive rights professionals they (as well as doctors that perform abortions) are denied the social recognition granted to those whose work correlates with oppressive social doctrines and economic inequalities. Martha and Nydia's work is indicative of how their activism confronts many of the intersectional forms of oppression inherited from Puerto Rico's colonial legacy that seek to control women's bodies in efforts to govern the island's population and reinforce a hierarchal class structure on the island.

The foreign, namely U.S., influence on social and environmental movements in Puerto Rico is problematic because of the excessive pressures forced upon the island throughout its colonial legacy. This does not inhibit Martha and Nydia's recognition and admiration for the achievements made in women's reproductive rights in other countries. Nydia speaks to this: "When global organizations make plans for the rest of the world in support of women's health and so many other countries are advancing, it's like we're in *la edad de piedra* (the stone age) just trying to implement basic things" (Colón). The "stone age" comparison illuminates the identity politics of both women who pursue work in the reproductive rights struggle which, like the LGBTQ movement, has yet to reach a high point in Puerto Rico.

Martha and Nydia enact their feminist identities as educators, a term they use repeatedly to describe their work. Martha makes explicit the role of education:

Education is fundamental. People must understand that no one wants a

woman to need an abortion, but things happen. We do not promote abortion, we promote education. She who knows has power. We need to help women get rid of the fear to utilize their knowledge that can empower them. As women, we lack power *en el pueblo* (within our communities) that denies us knowledge. Supposedly, women should not experience pleasure, shouldn't have more than one partner, and should repress our impulses. Men must be educated as well and be responsible enough to use condoms. (González Simonet)

As feminist educators, Martha and Nydia must deconstruct the perceptions held by society that view them as advocates for abortion, rather than advocates for women's reproductive rights and health. Simultaneously, they must work with women to break down the burdens of sexual repression and explain the options that exist for pregnancy prevention as well as pregnancy termination. Referring back to the education Martha received from the teenage women at the teen health center in Chicago, as educators they must also be equipped to interact with various women who live in diverse conditions and who have distinct reproductive needs.

The intersections of economic oppression and women's reproductive rights prevent many women from seeking reproductive assistance—both educational and physical. Martha reveals that the majority of women who need an abortion do not have the funds with which to receive one. She offers the women that seek services a “sliding scale” payment system that encourages them to act responsibly when engaging in sexual practices and reproductive options, but still makes available the same options offered to

women with access to financial resources. Martha continues: “Frankly, if someone doesn’t have any money, I will pay for the abortion. Everyone that needs it will get it. We all have circumstances in life that must be considered. International Planned Parenthood has money available for us, but a lot of that goes towards the construction of our clinics, so we must save money in other ways that we set aside for women that need it” (González Simonet). Her dedication to making abortions available to working and lower class women indicates the application of intersectionality into her feminist identity that combats class and gender oppression.

As publicly assertive feminist educator activists, Martha and Nydia face the threat of violence that accompanies the highly contentious field of reproductive rights work. They must confront the social, religious, and political forces, referred to in the previous section, that attempt to restrict women’s reproductive rights and stigmatize their activist work. Their assertiveness acts as the mark that renders them vulnerable to anti-abortion extremists whose violent acts symbolize colonizers’ attempts to forcefully control women’s bodies. Together Martha and Nydia recount:

We’ve really felt the impact right in this building, one person vandalized *todo el parqueín* (the entire parking lot), they vandalized the walls with spray paint, they vandalized the director’s car, slashed the tires, keyed the exterior [...] fundamentalists have come to violate this institution. We receive threatening phone calls. We suspect that people may make appointments with the director to infiltrate the facility. We have methods to ensure that people do not have access to the director. That’s why we

have security cameras. Once, someone attempted to take the security guard's gun right off him! If that happens here, you can only imagine what might happen at the actual clinics. Because of this we really have to be cautious about how we promote the opening of new clinics. (Colón; González Simonet)

The risk of physical violence forces reproductive rights activists to remain cautious and protective of one another as well as their clients. It also encroaches upon the accessibility to reproductive services, since effective security measures must be followed. Martha and Nydia's willingness to risk their lives in pursuit of activism demonstrates the commitment to their feminist educator identities that work in defense of women's bodies. As feminists, Martha and Nydia not only reach out to women in need of reproductive services, they also examine the colonial and patriarchal origins that claimed control over women's reproductive bodies and legitimized the violence enacted upon them. As educators they have the potential to combat the conservative, fundamentalist ideologies that foster the violent threats against their lives.

The trinity of education, religion, and government plays out within the obstacles that Martha and Nydia face as reproductive rights workers. Martha sheds light on the ways in which the government works closely with religious affiliates to maintain the oppressive ideologies that perpetuate struggles for women's reproductive freedom. Martha targets the recent growth of the fundamentalist movement in Puerto Rico, making explicit that the obstacles it fosters also prevail in the U.S. where the church and the state remain closely connected.

There is no separation between fundamentalism and the government, especially with a conservative party in office. They place people with strong religious ties into positions of power. Like the man put in charge of community organizations who used to write for a strictly Catholic newspaper that constantly condemned us, making comments against abortion, etc. We have problems with the office of *La Procuradora de las Mujeres*. One of the agreements when the office was established was that feminist women who work in women's health or women's rights had the right to choose candidates. We recommended four candidates and among them the governor chose one because she worked with some representatives and had worked many years as a consultant for women's organizations. To make a long story short, *la colgaron* (they took her out of the running) simply because she made some public expressions in support of abortion, in support of same sex marriage, in support of people's rights. We were very indignant, we marched, until now they haven't responded. Worse yet, there have been rumors that the government intends to eliminate the office of *La Procuradora*. That would be a huge blow to us because it is the only office that overlooks all women's organizations, even hospitals, to ensure that those places fulfill the requirements for women's sexual and reproductive rights, among others, and protect victims of domestic violence. (González Simonet)

As Martha explains, the government is more than influenced by conservative religious figures, those figures hold positions of power in which they make decisions based on repressive moral agendas. She highlights the limitations of the office *La Procuradora de las Mujeres* to effectively enforce women's rights. Martha and Nydia, who work for women's rights everyday, only have minimal say in who should be elected to the office. The governor's authority in selecting moderate candidates, and the mention of eliminating the office all together, indicate how women's rights are only protected to the extent the government wishes.

The impact these limitations have on the public arises as a major obstacle for Martha and Nydia. Nydia depicts some of the ways in which the government's conservative religious ties prevent Puerto Ricans from receiving proper sexual education and knowing their rights:

When we go into public schools to give lessons about sexual education we can only talk about subjects considered appropriate. On some occasions, they forbid us to bring out a dildo in classrooms to show students how to properly use a condom or to talk about certain subjects because they are considered taboo. Even when we are well received in the schools, the moment we walk out the door someone else comes in and contradicts what we teach. [...] In the area of communications, the biggest job we have currently in Puerto Rico is to make sure women know that abortion is really legal. There is a myth, like Martha says, that people believe because of all the religious beliefs and all that the religious figures do to

make you feel guilty, that it is a sin, *blah que blah* (and so on), that abortion is illegal and if you have one you are committing a crime. Then a woman, who believes she is committing a criminal offense, has an abortion in secret and feels she cannot go to anyone for support. (Colón)

The limitations Nydia describes confronting their role as educators of sexual health reveals how repressive ideologies begin working early on in people's lives to restrict their awareness of safe sex practices and reproductive rights. Such restrictions enable the government to convince people that abortion is illegal preventing women from accessing reproductive health options offered by Martha and Nydia. The existence of a myth criminalizing abortion forces some women to internalize their oppression and criminalize themselves.

The myth that abortion is illegal exemplifies how Puerto Rico's colonial legacy distorts people's beliefs and knowledge. As Martha says, "The Caribbean used to be known as the place for abortions" (González Simonet). Not only did women seek abortions in the Caribbean before the passage of *Roe v. Wade* in the U.S., the forced sterilization campaign and contraceptive pill experimentations of the mid 20th century posited Puerto Rico as birth control laboratory. By preventing women from freely accessing their reproductive health options and stigmatizing those who do seek reproductive services, the U.S. continues to attempt dictating Puerto Rican women's reproduction.

Furthermore, as a reproductive health agency that has existed for over 55 years, *Pro Familia's* potential involvement with the reproductive abuses of the past creates

conflicts between the organization and other activist groups. Martha explains how some environmentalist groups have accused *Pro Familia* of cooperating with the colonialist agents who carried out birth control experimentation on the island. Martha goes on to say: “From what I have read, *Pro Familia* was involved with the testing of the pill, but there is no way to know for certain that the workers in those days were any more aware of the consequences as the women experimented on” (González Simonet). From an environmentalist perspective, birth control experimentation encompasses the potentially deadly exploitation of Puerto Rican women and contaminating chemical effects of pharmaceuticals to nature. Still, the complexities of colonization are far too severe for such implications to deny women the right to access different forms of contraception or antagonize reproductive rights activists for facilitating birth control services. This example of an inter activist conflict reveals how the persistent effects of Puerto Rico’s colonial legacy can function to complicate the possibilities for collaboration among different activist movements.

Just as the U.S. propagated overpopulation as a justification for sterilization and contraceptive testing abuses in the mid 20th century, today the moral and economic restrictions set against abortion in tandem with theories about overpopulation encourage the same rationale. Andrea Smith speaks to this colonialist equation in her examination of reproductive rights and women of color in the U.S.: “[...] some activists refuse to address racism in abortion policies, arguing that abortion access represents “genocide” for communities of color. These advocates fail to consider that restrictions to abortion can become another strategy to coerce Native women or women of color to pursue

sterilization or long-acting hormonal contraceptives” (97). Regardless of one’s views on abortion, sterilization and contraceptives potentially damaging to women’s health cannot be left as women’s sole reproductive alternatives, especially when keeping in mind Nydia’s description of the limited sexual health education offered in Puerto Rican schools. As feminist educators, Martha and Nydia step in where they can to offer guidance and support to people who seek effective sexual education.

Surfing instructor and founder of the Women’s International Surfing Association in Puerto Rico, Paloma Quintana Valentín provides her own form of feminist education responding to the repressive social doctrines that attempted to prevent women from surfing during her adolescence. The rupture between humans and their natural environment reflects the colonialist separation that posits the intellectual mind as superior to the physical body. In Paloma’s trajectory towards becoming a surfer and her subsequent role as an activist, she had to confront both the division of Puerto Ricans and nature, as well as the colonialist separation of mind from body in their current forms. Physically active from a young age, Paloma practiced judo for much of her life and became intrigued with surfing as another way to express her self using the body. She shares her determination in becoming a surfer despite the repressive ideologies that separate humans from nature and mind from body:

I had a boyfriend that surfed when I was a teenager, but I never got to practice as much as I wanted to. Guys surf and girls were supposed to sunbathe. I wanted to really delve into it [surfing] so badly, the sensation it gave me was so incredible. It relieved me of stress. I didn’t care about

the gender taboo, but my mother was not supportive. She associated it with drug addicts and beach bums. There were so many male surfers pioneering the sport. I couldn't afford a board and there wasn't any one to teach me. That's why teaching others how to surf is so important for me today. I was diagnosed with cancer when I was 16. Early detection really made me look at my life. *Qué brutal* (wow). So after a year of successfully fighting cancer I wasn't going to let anything get in my way of surfing. It became my cure; exercise cure us, doing what makes you happy is a cure, we can be our own best doctors and nurses. (Quintana Valentín)

Paloma's experience exhibits several intersections of oppression. The stigmatization of surfers as deviant members of society relates to the separation between Puerto Ricans and nature, what NUPA advisor Robert Mayer Arzuaga calls a "fear of the water" (Mayer Arzuaga). Even though the ocean surrounds the entire island, it also becomes another patriarchal barrier for particularly attempting to keep women out of the water. Paloma used her agency as a surfer to break down these barriers without the support of her mother, boyfriend, and the larger social norms even before being diagnosed with cancer. Bridging the gap between humans and nature (Puerto Ricans and the water) proved essential to Paloma's recovery.

Cancer and other terminal illnesses represent forms of oppression that relate to the epidemics spread by colonization to control colonized populations, as well as the environmentally destructive expansion that contaminates the body. Audre Lorde

elaborates this relationship reflecting on her own experience with breast cancer: “For me, my scars are a honorable reminder that I may be a casualty in the cosmic war against radiation, animal fat, air pollution, McDonald’s hamburgers and Red Dye No. 2, but the fight is still going on, and I am still a part of it” (Cancer 60). Paloma’s agency also responds to the oppression of cancer by prescribing what she feels was her true cure. Just as surfing helped Paloma relieve stress, her belief that it physically and emotionally influenced her recovery reconnects the severed mind and body. Trans activist and writer, Julia Serano, speaks to this inherent and necessary bond: “Our bodies are inseparable from our minds [...] All of us who have experienced the physical difference between feeling healthy and feeling ill [...] have a deep understanding (whether we acknowledge it or not) that our body feelings make a vital and substantial contribution to our senses of self” (220-21). Paloma’s sense of self motivated her survival through cancer and her subsequent activist work as a surfing instructor, instilling in her students the mental and physical connection necessary to surf.

As a teacher, Paloma responds to the lack of support she received during her initial efforts to surf. She assists her students in overcoming the obstacles that inhibited her own development as a surfer. In doing so she combats multiple intersectional forms of oppressions: environmental degradation, social stigmatization, and gender barriers.

Paloma goes on to describe the evolution and effectiveness of her activist work:

I’ll admit to master my surfing skills I kept finding boyfriends who surfed. When we’d be practicing *gringas* would come around us, never greet me or even make eye contact with me, and they didn’t speak Spanish. I don’t

know if it's because they are racist, come to steal my waves or steal the men. As I became a more skilled surfer I decided to have a meeting with some of my other women friends that surfed. We came up with organizing a group for the International Day of Women Surfers, only for women! The event was pro-sport, pro-environment, and pro-health. We donated all the funds raised to cancer patients. We got surfing companies to donate boards. 150 women surfed that day. *Los sueños se hacen realidad* (Dreams become reality). (Quintana Valentín)

The success of the event spawned the International Women Surfers Association. It organizes out of Paloma's Alamar Surfing School, a space used for the classes she offers and the planning of the International Day of Women Surfers. This component of her activism responds to the sexist exclusion of women from the sport. Paloma was also motivated by the racist *gringas* whose indifference towards her made it even more important to showcase Puerto Rican women's ability. The mobilization of 150 strong and skilled Puerto Rican women proved them far more than mere counterparts to Puerto Rican men.

Paloma describes her feminist identity using a surfing metaphor:

In the beginning I wasn't respected in the water. Men would grab waves that should have been mine and then designate which waves I could have. Now, if they try to deny me a wave I will just take it, proving I am capable of riding the same waves [...] We are not better than men, we deserve equal rights. (Quintana Valentín)

Paloma's work as a surfing instructor encourages all young people to interact with and appreciate nature. Not only does enthusiasm for the sport influence greater interest in the water, Paloma makes sure that her students clean up after themselves on the beach. She goes on to explain how lack of concern for the environment begins in the home:

We must teach our children to clean up after themselves *desde muy pequeños* (from a very early age). It is not enough to clean up all the trash that builds up on the beaches, that self-sacrifice will not help the country in the long run. People need to learn how to be self-sufficient, not depend on others to clean up their mess. If someone leaves trash behind, to avoid offending them, I'll just say in friendly way "Hey! You left you Coca Cola can behind!" Men also tend to be more *descuidadosos* (less cautious).

Women might not dare to litter for their own reputation, rather than concern for nature, because they are taught in the home to clean up after men, gender says a lot. (Quintana Valentín)

The intersections she portrays between environmental degradation, dependency, and gender highlight how Puerto Rico's colonial legacy plays into the struggles Paloma combats. The colonial relationship forcing Puerto Rico to be economically dependent on the U.S. reflects in the patriarchal tendencies of that colonial influence in which men depend on women to clean up after them. Thus, Paloma works against that colonial dependency and the negative implications it holds for the environment and women.

While the U.S. economy profits most from commercial industries on the island, financially equipped tourists embody potential contemporary colonizers as they interact

with Puerto Ricans and their land. Paloma exposes the ethnocentric behavior of many *gringos* when she attempts to interact with them on the beach:

Maybe the word *gringo* is offensive, but it best describes the type of foreigners who come here to take advantage of our waves and leave their trash on the beach. I have lived here all my life, over 30 years, and people still come who refuse to speak Spanish, if they speak to me at all.

(Quintana Valentín)

To a lesser degree, the negligent behavior Paloma describes demonstrates how colonial mentalities reproduce among tourists. Though Puerto Rico retained the use of its first colonial language after U.S. invasion (integrating some English into the dialect), many U.S. tourists' refusal to attempt learning Spanish prior to visiting the island is indicative of the exceedingly global expectations for people to communicate in English when confronted with U.S. travelers. Hawaiian nationalist Haunani-Kay Trask conceptualizes the colonizing nature of tourism in her own context: "We are a hostage people, forced to witness and participate in our own collective humiliation as tourist artifacts for the First World" (33). Withstanding the frustrations caused by tourists' mistreatment, Paloma still offers surfing classes to interested travelers and will utilize English when necessary for her work. In addition to tourists' ethnocentric colonialist behavior, the tourism industry carries extremely negative consequences for the natural environment, especially in coastal areas where many Puerto Ricans, like Paloma, spend most of their everyday lives.

4.4: Environmental Activism

Héctor ‘Tito’ Varela is an organizer with NUPA (which he helped establish in the northeast area of the island) and *Vida Marina* (Marine Life), a project affiliated with NUPA which aims to protect marine life. Tito also pursues his environmental activism through his professional work as resource and conservation manager at UPR Aguadilla. He explains how the class oppression he experienced when growing up played a significant role in his motivation to actively work for environmental justice. In a “*viajecito*” (trip) back in time, Tito describes his exposure to Mother Earth in his early childhood:

I am from *el campo* (rural setting) and *mi abuela* was always a lover of nature, she taught me about flora and fauna, she taught me how to respect all living things. The descriptions of nature in the Bible, although I do not go to church anymore, also made me think more about my relationship to the earth. My father was a hunter and would take me with him, so I was exposed to the different kinds of hunters. Some would only kill for sport, for no reason at all; others would use every part of the animal to feed their family. Witnessing this distinction began raising my consciousness.

(Varela)

As environmental damage increases, hunting for any reason becomes less possible, denying food to those who hunt for survival in response to economic oppression. Hunters who kill for recreation respond to what Tito calls “the *brecha* (breach) between humans and nature that makes them forget we are part of it” (Varela). This rupture

descends from the dismissal of sustainable indigenous hunting and food acquisition practices that existed long before the expansion of large scale commercial meat production and depletion of natural resources, both colonialist endeavors that most severely impact the land, non-human animals, and economically oppressed Puerto Ricans.

Tito highlights the economic factors in society that fostered this separation for him at a personal level in his upbringing.

I was raised working class, my father worked eight hours a day for the government, and he drove two hours back and forth from Aguadilla to San Juan every day. My mother worked in a factory from 8:00 to 4:30 every day. After the loss of *mi abuela* and my parents working virtually all the time, there was no one left who had the time to explore nature with us.

(Varela)

In this case, the division from nature for Tito and his siblings resulted due to a separation from their parents who were obligated to work long hours to feed their family. He further explains that the days he spent in school did nothing more to promote interaction with nature for him or anyone else.

The schools would never offer field trips into the numerous, and diverse natural habitats we have here. Too concerned with liabilities taking students off school grounds, and not concerned with the consequences of separating us from nature. This is why I consider education and outreach to young people the most important aspect of environmentalism. You

must experience a connection to nature from a young age to be environmentally conscious in the future. (Varela)

The failure to expose students to natural landscapes and, to a greater extent, the lack of concern for environmental damage taught in schools is representative of how academic institutions' curricula result from, and simultaneously influence young people's disconnect from nature that fosters environmental degradation.

Tito identifies as an educator who teaches young people lessons denied to them in their youth. Tito describes his work with NUPA in exposing children to environmentalism: "We must begin in our own barrios, taking students from their schools into the real situations and showing them how to help, then taking them to other towns to witness the destruction of Mother Earth in those places" (Varela). This speaks to the inside out process of identity politics in which young people first recognize how landscapes are impacted in their own communities. Involving young people in community and beach clean up projects enables them the possibility to recognize their own potential agency in helping to protect their island. The effectiveness of such activism is proven by the numbers of elementary to high school students who seek involvement in the group and continue its efforts once the NUPA volunteers leave their school.

Tito discusses in great depth the government's role in combating the efforts of environmental movements. He considers the government's *mala planificación* (bad planning) the primary cause of overpopulation. With the following description of that

poorly executed planning, Tito augments the concept of overpopulation to encompass the persistent expansion of environmentally degrading development projects:

The political parties here basically shift back and forth every four years between the *Partido Nuevo Progresista* [New Progressive Party], *los azules* [the blues], and the *Partido Popular Democrático* [Popular Democratic Party], *los rojos* [the reds]. If the party in office happens to support an environmental issue, which neither party really does, the other party will oppose that issue in the next election to gain votes. Ultimately, support for the environment is in the hands of people in their communities because the political parties depend so much on their financial backings. To win votes the parties have to promote themselves *para que tengan un boom* (to impress the public). How do they do this? They depend on large financial contributions donated by people or entities, or some other group, in exchange for permission to carry out a [development] project. It doesn't matter if the project is illegal, all that matters is the money the parties want to secure votes. (Varela)

The corruption of political parties Tito describes is only possible with the financial support of developers, often tied to U.S. corporations, who strategically avoid adhering to environmental laws in order to implement their projects with less responsibility. Tito reveals how similarly corrupt financial engagements occur between developers and representatives from the government's environmental agencies. He explains the governor's control over the agencies supposedly established to protect the environment.

“I knew someone who worked for the Office of National Parks. When he objected to something the governor did concerning the environment, they removed him from the position” (Varela).

The U.S. uses capitalism as a mechanism to physically assume control over the land and ideologically colonize Puerto Ricans, creating major struggles for Tito’s activist work. The government acts complacent allowing developers to pursue projects prohibited by law. The damages imposed on zones supposedly protected under environmental law demonstrate the need for Tito to continue his activist work defending lands that the government will not. Reflective of the ways in which economic oppression fostered the separation between people and nature during Tito’s youth, many people rely on the environmentally destructive industries for jobs they need to make a living.

In Tito’s discussion of the obstacles he faces as an environmental activist, he explains how the real consequences of overpopulation are caused by the overcrowding of cement and commercial constructions. Rather than blaming Puerto Ricans who live under environmentally destructive conditions, or women for reproducing, Tito makes clear the government’s role in destroying the island’s natural landscapes.

You can look at the housing developments here. There is no space to walk and enjoy the environment, houses are built one right beside the other [...] you’ll see how overpopulated San Juan is, you can barely find a green area, and if there is one people don’t go because they assume it’s a place for *tecatos* (junkies). People fear overpopulation and trap their children inside the house. Again, we see the distance between people and nature.

[...] The system does not let us see the nature we have here. So much of our land is taken away and we are left with such little space to live. They [U.S. developers, the government] treat the island as though it was a continent, as if there was enough space for so much cement and so many constructions taking away green areas. (Varela)

The housing and urban developments supposedly constructed to deal with Puerto Rico's high population, do more to destroy the earth and ideologically separate people from nature than provide adequate living spaces. By pointing out the government's negligence in allowing developers to expand beyond environmentally safe limits, Tito exposes how the damages due to overcrowding of constructions exceed the potential environmental threat caused by human overpopulation. The association between overpopulation and people's fear of drug users in urban green spaces reveals how colonialist tactics can simultaneously push people away from nature and demonize homeless and substance using members of society.

4.5: Addiction/Homelessness Prevention Activism

Pedro Rojas Vega, the director of *Hostal Getsemani para Ambulantes* (Gethsemane Homeless Shelter), explains the relationship between homelessness and drug addiction that necessitates his activist work. He illustrates the passion he holds for his work in his preliminary statements before entering into an interview dialogue.

First and foremost, what I am going to tell you, you won't learn in college or in a book. There are social workers who come here with their master's degrees, doctorates, but have no idea what addicts go through. They go to

Caserío Kennedy (housing project) for example, and have no idea what to do once they are inside. What we do at this shelter is offer temporary housing and rehabilitation for homeless men. There are 14 people living here right now suffering different social problems: alcoholism, addiction, victims of violent crimes, perpetrators of violent crimes, people who have lost their jobs, people who have lost their families. Most people believe that the primary cause of homelessness is poverty or family abandonment, they are both myths. The principal cause of homelessness is addiction, which often results in poverty and loss of family. Three out of the five men playing dominos outside right now were addicts. (Rojas Vega)

With these statements Pedro points to two of the primary struggles that hinder the uplift of homeless people and addicts seeking assistance: social workers who are certified to help homeless addicts, but remain ignorant to their actual lived experiences, and the misconceptions held by society that foster the stigmatization of homeless people and addicts. Both conflicts resonate with Laura María Agustín's critique of social service agents misguided attempts to "save" sex workers. "[...] social helpers consistently deny the agency of large numbers of working-class migrants, in a range of theoretical and practical moves whose object is management and control: the exercise of governmentality" (8). Social agents' failure to account for the diverse realities experienced by those they seek to help serves to further marginalize homeless people addicted to drugs, often treating them as objects in need of control.

Pedro explains how addiction becomes synonymous with homelessness because both experience societal rejection that further perpetuates the struggles for homeless people and addicts. Pedro attributes substance abuse to *ansiedad* (anxiety) that develops as a result of the oppressive conditions within an individual's life. He does not go into detail about those specific conditions, but makes clear that one does not need to be poor to feel anxiety or become an addict. Anxiety crosses class boundaries and involves the factors explored by Roberto, Nahomi, Martha, Nydia, Paloma, and Tito: repressive social doctrines, gender and sexual orientation inequality, corrupt political systems, and the division between humans and nature.

Pedro goes on to describe how this anxiety is reproduced with drug dependency. An addict feels that anxiousness when they need another 'fix.' As a marginalized group, homeless people who are addicts experience dual forms of discrimination, from other members of society against them, and discrimination they project onto those members of society. Both make Pedro's activism necessary, but he explains how a recent case dealing with the latter discrimination made him realize more than ever the real significance of his work and the parameters of his role as an activist.

I have two bachelor's degrees in psychology and social work, but I grew up *en la calle* (in the streets), I did drugs and witnessed the problems that addicts face. The woman I'm going to tell you about is who made me realize why I must continue this work until God wills me to stop. This is a real case. This woman graduated in chemical engineering from UPR Mayagüez, she was accepted to Harvard for a math program, and her

father was a millionaire. She began her addiction in the company of a former boyfriend. I met her two years ago when she came here with ulcers showing, crying about having her children taken away, and saying that her boyfriend would kill her if he found out she was here seeking assistance. She stayed at the shelter for the weekend, even though it's a shelter for men, and on that Monday we took her for assessment. She spent ten months in rehab. On May 30, 2009 she finished the program and by June 17 was arrested. She manipulated the situation. I had gotten her back in contact with her father, her mother, and her children. We got her a house, her father paid half the rent and I paid the other half. She was on food stamps. The house basically served as a space for her to sleep and where her kids could play. During those 18 days out of rehab she left the house, prostituted herself, and binged. During this time she discriminated against me. I'm going to use *malas palabras* (curse words) now, *no problem?* Yelling at me day after day: '*hijo de la gran puta* (son of a bitch),' '*me cago en tu madre, te odio* (I shit on your mother, I hate you).' I ended up calling the police. It was the only way I could get her to stop. I couldn't believe all that happened. I cried, went into depression over it. She accused me of domestic violence under *la ley 54*. Her father has not contacted me since. He blamed me for what happened, and maybe it was my fault. She hated me because I didn't do drugs, if I had I would have been her *rey* (king). The end of the story, if you hadn't guessed, is that this

woman was *mi compañera* (girlfriend). It is so painful when a woman or man that you have helped for a year or more ends up getting worse, some to the extent of suicide. (Rojas Vega)

This profoundly personal experience reinforces why Pedro continues his rehab work for homeless addicts and demonstrates to him first hand the need to maintain an appropriate distance from the people his work seeks to benefit, for their sake and his. Activist work with homeless people and addicts connects to the oppression that other activists in this research work to alleviate, but entails significant levels of emotional restraint that are not always easy to adhere to, as demonstrated in Pedro's experience. In recognizing his own potential guilt in the ineffective outcome of his girlfriend's rehabilitation, he realized the need to continue his work with greater discipline.

Pedro's description of his girlfriend could paint her as an extremely destructive individual, but he explains the conditions that cultivate her responses and the responses of others who find themselves homeless and/or addicts. "Discrimination is so strong against people oppressed by addiction and homelessness. All the years of stigmatization, being followed in stores assumed to be thieves creates strong resentment, of which I too have experienced powerful feelings" (Rojas Vega). In response to the anxiety that Pedro believes influences substance abuse, feelings of resentment emerge in users that can foster distrust in others, in addition to heightened drug intake. While that mistrust makes Pedro's work more complicated, it also reinforces the need for his specific type of activism that entails gaining trust from people who have set up barriers against persecution from others.

By looking at addiction and resentment as responses to oppression, both act as forms of agency by which an individual deals with the conditions in their life. Aurora Levins Morales makes this idea clearer in reference to her father's words: "My father believes in the creativity of people [...] to find ways to work seeps through the rigid structures meant to contain us. He told me when I was very young that there were no bad people, just bad decisions" (Medicine 128). The activists I discuss here have sought education, professional work, and athletic participation in response to the oppression they have experienced or witnessed. People who turn to substance abuse seek a physical escape from the "rigid structures" imposed by the oppression brought on and perpetuated by a legacy of colonialism.

A current resident of the shelter, 62-year-old Alfonso Pérez, shares some of his story. He traces his cycles of substance abuse, incarceration, periods of homelessness, and his failed attempts at entering the shelter when no beds were available. He recounts how a worker for the shelter came to him on the street when a bed was available. After eight months, Alfonso has remained sober, helps with the upkeep of the *hostal*, and is in contact with his grandchildren, a relationship he assumed had long passed. Alfonso's experience highlights the community interaction the shelter maintains, remembering specific individuals who seek its support and offering services to that person once space is available. Alfonso's account highlights one person's uplift achieved as a result of seeking out the shelter's services. By recognizing addiction as a real response to oppression from people under diverse circumstances, Pedro Rojas Vega legitimizes the need to continue his activist work.

As a drug rehabilitation counselor, Pedro does not express a need to claim an identity as an activist. He makes explicit that he is not some unexposed social worker with a degree unequipped to handle the problems of homeless people with substance dependency. To effectively carry out his work, Pedro must carry a strong sense of the identities of the men who live at the shelter. He describes how addicts are left vulnerable to scrutiny and persecution:

The ulcers on an addict's arms from using intravenous drugs is an eye soar to people in public, they physically mark someone for societal rejection. People are much less likely to help a homeless person with ulcers. If someone needs help, don't just pass them by. If you don't know how to help, find someone like me who can. You never know when someone in your own life could end up in a similar situation, if that were the case wouldn't you want someone to help? It's a problem that belongs to the whole society! (Rojas Vega)

The empathy Pedro displays for homeless people who are addicts is essential to rehabilitation work. He recognizes how homeless addicts, because of their bodies, are left vulnerable to apathy and potential persecution. His understanding of the implications put upon the identities of homeless addicts speaks to his own activist identity that views homelessness and addiction as problems for which society at large is responsible. Pedro recognizes his own potential to contribute to the oppression at work in another's life when he crossed a professional boundary with his former girlfriend, turning his role as a rehab facilitator into an enabler for continued substance abuse. This sheds light on the

role each activist plays within her or his interpersonal relationships.

In Pedro's discussion of the humiliation inflicted upon homeless people, he reveals ways in which Puerto Ricans can assume the colonizing role of tourists against, who he considers to be, the most marginalized group in society. He speaks of one incident in which students from UPR Mayagüez burned a homeless man with fire crackers and proceeded to laugh and throw trash cans at him. The hierarchy that enables invasive tourists to pivot themselves above Puerto Ricans also functions when college students feel entitled to physically harm and publicly humiliate homeless individuals. Homeless people carry marks, such as living on the street or exposing ulcers, which leave them potentially vulnerable to violence.

Pedro demonstrates how the government utilizes tactics inherited from the colonial legacy in its efforts to impress tourists:

During the *Fiestas Patronales* [Patron Saints Celebration], the mayor of Bayamon, Jorge Santini, ordered the round up of all the homeless people in Old San Juan. He put them into a bus and dropped them off in different towns without giving them any food or clothing. A public figure did this! The police don't arrest homeless people; they make them invisible, cleaning up the streets for the foreigners who come here. It's not real. [...] People blame homeless people for causing most crimes. The police cause crime when they spend time harassing homeless people, instead of doing their job. (Rojas Vega)

Pedro's account reveals how the government intensifies the struggles of dispossessed people in order to accommodate the idealistic tourist gaze that overlooks the consequences of their presence. The colonial ambiance and architecture of Old San Juan exhibits the ever present homage paid to European conquest and Puerto Rico's colonial legacy. With this in mind, the U.S. tourists with substantial class privilege, for whom the government makes homeless people invisible, embody the colonial benefactors overseeing the development of Puerto Rico as a colonized territory. Just as the monuments and Spanish inspired setting of Old San Juan commemorate European conquest and veil the atrocities committed against African slaves who built the colonizers' civilization, the government officials today displace homeless people to cover up the persistent consequences of an unjust society introduced by colonization.

Government officials intentionally escalate the problems homeless people face when displacing them from one place to another, robbing them of what little resources they have acquired in their initial space. Such mistreatment fosters the anxiety and resentment that Pedro mentions earlier as causes of drug addiction. Furthermore, Pedro reveals how the government offers minimal funding to organizations servicing homeless people and addicts, like the hostel he directs. In tandem with the distrust felt by homeless people responding to the perpetual discrimination and abuse against them, the government's disregard for their struggles creates major obstacles for Pedro's work. When the government disregards homeless people, it denies the value of his activism.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

The participants whose oral histories compile the heart of this project confirm the research arguments presented in this thesis. The findings and analysis of their perspectives reveal the intersectional connections among their diverse life and work experiences, and also provide a more inclusive conception of what activism looks like. Simultaneously, their intersectional responses also reveal how intersectional forms of oppression on the island find their roots in Puerto Rico's colonial legacy. The possibilities for a more inclusive anti-oppressive, decolonial movements emerge from the intersections as well. The commonalities that the activists share, and recognition of their differences, provide greater potential for solidarity. More importantly, the acknowledgment of the value behind each activist's efforts combats the hierarchal tendencies that cause fragmentation, competition, and ineffective attempts to end oppression.

The interactions among the nine participants' oral histories demonstrate in various ways the intersections connecting diverse types of activist work that respond to distinct forms of interlocking oppression. Each activist underwent an inside out process motivating the development of their current work, having experienced or witnessed oppression at earlier stages in their life. For example, Desi Luis and Roberto both confronted religiously driven homophobic treatment in their youth. Although they were not impacted in the same ways, they recognized the oppressive logic behind such mistreatment. As Desi Luis expresses, ““If you are not married and have sex, *es un pecado* (it's a sin), if you have sex and don't reproduce, *es un pecado*, if you have sex

with somebody of the same sex, *eres un fokin pecador* (you are a hardcore sinner).”

These oppressive doctrines descend from the colonial legacy that binds gender and sexuality as a tool to perpetuate patriarchal rule and heterosexism. In order to pursue activist to combat any type of oppression, one must first understand the processes that developed that oppression.

The identities negotiated by the activists also served to reveal intersectional commonalities and differences among their oral histories. As native born Puerto Ricans who dedicate their lives and work to the uplift of their homeland, the activists exemplify identity politics in which they work inside of the setting they know best in order to carry out their most effective role possible as activists. Furthermore, they must negotiate their identities to determine how they can work best within their contexts. As one example, after 20 years in his profession, Pedro still needed to better assess his role as a counselor, relating to Martha and Nydia's lessons learned in their earlier jobs which required them to undertake a more effective role in the reproductive rights movement. Martha and Nydia needed to be part of an organization more suited to their ideals, Pedro learned from the experience with his girlfriend the need to evaluate his own ideals and practices in working with people who seek rehabilitation. This shows how activism is a lived practice that undergoes change and growth as the activists themselves evolve with their work.

The persistent obstacles confronting the activists' work reveal how Puerto Rico's colonial legacy functions to reproduce intersectional forms of oppression. Activists who participate in organized resistance, like Roberto, Nahomi, Martha, Nydia, Tito, and

Pedro, expose the ways in which the government fails to uphold laws made to protect the rights of oppressed individuals and the natural environment. In addition, they point out the blatant corruption and exploitation of political parties and law enforcement officials and the use of conservative religious morals to legitimize and promote repressive ideologies among Puerto Ricans. Activists, like Hilda, Desi Luis, and Paloma, who pursue activism in less traditional ways reveal consequences of the divide and conquer tactics of colonization which cause Puerto Ricans to stigmatize and discriminate against each other.

Primarily dealing with consequences of U.S. colonization, the activists draw on the oppressive trinity of education, religion, and government. All three contribute to Puerto Ricans' internalized oppression that fragments oppressed groups and inhibits possibilities for more inclusive anti-oppressive activism. Hilda and Tito elaborate the corrupt practices of political parties that ultimately only seek financial backing and the maintenance of an elite class. Furthermore, Roberto, Nahomi, Martha, Nydia, Tito, and Pedro, all reveal law enforcement's and the judicial systems failure to uphold laws geared to protect the rights of oppressed individuals and the environment. The recognition of how these activists' perspectives intersect reinforces the theory of intersectionality, demonstrating how multiple forms of oppression feed off one another and rely on one another the perpetuate colonialist oppression in Puerto Rico at large.

Aurora Levins Morales combats the divide and conquer mentality and supports the coalition of movements divided by their different priorities: "We need to rigorously root out our tendency to patronize or avoid such movements and take charge of finding

ways to make necessary links that will expand the visions of both their movements and our own until we find a point of collaboration” (Medicine 125). This project offers a glimpse of the elements, linking and distancing different activists, which are needed to determine potential collaborations.

Although this project does assume a nationalist stance, Cherríe Moraga’s vision of an inclusive and liberating form of nationalism showcases what an intersectional movement could achieve if it were to overcome residuals of colonization. She emphasizes:

If women’s bodies and those of men and women who transgress their gender roles have been historically regarded as territories to be conquered, they are also territories to be liberated. [...] The nationalism I seek is one that decolonizes the brown and female body as it decolonizes the brown and female earth [...] and heterosexism and homophobia are no longer the cultural order of the day. I cling to word “nation” because without the specific naming of the nation, the nation will be lost (as when feminism is reduced to humanism, the woman is subsumed). Let us retain our radical naming but expand it to meet a broader and wiser revolution (Moraga, Last 150).

An inclusive movement needs to encompass recognition of Puerto Ricans’ shared resilience, but must rigorously work to dismantle the colonialist and patriarchal doctrines fostering sexism, homophobia, and transphobia, the capitalistic endeavors inflicting

economic oppression and environmental destruction, and the residual racism against Puerto Ricans who physically bear their African ancestry.

The activists whose oral histories make this thesis worth writing embody the resilience of Puerto Ricans and actively work to dismantle, in one way or another, the intersectional forms of oppression prevailing in Puerto Rico. Despite the perpetual colonialism inflicted by the U.S. and internalized oppression causing some Puerto Ricans to actively oppress others, the activists continue to believe in the significance of their worth and envision the possibilities which may or may not take place in the future. As Audre Lorde explains, “to speak of change in the absence of vision is to court chaos for ever” (Hall 146). Although impossible to ever assess a unanimous vision among Puerto Rico’s diverse population, activists must remain driven by possibilities for effective changes. Their visions may never find actualization on a large scale, but the Puerto Rican’s continued resilience, and the legacies of their African and Indigenous ancestors, demands activism to continue.

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