

“DESDE ABAJO, COMO SEMILLA”: PUERTO RICAN FOOD
SOVEREIGNTY AS EMBODIED DECOLONIAL
RESISTANCE

by

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A THESIS

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This thesis explores the power, possibility, and agency embedded in food in the contemporary Puerto Rican context. Building from participatory ethnographic fieldwork with activists, chefs, and farmers engaged in food sovereignty work, I examine the concepts of political agency and subjectivity as they relate to embodied experiences of politics and highlight the generative potential of work occurring in unconventional locations for political participation. This approach is made possible with the understanding that the food we consume directly connects our individual lived experiences to broader structures of power in intimate and material ways. Through food, I offer a grounded critique of US colonial violence, inherently linked to ecological destruction, cisheteropatriarchy, and disaster capitalism. I also document dynamics of radical prefigurative politics as visible in people’s generative reimagining of relationships with their bodies, each other, and the land. This analysis is supported theoretically by Indigenous, anarchist, and queer/feminist perspectives which similarly connect the personal to the political and offer examples of political action that extend beyond state-centric formal politics.

Ultimately, I argue that food is a powerful site of resistance, source of resilience, and mechanism of resurgence; as Puerto Ricans reclaim autonomy via food, they are resisting deeply rooted patterns of colonial extraction and dispossession and directly cultivating a more ecologically, socially, and politically resilient future.

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Writing a thesis is, in many ways, like caring for a garden. Yes, there is the harvest; At a point in the process, we reap the rewards of hard work in the form of some material good. Yet before any harvest can happen, the process requires a steady investment of energy, time, love, dedication, and hope in the potential of what's to come. So, as I write these words, I am surely proud of the product. But I'm far prouder of the process I've taken to get here. I relish in knowing the process has been one of interconnection and relationship-building. Of knowing that I have not done this alone. This thesis is dedicated to all those who have done it with me.

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Introduction and Background

I arrived at la huerta in the late afternoon. The hot Caribbean sun was traversing across the sky lazily and the surrounding buildings' shadows were growing slowly longer. Amongst the tall cement buildings and expansive parking lots, the garden stood out like a fertile oasis. I could feel the energetic change as I made my way closer, breathing in the ripe scent of fresh compost being rotated a few feet away. With the wave of a suntanned hand, a group of people made their way towards the garden rows. After catching up on the week, we slowly transitioned to a seated circle. Una semilla remained standing, delicately picking through a handful of seeds. "Hoy vamos a sembrar quimbombo!" She looked at me, knowing I didn't understand the last word, and offered the translation with a wink: "Okra." I nodded as she continued, passing around seeds one by one and explaining how okra arrived in the Americas, many centuries ago. West African women, enslaved by European colonial powers, braided seeds into their hair for safe passage in the journey across the Atlantic. She explained how, despite the uncertainty of where they might be going or what their future might hold, the slaves knew that they would have food, the food of their homeland. As I reflected on this short history lesson, I rolled the small seeds between my thumb and forefinger, holding them more carefully, more intentionally, knowing the history they held within their dry shells. Then, as quickly as we had sat down, the group stood up. There was work to do and seeds to plant, a new generation of okra to cultivate, finding roots in soils far from their original home.

Eating is a political act, connecting our bodies to politics in some of the most intimate and material of ways. What we eat, how we do so, when, with whom, and where is all influenced by our social identities, which are inherently politicized given our relationship to structures of power and privilege. By eating we engage politically, our choices (or lack thereof) carrying with them, manifold political implications. What we consume is far more than a collection of nutrients and calories. Rather, it is the product of a complex web of systems and structures that are deeply steeped in dynamics of power and control, domination and resistance. Consider for example, dramatic racial

health disparities linked to the limited availability of healthy food in historically Black neighborhoods, linked to histories of redlining and intentional federal disinvestment, or the changed diets of Indigenous peoples after contact with settlers who forcibly destroyed nutritionally dense traditional food sources and replaced them with high calorie, low nutrient foods as part of a larger pattern of forced assimilation and genocide. The concreteness of this relationship – between the individual and the broader structures – makes food an extremely rich site to think about political action and agency.

By focusing on Puerto Ricans’ engagement with food, this thesis is a commentary on power, agency, and political subjectivity in a colonial context. I explore colonialism and capitalism less as theoretical concepts than as structures that directly shape lived experiences rooted in particular social and political geographies. My project is grounded in the understanding that the personal is inherently political and made possible through exploring traditionally unconventional spaces for political participation: gardens and kitchens. I aim to show that Puerto Ricans are engaging in revolutionary prefigurative politics through activities that fall broadly under the umbrella of food sovereignty work.¹ By prefigurative, I mean that the social relationships and organizing principles strive to reflect the future society being sought by the group.² In other words, the means embody the end. I label them “revolutionary”

¹ Food sovereignty is fundamentally a call for the right of communities to define and control their own food and agricultural policies. I use the term with this definition in mind: “The right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations.” (excerpt drawn from the Nyéléni Declaration, drafted at the 2007 World Forum on Food Sovereignty hosted by La Via Campesina).

² For an in-depth account of what prefigurative politics is, is not, and looks like in practice as well as a rich collection of literature on the topic see Raekstad & Gradin 2020.

because these actions not only react to (oppose) the status quo, but subvert it with a goal of radical transformation. In categorizing them as such, I support a view of revolution not only as a singular cataclysmic event, but a process and category of actions. As anarchist anthropologist David Graeber (2004) writes, “revolutionary action is any collective action which rejects, and therefore confronts, some form of power or domination, and in doing so, reconstructs social relations” (45). In the case of the Puerto Rican food sovereignty work I focus on, rather than supporting and reproducing deeply-entrenched patterns of colonial extraction, exploitation and violence, these activities are characterized by dynamics of investment, restoration, and deep healing. In this process, food is central to a radical imagination of what could be; it is actively cultivating that future today.

Building from ethnographic fieldwork, I document efforts occurring at the grassroots and connect these processes with theoretical commentary on social and environmental justice. The focus of this thesis is not to make evaluative judgements on the success of the evolving food sovereignty movement. Nor do I attempt to detail in great depth the techniques of colonial and capitalist domination via foodways, although that is necessary. The focus of this project is instead to draw attention to examples of radical alternatives that challenge the extractive processes of colonialism and capitalism. By documenting experiences of resistance, I offer what I captured to the best of my ability as a curious activist-researcher dedicated to storytelling with the goal of social change. I center my assets-based narrative analysis on the ways in which food provides the space to not only resist and react to colonialism in its ever-evolving form,

but regenerate, renew, and revitalize health, community, and social ecologies in productive ways. This work for emergent alternatives is creative, energetic, radical, and ever-transforming. This inquiry is guided by the central question: **How do Puerto Ricans view and use food as embodied decolonial resistance in the struggle for a radically new socio political reality?**

Through food, I offer a grounded critique of US colonial violence, making the link between political disenfranchisement, ecological destruction, normative cisheteropatriarchy, and disaster capitalism. The linkages between these violent systems and the supporting ideologies creates great significance and urgency for the work being done, which fights for a more sustainable, just, and regenerative food and social ecological landscape. In documenting people's generative reimagining of relationships with their bodies, each other, and the land, I aim to provide some hope and a narrative of creative intervention to structural violence. Ultimately, I argue that food is a powerful site of resistance, source of resilience, and mechanism of resurgence; as Puerto Ricans reclaim autonomy via food, they are resisting deeply rooted patterns of colonial extraction and dispossession and are directly cultivating a more ecologically, socially, and politically just future. As seeds are planted, local recipes recreated, and meals shared, a new reality is being created that all of us in a world increasingly being threatened with the catastrophic impacts of climate change, ecological devastation, rising inequality, and political turmoil would benefit from paying attention to and learning from.

Politics as Relationships

This project invites a return to a most basic and intuitive understanding of politics: politics as relationships. Stripped of jargon and theory, metrics and indicators, politics has always centered around relationships. For at the core of a political system is ultimately the management of relationships – with ourselves, with each other, with our surrounding environments, with the state, with the market, etc. In the nation-state context, politics as governance is the power to influence change in these relationships. Public policy and law tells us how we may relate, or gives us the freedom to relate as we wish. Either way, this matters because our relationships matter. A framing of politics as relationships is thus an extremely personal and practical framing, allowing us a grounded view of something so often rendered abstract beyond application.

I find this understanding of politics useful particularly as a way of examining sources and structures of power. Through examining these relationships, always interconnected, we discover power is not as straightforward as we may assume or as classical theory often presupposes. Implementing power is not reserved to decisions taken by the traditionally “powerful” (the wealthy, our elected leaders, etc.) but ever-present in the quotidian actions of your “average” person. This more comprehensive account of power is grounded in the particular experiences of those engaging in politics in the most basic sense: through living their lives as political subjects in a politicized world, where their bodies occupy physical space with geopolitical implications while they experience politics in the most visceral of ways. Accordingly, I reflect on how

power operates on people's corporealities and how they in turn, act on political systems through their bodily choices.

For this thesis, I expand on the idea of embodied politics to consider three, interrelated bodies that correspond with tiers of relationships: the individual body (relationship with the self), the body politic (interpersonal relationships), and the earth body (relationship with the more-than-human world). As I will discuss further, each of these bodies have been harmed by mechanisms of colonialism in Puerto Rico while the state and the market have severed relationships among the three tiers, naturally interconnected. Healing from this structural violence requires addressing and reconnecting these relationships. This is precisely the type of work I highlight.

An Interdisciplinary Intervention

My research is fundamentally interdisciplinary in nature and draws across many methodological traditions, with the hope that such an approach allows for a deeper, more meaningful critique of injustice. I draw on critical methods and perspectives from political science, sociology, anthropology, geography, and philosophy and see this work located at the intersection of gender and sexuality studies, ethnic and critical race studies, environmental studies, and food studies. I am following in a tradition of scholars who study power from below, seek to discover hidden narratives, highlight unexpected sources of agency, actively visibilize everyday acts of resistance, and center the words, stories, and desires of the communities they work with. I am especially grateful for and attentive to feminist of color critique, Indigenous environmentalisms, and anarchist perspectives as they inform this case study.

My research contributes to various fields in key ways by connecting across disparate literatures and bringing perspectives usually at the margins into the mainstream. Scholarship on food sovereignty is in need of more Indigenous, queer, feminist, and comparative analyses, as well as greater articulation of how movements relate to the state. While scholars have studied food sovereignty as a practice of sustainable agriculture (Rosset 2008; Perfecto, Vandermeer, Wright 2009; Francis et al 2003; Desmarais 2007), there has been less sustained attention to the implications of these agricultural practices on conceptions of citizenship and political subjectivity. My research aims to address those gaps, which I have become far too familiar with in reading works that leave me wanting more critical investigations into the truly radical potential of food as a source of political agency. Much like Grey & Patel (2015), I am focused on food sovereignty here less as an agricultural practice than as a political practice of cultivating self-determination and challenging broader colonial conditions of subjugation and exploitation. In doing so, I am responding to past scholarship on food sovereignty in Puerto Rico which has explicitly identified the need for such a political approach, as well as called for greater attention to how gender functions (Diaz & Hunsberger 2018).

Within environmental studies research, there have been calls for more decolonial work (as well as theorization of settler colonialism) and greater examination of a “critical environmental justice” framework (Pellow 2018), which this project fits squarely into. Within anarchist and radical theory, scholars have encouraged research into a “sociology of absences and emergences” (de Sousa Santos 2003) as well as called

for a need to examine the relationship of anarchist thought to Indigenous and feminist theories. As someone who is especially interested in all these theoretical spaces, I see my project connecting ideas that hold great resonance with each other but are rarely, if ever, put into conversation. Finally, within political science, most theory is traditionally state-centric and gives limited attention to embodiment or mechanisms of political action that are not electoral or formally institutionalized, a disciplinary tendency I aim to resist in this project. Common across all fields, there is a need to ground theory in specific case studies and incorporate more voices from the grassroots, which my research strives to do.

Why Puerto Rico?

Puerto Rico offers an especially unique site to study food sovereignty and colonialism given its geopolitical relationship with the US and position of ambiguous liminality. By formal legal definitions, Puerto Rico is not a colony. As an unincorporated territory of the US, Puerto Rico has not been explicitly included in formal decolonial efforts, such as that by the UN's special committee on decolonization. Nevertheless, most Puerto Ricans and critical scholars alike do not hesitate from characterizing contemporary relations as "colonial" (Trías Monge 1997; Soto 2017; Collado-Schwarz 2011; Cabranes & Torruela 1986; Fernandez 1994; Lopez 1987; Rivera Ramos 2001; Denis 2015; Klein 2018; Negrón-Muntaner & Grosfoguel 1997; Bernal 2018). Puerto Rican legal scholar Efrén Rivera Ramos (2001) described the US acquisition of Puerto Rico from Spain in 1898 under the Treaty of Paris as "shed[ing] an old colonial master and fac[ing] a new stage in its colonial history" (5). The

transition of Puerto Rico's political status to a "commonwealth" in 1952 did not change the fact that Puerto Ricans still have the fewest constitutional rights of any US citizens, lacking the ability to vote in presidential elections, elect voting members to Congress, or directly control any legislation concerning Puerto Rican affairs. Plenary powers according to the Territorial Clause of the US Constitution gives Congress exclusive authority to legislate on Puerto Rican affairs, despite Puerto Rico lacking voting representation in Congress.

Even just a brief examination of policy and legal structures in place today make clear the vastly unequal and undemocratic relationship between the US and Puerto Rico.³ Writing about the ways in which the possibilities for effective disaster preparedness and recovery in Puerto are hampered by ongoing US colonialism, Adriana Garriga-López (2019) explains that, "In the current context, economic modes of extractivism, austerity, and disaster capitalism increasingly intertwine in Puerto Rico, where at present we are witnessing the privatization of the public sphere on a massive scale. These dynamics have produced a clash between the state and ordinary people that threatens their long-term survival on the islands" (175). Policies have consistently benefited the US military, mainland elites, and US-based corporations while stifling healthy development and creating a dangerous debt trap on the island. Massive land grabs and shrinking of the commons has supported a colonial process of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2005) and left your average Puerto Rican at heightened risk

³ For a review of policies that reflect colonial dynamics in various spheres, see De Onís 2018 (on energy policy); Zambrana n.d. (on debt); Cabán 2018 (on austerity and the fiscal control board); Graddy-Lovelace 2017 (on agriculture and food policy); Backiel 2015 (on macroeconomics); Atilés-Osorio 2014 (on environmental policy). For accounts of the legal relationship, including discussion of the Insular cases, see Rivera Ramos 2001; Ayala & Bernabe 2009; Neuman & Brown-Nagin 2015; Erman 2019

of poverty⁴ and its associated risks. In this context, Puerto Ricans are undeniably second class citizens, lacking access to full democratic rights and facing extreme vulnerability to the intrusion of foreign capital and state interests.

It is only appropriate that Puerto Rico rests on the fault lines of two tectonic plates. This geologic reality contributes to the seismic activity facing the island and perhaps can be seen as a larger analogy for the ambiguous position of the archipelago and its inhabitants, in some ways posited tensely between Latin America and the US, the Global North and the Global South, full citizenship and something else entirely. While this condition of ambiguity has led to oversight by scholars, I suggest the complexity offers unique value. Black feminist scholar bell hooks writes on the practice of centering what is usually in the margins, understood to be spaces that are often rendered invisible due to structural vulnerability. She calls this a space of “radical openness” and characterizes it as ripe with possibility and liberatory potential (hooks 2015). Similarly, Chicana feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa writes on the generativity found in the “borderlands,” understood to be the spaces in between (literally in the case of geographic borders but also metaphysically and ideologically). Inspired by these perspectives and others that find value in greater complexity, I appreciate and welcome the complicated conditions that we must navigate in this case study.

⁴ With a poverty rate of 43.1% upon last checking the official US Census website (<https://www.census.gov/>), Puerto Rico has the highest rate of poverty across all US states and territories. The average per capita income is roughly half that of Mississippi, the poorest of all US states. Childhood food insecurity, even before Hurricane Maria, was at a rate of 56%, triple the US average (<https://www.bread.org/report/2019-hunger-report>). While these rigid metrics do not capture experiences of poverty or food insecurity and are certainly only a partial story, they are valuable in comparison.

The Crisis Context

I write at a time of heightened volatility, where structural vulnerabilities are made ever more visible in the context of multiple overlapping social, political, and ecological crises. As I was writing in the winter of 2020, Puerto Rico was experiencing a season of ravaging earthquakes, the most dramatic faced by the islands in years. The impacts on physical infrastructure, lives, and ecologies were immediate and intense. As I continue to write just a few short months later, thousands are still living in tents outside, their houses destroyed or made uninhabitable by the quakes (Robles 2020). What's more, as of March 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic has struck the world with unprecedented impacts. Yet again, reports show that Puerto Ricans are facing heightened vulnerability given government dysfunction and mismanagement of resources (Mazzei 2020). These crises come just over two years after Hurricane Maria made landfall on the archipelago with devastating impacts, many of which are still being felt.

Crisis conditions like these have revealed the ineptitude or perhaps willful neglect of the state in responding to Puerto Rican suffering, as well as the ever-looming threat of predatory disaster capitalism and authoritarian power-grabs (Klein 2007). The reaction, and lack thereof, to Hurricane Maria by both US federal officials and Puerto Rican elected officials in many ways set the foundation to the eruption of protests that rocked the island over the summer of 2019. Scholars have urged us to consider the mobilizations as beyond simply disillusionment with the state's corruption. Indeed, they are symptoms of much deeper structural crisis: colonialism (Garriga-Lopez 2019,

Bonilla & Lebrón 2019). This reminds us of a common catchphrase: “el desastre no es natural” (the disaster is not natural). This quote challenges mainstream discourse on “natural disasters” by arguing that the crisis is not a result of environmental happenstance, but the inability of political structures to adequately prepare and respond to them. The principle injustice of colonialism is revealed: that territories and marginalized populations are incorporated into the state via the market as it is profitable, but not democratically. In the colonial context, I invite a reframing: the crises should be understood not as failures of the state but rather a success of the colonial project, working through the mechanisms of the neoliberal state.

It should be clear that in the context of these crises, Puerto Ricans have not silently accepted conditions of their disenfranchisement and exploitation. They have responded with agency in order to survive, building and employing grassroots networks of mutual aid to meet critical needs such as housing, food, and medical care (Vélez-Vélez & Villarrubia-Mendoza 2018). Scholars on disaster often describe crises as both destructive and productive. Writing about the COVID-19 pandemic, Indian author Arundhati Roy described crisis moments as a “portal, a gateway between one world and the next” where we must choose what baggage we leave behind and what we bring with us (Roy 2020). In the Puerto Rican case, this understanding of crisis contexts as generative rings true. Losing faith in the simultaneously exploitative and unsupportive state, people have responded to devastation in increasingly creative ways, turning towards community. The volatility of the moment has opened up new space for

opportunity. As a result, crisis conditions have revealed the power of local organizing and inspired radical imaginations of what could be.

Identifying Solutions Outside and Beyond the State

When considering political solutions to the crises in Puerto Rico, most mainstream perspectives offer limited prospects for transformative change. Debates often center around questions of status: Should Puerto Rico pursue statehood, independence or remaining in the current status as a US territory? The assumption is that one of the options holds better potential for a more just future and will provide greater benefits for Puerto Ricans. This debate is rife with complexity and many opposing viewpoints, but ultimately maintains a state-centric focus. Instead, I (and those I worked with) suggest our attention should look beyond the state as the solution, given that the state is one of the primary contributors to the situation of injustice. This perspective aligns with recommendations for greater wariness of the state as an ally in a “critical environmental justice” framework (Pellow 2017). It only makes sense to adopt such a positioning since the state has never worked *for* Puerto Ricans, not under Spanish colonialism nor contemporary US neoliberal coloniality. Rather, assimilationist policies have actively targeted, destroyed, and exploited the land, bodies, and culture of Puerto Ricans, demanding incorporating into the capitalist colonial state and creating artificial dependency (Santana 1996). This process, varied in specific mechanisms over time but reflected continually since the first contact with colonizers, has actively and strategically worked against Puerto Rican autonomy and sovereignty while enhancing

the power and control of the colonial state. As a result, efforts to be included in the state offer limited potential for substantive justice or are at the very least, constrained.

This constraint is visible in discourse and policy approaches to food in key ways. For example, the state and formal institutions usually operate around the concept of “food security” and shy away from any mention of food sovereignty. Defined by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), food security is “a situation that exists when all people have social and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO 2003 cited in Patel 2009). Compare this to the definition of food sovereignty by La Vía Campesina (2009), the grassroots peasant movement credited with the creation of the term: “The right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.” The term has become a rallying call for a particular strain of food justice activism that goes beyond a focus on food accessibility/security by invoking an explicitly political critique of the larger structures producing cases of food insecurity or food injustice. La Vía Campesina write that, “food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social classes and generations” and explicitly mention the term as a strategic tool in the global fight against “imperialism, neoliberalism, neo-colonialism and patriarchy, and all systems that impoverish life, resources and ecosystems, and the agents that promote the above such as international financial institutions, the World Trade Organisation, free trade agreements, transnational corporations, and governments

that are antagonistic to their peoples.” Targeting monopolized control of food systems by corporations, a food sovereignty approach advocates for democratic control and a greater distribution of wealth, knowledge, power, and land in line with six core principles:

1. Focus on food for the people
2. Values food providers
3. Localizes food systems
4. Puts control locally
5. Builds knowledge and skills
6. Works with nature

Clearly, food sovereignty is about much more than having enough food (although that is also an outcome); it is about radically transforming social and political structures and asserting a wide range of rights. In doing so, we see that "to demand a space of food sovereignty is to demand specific arrangements to govern territory and space" (Patel 2009: 668). The political geography that food sovereignty implies (Trauger 2014) is simply incompatible with top-down neoliberal governance as well as philanthropic models of aid. Perhaps this explains why the term food sovereignty does not appear once in the UN's 239 page report on 2019 Food Security and Nutrition in the World or anywhere on the USDA's website.⁵ Ironically, many scholars on food security argue that there cannot be food security without food sovereignty, not in Puerto Rico (Rodríguez-Cruz 2020) and not in general (Neff & Biehl 2020). This reflects the insufficiency in using a state-centric approach, in both analysis and practice.

⁵ For more perspectives comparing food security and food sovereignty discourse and the resulting implications, see Jarosz 2014; Fairbairn 2012; Alkon & Mares 2012.

For this reason, I find greater value in identifying means of political action outside the realm of the state that focuses its attention on goals beyond liberal democratic incorporation into the existing political regime. Rather than getting stuck in theoretical circles around what it means to decolonize or what hypothetical political arrangement offers the best prospect for liberation, I prioritize my attention on examining day-to-day decolonial practices that transform conditions on the ground and impact the lived realities of Puerto Ricans today. The political goals of this type of organizing work is not necessarily formal political legitimacy or recognition in any electoral sense. In many ways, there is actively a rejection of incorporation, which would only maintain and enhance the colonial power structure.⁶ To be clear, organizing in an ethos of rejection should be seen not as a simply negative but as generative, willfill, and hopeful (McGranahan 2016). It should also be noted that this type of action, despite perhaps not aligning with the liberal democratic state, is not antithetical to democracy. Rather, this type of subversive and insurgent organizing may be the most deeply democratic activities occurring. In contrast to state-centric political activities which stand deeply marred by corruption, rigid hierarchy, and inaccessible bureaucracy, grassroots organizing often reflects dynamics of greater accessibility and inclusion.

Overview of Paper

This paper will begin by discussing relevant literature on structural violence and environmental justice. I establish a three tier multiscalar approach to discussing healing and social transformation in the context of queer agroecology in Puerto Rico. I will also

⁶ This explicit rejection of incorporation is consistent with many Indigenous organizing efforts, which similarly seek autonomy and sovereignty rather than inclusion. See Gilio-Whitaker 2019; Simpson 2014; Coulthard 2014.

engage in a brief policy analysis in order to exemplify how the mechanisms of colonialism shift over time and are supported by legal structures. Following, I will discuss the methodology employed in this project, spending extra time to explore the complicated questions around what decolonial scholarship requires and what responsibility scholars hold in doing academic work in their privileged positionalities. Next, I will transition into discussion and analysis of the findings of my fieldwork accounts, bringing in the voices from those I worked with during my trip in Puerto Rico. Lastly, I will conclude with a review of what can be learned from this case study as it relates to creative political interventions and grassroots strategies to support public health. I will also offer brief commentary on the significance and urgency of this project in the COVID-19 context. Throughout the text, I include vignettes I wrote with the goal of presenting information in alternative ways and rooting my analysis in metaphors for greater accessibility. Text appears in Spanish, English, and Spanglish. Including all three was a decision made with special consideration with the understanding that Spanglish holds unique political salience in the Puerto Rican context given how language has been a tool of colonial assimilation. All translations of Spanish are provided in footnotes.

Literature Review

She explains why they use a no-till method. The soil, it carries a history. Each layer, a different moment in time, having absorbed the energies, the voices, the breath and tears and cries and hopes and dreams of those walking upon it. We are walking on this history, always connected to it. As we ground down through our soles, those who walked before us reach up, meeting us in the holy union of our bare feet against the earth's crust. In their planting, rooting down into the black earth with eager fingers, they navigate what their ancestors experienced, what they knew, let the voices of the past escape through the cracked earth in whispers. Then, in due time, they build on it as top soil layers deepen and nourish a new generation of crops. Instead of tilling before cultivation and trying to erase the structure, holding the history, in the soil, they honor it all. Connect with it. Let the voices of the past inform the present, be part of the future, being created de nuevo with each seed planted into the black earth.

Violence Across Three Bodies: A Multiscalar Crisis

To better understand the significance of my ethnographic work, it helps to consider theories on colonial violence and environmental justice. Doing so allows for greater understanding of the interconnectivity between cultural work, agricultural work, and social justice work (in fact, it reveals their inherently overlap) as well as provides us with useful frameworks for analysis and language for articulation. In the following sections, I will explore the idea of colonialism as a multiscalar crisis, with violent impacts across all three, interconnected bodies and sets of relationships: the individual body (relationship with self), the body politic (interpersonal relationships), and the earth body (relationship with surrounding land and ecologies).

Before I begin with the theory, I briefly highlight three decisions the US state has taken in Puerto Rico which exemplify the way in which the island and its inhabitants have faced direct harm as a result of colonial geopolitics. Consider first the

way in which Puerto Rican women were used as human guinea pigs in the first large-scale human trials of “the pill” birth control in the 1950s (after continental US-based women refused to continue in trials given the horrible side-effects) and later faced forced sterilization campaigns grounded in eugenic beliefs about Puerto Ricans’ biological and racial inferiority (Briggs 2002). Both campaigns were not only allowed but encouraged by the US state in the supposed promotion of public health and nation building. This example reveals how the intersecting ideologies of family, sexuality, science, and reproduction animate imperial projects. Second, consider how Puerto Rico has been used as a “laboratory” for Green Revolution technology, including GMOs and transgenic seeds. Agribusiness corporations such as Monsanto (now owned by Bayer) have claimed land beyond the maximum 500 acres permitted by the Constitution of Puerto Rico (under Section 14, Article VI), while they have received hefty government benefits and advantages under the Ley de Promoción y Desarrollo de Empresas de Biotecnología Agrícola de 2009 [Law for the Promotion and Development of Agricultural Biotechnology Companies] specifically “tailored to favor them” (Martínez Mercado 2011). The crops grown on these large-scale monocrop farms are primarily for seed development and export and have pushed small-scale farmers away from community-based subsistence agriculture, contributing to greater food insecurity and import dependency in the area. All the while, the ecologically harmful impacts of biotechnology and synthetic inputs (fertilizer, pesticides, etc.) hurt the island’s soil and land in ways still unknown. Lastly, consider how the Puerto Rican island of Vieques was used for over 60 years as a testing site and bombing range for the US Navy,

operations ending only in 2003. The introduction of heavy metals and toxic chemicals like depleted uranium and Agent Orange have been linked to higher rates of disease and the island still has active bomb sites. As of 2016, residents of Vieques were eight times more likely to die of cardiovascular disease than Puerto Ricans at large and cancer rates on the island were some of the highest in the Caribbean and well above the US average (Pelet 2016). These three examples, each extreme on their own yet especially in coordination, remind us that this type of violence against land and bodies is not simply coincidentally located in Puerto Rico. Rather, they each reveal the way in which US-sponsored industrialization initiatives and techno-scientific “solutions” reinforce colonial biopower. Heavy with assumptions about modernity, progress, and development, the US has exerted colonial power across time, made possible by coordinated and systemic state mechanisms, policy, and infrastructure.

I hope by putting them alongside each other, I will make clear that violence at each level is connected, linked by a colonial set of ideological and epistemological hierarchies. State sovereignty is inextricably tied to biopower, as states hold monopoly on violence and invoke the “capacity to define who matters and who does not” (Mbembe 2003: 27). These logics of domination, employed by the state, contain symbolic notions of what is “natural” and “unnatural,” in doing so rendering certain bodies, resources, and lands extractable and dispensable. As Macarena Gómez-Barris (2017) writes:

Before the colonial project could prosper, it had to render territories and people extractable, and it did so through a matrix of symbolic, physical, and representational violence. Therefore, the extractive view sees territories as commodities, rendering land as for the taking while also

devalorizing the hidden worlds that form the nexus of human and nonhuman multiplicity. This viewpoint, similar to the colonial gaze, facilitates the reorganization of territories, populations, and plant and animal life into extractible data and natural resources for material and immaterial accumulation.

These systems of colonial ideologies, described by Gómez-Barris as the “extractive view” matters because state policies reify their assumptions in ways that directly impact lives and public health, such as the case of Vieques clearly shows.

Environmental Justice scholar David Naguid Pellow outlines the idea of “Critical Environmental Justice” in his aptly titled book, *What is Critical Environmental Justice?* In the text, he introduces a new framework for critically analyzing environmental justice scholarship and activism, embracing greater interdisciplinarity and encouraging work that “pushes the ideas and potential of earlier generations of EJ studies into new and productive directions” (3). By examining spaces of conflict and collaboration, “that are not often always defined as ‘environmental’” (3) Pellow’s work offers valuable insights into the field of EJ and encourages greater attention to the way in which social justice struggles are inherently linked to ecologies and environmental place. Pellow identifies four pillars of Critical EJ which embody a generative response to limitations and tensions within earlier generations of EJ scholarship. First, the notion of intersecting forms of social inequality and oppression. Second, an embrace of multiscalar methodological and theoretical approaches. Third, an examination of the state as a key agent of oppression and thus a particular hesitation to assume justice comes from the state. Fourth, the concept of *sociological indispensability*, which refers to the view that all people and beings on the “more-than-human spectrum” are integrally linked in webs of interdependence so that, in Naomi Klein’s words, “the

change everything we need everyone.” I extend Pellow’s framework to my own project, drawing especially on the idea of multiscale as I consider embodied violence and resistance. I believe this will allow us to better recognize, understand, and respond to mechanisms of harm that go beyond that which is customarily conceived as violence (i.e. action that is immediate in time, explosive, highly visible, physical, and interpersonal in nature). Nixon (2011) calls for greater attention to a “different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales” (2) which I hope I can do here through highlighting the structural violence of colonialism.

Understanding Colonial Dynamics Across Time

Multiscale is useful in conceptualizing both spatial and temporal scales. A consideration of temporal scale allows us to view colonialism not as an event of the past, but a structure and practice, ongoing and ever-evolving. This perspective is inspired primarily from Indigenous theories of settler colonialism as a structure (Woolfe 2006; Grande & Ormiston 2016) and critical scholars from the Global South who have challenged the notion of “post-colonial,” asserting that there is no “post” when the basic relationship of extreme power imbalance remains (Gómez-Barris 2017; Quijano 1992; Mignolo 2011). This is especially apt in the Puerto Rican case where little subtlety exists. If we are attuned to the root logic of extractivism, we may connect policy and state action (such as those described in the section above) in fluid continuity, understanding them as part of a larger project. Dynamics under this category go by

many names -- colonialism, coloniality, settler colonialism, neoliberal globalization, and imperialism to name just a few -- yet fundamentally involve many the same processes: incorporation for the purposes of exploitation, imposition of a dominating external culture and worldviews, accumulation by dispossession, and transformation of systems to create dependency and weaken self-determination and autonomy. Theorists often struggle to find appropriate theoretical frameworks and categorical labels, but we should not forget that, whatever we decide to call it, the violent dynamics of extractivism remain consistent. I thus prefer to focus my energies in this thesis not on outlining my decision on the perfect term to use but outlining the dynamic as it appears in Puerto Rican policy over time.⁷

I wish to highlight three core policies, which reflect colonial tendencies in clear ways and create explicit challenges to Puerto Rican food sovereignty:

1. **The Jones Act** (Merchant Marine Act of 1920): This policy requires that all goods entering Puerto Rico arrive on US-made, US-staffed, and US-flag-carrying ships. It has been blamed for lending to higher consumer prices (at the benefit of protected US based industries), contributing to the debt crisis, as well as choking disaster relief efforts, since it restricts Puerto Rico from receiving aid directly from neighboring Caribbean nations. It ensures Puerto Rican dependency on US markets, shipping companies, and labor and formally suppresses Puerto Rican sovereignty and trans-Caribbean solidarity by inhibiting direct trade.⁸
2. **Operation Bootstrap**: A post-WWII modernization and industrialization initiative which created corporate tax loopholes and special benefits in order to attract American-based corporations and foreign capital to Puerto Rico. By deregulating and encouraging less stringent enforcement of environmental protections, it makes Puerto Rico an ideal destination for wealthy investors and corporate polluters, including the pharmaceutical industry, petroleum based industry, and industrial agriculture. It directly incentivized the growth of the export-oriented sugar industry which led to concentration of land, higher levels

⁷ For a cartoon representation of history of colonialism, see: <https://www.villagevoice.com/2018/03/19/a-cartoon-history-of-colonialism-in-puerto-rico/>.

⁸ See Valtine Mari & Alameda-Lozada 2012 for a detailed report on the impact of the Jones Act on the Puerto Rican economy.

of pollution, increased food import dependency, and widening socioeconomic inequality.⁹

3. **PROMESA** (The Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act): passed in 2016, this act grants Congress unbridled control of an undemocratically elected fiscal control board with the professed goal of “managing” the debt crisis. The Board, referred to colloquially as “La Junta,” has received extreme and wide-spread criticism in response to the imposition of neoliberal austerity measures, which have touched on all aspects of Puerto Ricans lives. Board members have cut retirement pensions, closed schools, gutted funding for the public university system, while fast-tracking “critical” energy projects and creating convenient opportunities for foreign capital. This has led many to view PROMESA as enabling a larger process of disaster capitalism (Klein 2018).

These three policies are explicitly implicated in the food system, contributing to higher rates of food insecurity while working against food sovereignty. They also reveal the way in which colonial dynamics shift over time. For example, under Spanish colonialism, Puerto Rican agriculture was also export-oriented under a plantation model which prioritized the needs of the Spanish crown at the expense of local sustenance (Mintz 2010; Goucher 2000). This evolved smoothly into contemporary overreliance on GMO seeds and corn, largely the result of Operation Bootstrap. This pattern purposefully contributed to overdependence on imports from then Spain and now the US economy. Puerto Rico’s overreliance on the US is visible in statistics that claim that even before Maria, Puerto Rico imported over 85% of the food consumed on the island. I can't help but wonder if this would be the case if Puerto Ricans had a seat at the decision-making table.

⁹ See Berman Santana 1996, for a closer look at the impact of sugar production and Operation Bootstrap’s agricultural policies on local communities. See Carro-Figueroa 2002 and Collo 1989 for a tracing of agricultural decline and food import dependency.

Understanding Colonial Violence across Spatial Scales

When discussing structural and institutional violence such as that of colonialism or capitalism, it is sometimes easy to forget that individuals and their physical bodies are inherently implicated in these complex processes and systems. Yet we know that individual bodies become direct sites of colonial violence as they have embodied what the colonial state seeks to destroy, suppress, or otherwise control. Walkters et al. (2011) describe the embodiment of colonial trauma in American Indian and Alaskan Natives, reminding us that bodies not only tell stories but histories too. Their examination of particular bodies that have been the direct targets of colonial projects of genocide and dispossession reveal the way in which bodies become vessels of larger dynamics, carrying with them the visceral biological scars of policies.

It is critical to remember that certain bodies are disproportionately impacted by the simultaneously extractive and destructive processes of colonialism. Given the way in which colonialism has co-created and reinforced racial classifications (Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2000) as well as heteronormativity and the gender binary (Lugones 2010; Morgensen 2012), it comes as no great surprise that feminine, queer, Black, brown, Indigenous, and disabled bodies (and all those at the intersection of those categories) have been the primary recipients of this violence. Indigenous and non-Indigenous feminist scholars alike have explored this dynamic in depth, revealing the ways in which particular vulnerabilities are created by the logic of the colonial state as it

employs gendered, racialized, and sexual hierarchies.¹⁰ Indigenous anthropologist Audra Simpson (2015) helps us understand this process by explaining that the bodies of Indigenous women have been strategically targeted because they are signifiers of a political order that is directly threatening to the political legitimacy of the settler state. She explains that Indigenous women's bodies house and reproduce indigenous political orders so must therefore be eliminated according to a logic that seeks to control. Here we see that gender and sexual violence can be understood as a direct tool of genocide and colonial dispossession (Simpson 2017). Applying this understanding to the case of Puerto Rico, it is thus not simply a convenient coincidence that Puerto Rican women have been targeted by state sterilization projects. We should understand this project as strategic, in support of a colonial American state that has an interest in maintaining biopolitical control of Puerto Rican bodies, land, and resources.

Much as bodily autonomy and intimate relationships have been regulated and restricted by the colonial state, land use and ecologies have been policed in a parallel process. Ecologies have been sites of colonial violence, reflecting the processes of rigid control and forced assimilation into the colonial norm. Much like the policing of gender and sexual diversity that we observe in the personal and interpersonal realm, ecological diversity is also targeted. This is visible in the promotion of monoculture and other systems that prioritize efficiency over ecological health, social justice, or sustainability.

¹⁰ See Voyles (2015) who uses a framework of environmental racism to explain why certain landscapes and the peoples who inhabit them come to be targeted for disproportionate exposure to environmental harm; See Deer (2015) for a close examination of how the "epidemic" of rape and sexual violence against Indigenous women is tied directly to a settler colonial legal framework; see Roberts (1997) for an account of how Black women's bodies and their reproductive capacities have been targeted by systemic state abuse; see Salleh (1997) for a materialist analysis of how capitalism's exploitation of women's labor and reproductive capacities has paralleled ecological extractivism.

Bacon (2018) describes “colonial ecological violence” and connects it to the process of dispossession by asserting that, “degradation of the natural environment is a central vector continuing the transfer of power and material resources from Native to non-Native People today” (190). Similarly, Whyte (2018a) asserts that there are identifiable “settler ecologies” which reflect the demands, desires, and ideologies of the settler culture. The promotion of industrialized agriculture in Puerto Rico, which includes GMO, monocrop, and export-oriented models, and ensuring transformation of ecological landscapes fits this description. Operation Bootstrap matches the process that Whyte calls “settler industrialism” where modernization/industrialization initiatives are conveniently adopted by settler society in order to constrain livelihoods and encourage a certain way of being. The coloniality of US agricultural policy has not gone unnoticed (Graddy-Lovelace 2017), but bringing specific attention to the way in which this process has mirrored sexual and gender violence warrants special note.

In Response: Queer Ecology as a Transformative Political Paradigm

Simpson’s idea that Native bodies contain political orders offers a point of departure when considering responses and resistance to colonial violence. What makes a certain body an especially threatening political order also makes it naturally the most potent and generative space of resistance and radical resurgence (Simpson 2017). Thus, in my study, queer Puerto Rican bodies and ecologies hold unique generativity as they contain radical political orders that subvert and challenge the colonial state in fundamental ways. In this context, the diversity they welcome (gender, ecological, etc.) directly subverts the colonial pressures of hegemonic incorporation and assimilation.

An ecological orientation rooted in relational dynamics of interdependency is also subversive in how it demands our re-connection with our surrounding ecologies and the very land itself.

Queerness as a paradigm holds radical hope and generative possibilities in the space it creates for alternatives to the violent status quo. The most potent decolonial work is queer and feminist because heteropatriarchy is built into the very structure of colonialism. A queer ecology encourages life that is polycultural, diverse, inclusive, and revolutionary, against a colonial monocrop model that is homogeneous, exclusionary, reformist, and incorporatory. Thus, when asking what decolonization, transformative justice, and substantive healing looks like, we would do well to look to queer ecology. Luckily, my participants had plenty to say on that. I leave off with a quote from Tara:

Our organization believes that there is a direct link between all of the issues that food and farming and agriculture face because of the fact that they are disconnected from queer practices...Ecosystems are not monoculture. Ecosystems are not homogeneous. Ecosystems are in that sense, queer. *What does queer mean?* It's out of that "normal" that we have defined, in many ways due to capitalism? And so queer, we think, is not normal. But actually *queer is pretty normal*. What is not normal is straightness and heteronormativity. Everybody being the same, or dressing the same, or all of my farm looking the same, or growing the same crops. That is what is not normal. (my italics)

Methods

Branches heavy with bunches of small green quenepas¹¹ decorate the tables. They invite you not only to sit but to indulge in the treat of peeling back the thin sour skin in order to pop the fruit whole into your mouth and suck its flesh and eventually spit out the big white seed, your teeth now half full of stringy flesh (or maybe that's just a Gringa thing). Before I have the guts to talk to my neighbor with the cherry red lipstick, I find company with the quenepas. Small, round, underwhelming in their appearance and at first bite not initially spectacular. Little do I know then how much I'll miss them upon leaving the island, how much energy I'll invest thinking about how to smuggle them in my carry-on back to Oregon. As I admire the way the fading sunlight makes the building next door glow in that certain kind of way, I think "just one more." But soon my lap is full of green shells, stacking into each other like small cups. Little do I know how many more quenepa shells will nestle into my lap in the coming weeks, how many conversations will flow upon sharing their flesh, how much they'll matter.

A Transformative Research Praxis

In this thesis, I strive to employ a transformative research praxis, which guides my methodologic and epistemic approach according to the central principles of accountability, intersectionality, reciprocity, and reflexivity. Considering the power dynamics inherently present in the process of knowledge production, I entered this project asking: How do I as a scholar do research that does not perpetuate dynamics of colonial extraction and exploitation but instead supports opportunities for agency and community empowerment among those that I work with? How do I mobilize on my own positionality and privilege, in solidarity with movements for social change? This inquiry required me to consider whose voices are prominent, considered, and available in scholarship, who is considered experts on topics, and how knowledge is produced: by who, for who, and why?

¹¹ Quenepas, also called Spanish Lime and by many other names, are small fruit commonly eaten across the Caribbean.

I entered this project as a self-identified activist-scholar; I view my scholarship as inseparable from my activism. Thus, my goals go beyond fulfilling disciplinary expectations and extend beyond the academy. I identified four central goals to this project:

1. Become an expert in radical hope. Bring urgent attention to inequity and oppression but focus on resilience, agency, and the grassroots resistance to it.
2. Contribute tangibly to the communities I work with to support their capacity for change-making.
3. Share the knowledge gained with a wider audience, including non-academic, in a variety of forms.
4. Build lasting and meaningful connections with those I am working with.

My epistemic and methodological approach is informed by the values of critical methodologies including feminist standpoint theory (Harding 2004; Haraway 2004; hooks 2015), queer public sociology (Santos 2012; Burawoy 2005), Indigenous and decolonial methodologies (Tuhiwai Smith 1999), subaltern and postcolonial theory (Lewis & Mills 2003), anarchist and radical theory (Graeber 2004; Gibson-Graham 2006), and Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Wakeford, T. & Sanchez Rodriguez, J. 2018; Greenwood, D., & Levin, M. 2007).

I align myself with the work of many other academics who similarly orient their work towards greater political aspirations. Critical geographer Laura Pulido (2008) describes the “scholar-activist” as engaging in a praxis centered beyond the academy, whereby “the point is that the scholar is somehow committed to oppositional action beyond that of writing for academic audiences” (342). Similarly, Levkoe, Brem-Wilson, and Anderson (2018) define praxis as “the dialectical interaction of theory/reflection and practice/action that opens the possibility for transformative political action” (8). In

categorizing a “food sovereignty research practice,” they identify three pillars: 1) People (dedicated to humanizing research relationships), 2) Power (equalizing power relationships), and 3) Change (pursuing transformative orientations). I adopt such a framework for practice, researching a social movement in solidarity with those at the grassroots and oriented towards a radical politics with no attempt to claim neutrality or objectivity. I know that my own identities and experiences necessarily impact this work and the stories I tell and do not view that as discrediting or delegitimizing my work. I hope my work strengthens a culture of engagement between academics and community-based organizations.

In my data collection process, my ethnographic practice centers on uplifting the value and wisdom of lived experiences, especially of those at the margins. Inspired again by the work of bell hooks, I choose to focus on the margins and pay attention to the voices that reside in that space (hooks 2015). I also draw on critical sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ notion of a “sociology of absences” and “sociology of emergences” in doing this work. De Sousa Santos (2014) encourages research into actually-existing social realities and practices that have been made nonexistent (absent) by treating them as impossible alternatives to the status quo, dominated by colonialism, capitalism, etc. He posits that what has been made absent provides the materials for an alternative future. Thus, in doing this work of resistant sociological imagining, I strive to uplift experiences and narratives at the margins, in order to “replace the emptiness of the future (according to linear time) with a future of plural and concrete possibilities, utopian and realist at one and the same time and constructed in the present by means of

activities of care.” (de Sousa Santos 2014: 182). I see the body and experiences as theory and wish to acknowledge the “everyday experts” all around us, rejecting positivist ideas of intellectual authority and rigid gatekeeping of expertise (People’s Knowledge Editorial Collective).

In my ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation, I attended community events of various types, including those that were explicitly political (such as protests, rallies, and community assembly meetings), as well as academic (speaker panels, talks at the University of Puerto Rico) and social in nature (farmers markets, garden work parties, fundraisers, art shows, parties, miscellaneous social gatherings). To blur those categories however, my framing of political action means I understand each event I attended to be inherently political given how attendees navigated space and power dynamics. Some events were explicitly centered on food and agriculture such as brigadas,¹² farmers markets, and community meetings focused on discussing food sovereignty, while at others food was not explicitly present. I also spent time observing and assisting the daily operations of the restaurant/multi-farm CSA turned grassroots organization (becoming a nonprofit), El Departamento de la Comida (eldepartamentodelacomida.org). I documented my observations in written field notes and voice memos as well as collected photos and videos when appropriate and with the consent of those photographed. I also formally interviewed 14 participants over the course of two months, an open-ended semi-structured style ranging in length from 30 to 90 minutes. Interviews were conducted in the language most comfortable to the interviewee, so often were a mix of English and Spanish. Translations of the interviews

¹² Work parties, often at a finca [farm].

from Spanish into English for the purposes of this paper was done by myself and the gracious help of a Puerto Rican native-Spanish speaking friend, who is also helping me translate a version of this thesis into Spanish upon completion.

In collecting data for this research, I also made use of social media and online networks as I followed the ever-evolving work around food sovereignty and justice in Puerto Rico. Through posts and messages on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, I had greater insight into the work of those I interviewed and spent time with in person, as well as a chance to understand broader networks of action. Through viewing content on these platforms, I could see how even those I was not able to speak to or connect with personally were framing the issue, mobilizing in action, and using the internet as a tool for social change. The central importance of social media and digital networks in activist work is worth reiterating, especially in the context of the mobilizations surrounding #RickyRenuncia/#TelegramGate this summer. A hashtag exploded into a movement, shut down the island, and resulted in the ousting of Governor Ricardo Roselló with reverberating effects still incomplete. This summer can be understood in the context of the “era de Movimientos Red” (era of social media/network movements) where an ever-increasing number of movements -- from #Occupy to #15M to #BlackLivesMatter to #MeToo -- have been spurred and fueled by online networks and technopolitics, allowing virtual space in addition to physical as a platform for organizing.¹³

¹³ These ideas draw heavily from a panel presentation entitled “Somos Más: Diálogo entre movimientos alrededor del Mundo” hosted by Beta Local in Old San Juan on August 6th, with panelists Javier Toret, Yarimar Bonilla, Carla Jeanet Torres, and Pablo Benson; FB event: <https://www.facebook.com/events/456956774860358/>.

On Storytelling, Connecting, and Giving Back

In this thesis, I conceptualize myself as a storyteller, with an orientation towards narratives of resilience and opportunities for change. I use an assets-based approach, centering on creative responses to structural vulnerabilities. For as I overheard at one of the community assemblies I attended: “PR is called poor, but PR is rico! Rico en amor, rico en valor, rico en resistencia!”¹⁴ I also hope to be a translator, making the significance of grassroots activism legible and legitimate to audiences in the academy and beyond. I engage with theory as a bridge, connecting phenomena witnessed and experienced on the ground to the theoretical frameworks, collections of information, epistemic authority, and credibility that I have privileged access to given my position as a university student (Medina 2013). Yet all my commentary is informed by and rooted in a commitment to being what I believe all researchers must be, first and foremost: a listener. Methodologically, as a listener I strive to center and honor the voices from those at the grassroots and to let their words inform my theoretical framing, rather than forcing them into my theory as “evidence.” Roughly following the guidelines of “grounded theory,” I centered an emergent approach to my analysis, which allowed themes to reveal themselves from the words and stories of my research participants (Charmaz & Flick 2017). I approach this experimental process with an attitude of humility and curiosity. I know I do not hold all the answers and that how I’ve approached and represented this information is but one of many possibilities.

As a non-Puerto Rican researcher interested in the politics of knowledge production and attuned to the ease in which supposedly decolonial work can further

¹⁴ PR is called poor, but PR is rich. Rich in love, rich in bravery, rich in resistance.

enforce colonial dynamics (Tuck and Yang 2012), I have approached this project tenderly. I recognize that research is inherently political and that it has been and continues to be a tool of colonialism (Tuhiwai Smith 1999). Moreover, I recognize that there is increased risk of those dynamics in the crisis context, where disaster zones and those inhabiting them often become enveloped in disaster capitalism and trauma porn by academics and journalists alike (Gaillard & Peek 2019). I am certainly not the only US American scholar drawn to the island so am hyper intentional not to perpetuate a superficial, episodic, and technocratic approach to this work, instead more interested in “deeply rooted, long-term, semiotic, and accountable to the communities” I am working with (Garriga-Lopez 2019). Throughout my trip, I contributed my time, labor, energy, knowledge, and skills as best I could where I could in the communities I was spending time with, in alignment with an ethos of research as solidarity (Brem-Wilson 2014) and mutual aid (Grubačić & O’Hearn 2016).¹⁵ I also strive to continue to support the work from afar through continued engagement with the issues. I concluded each interview with asking how “outsiders” and non-Puerto Ricans could best support their work, if at all. The answers to these questions informed the work I continue to do, including my goals of knowledge mobilization (discussed in depth in my conclusion).

This research has been incredibly meaningful personally and supported my own processes of growth - intellectual, emotional, spiritual - in a multiplicity of ways. The people I worked closely with over the course of my fieldwork in Puerto Rico and

¹⁵ Over the course of my time in Puerto Rico, I assisted El Departamento in a very limited capacity with website design, editing, and preparing food for a retreat. I continue to try and support their work as best I can from afar, using digital platforms for communication and social networks (i.e. by sharing events, fundraising initiatives, resources, possible volunteers). I supported Huerta Semilla physically by helping with brigadas and digitally through social media mobilization.

continue to remain in connection with have helped immeasurably with my research process and have generously supported me with their shared connections, company, space, wealth of lived experiences and information, energies, food, and so much more that could never be put into words. I know that the words and stories they shared with me are far more than simply “evidence” with academic utility. They are lives, they are emotional journeys, they are stories shared in trust. I hope to honor them as such. Given the depth and quantity of what I was generously offered, it was not only ethically appropriate, but natural for me to reciprocate in any capacity I could. I can only hope that my work gives something back to all those who gave me so much.

I actively aim to avoid reproducing the extractive dynamics of colonialism in my own research process, with the acknowledgement that despite my best efforts, I am fundamentally ingrained in an academic structure which is rooted in exclusion. I recognize that “power relations are embedded in ethnography, which can produce imperialist tendencies in representing participants and their knowledge and thereby collude with the structures of domination” (Manning 2018: 320). Aware of those circumstances, I believe I hold responsibility not to perpetuate injustices in my research and hold myself accountable to the communities I worked alongside. This warrants a note on my own positionality as it relates to my proximity to structures of power and privilege. I enter this project as a white, middle-class, cis, femme, queer student and community organizer based in the continental US with anti-imperialist, anti-racist, anti-capitalist groundings and an affinity towards anarchist organizational models rooted in anti-hierarchical values. I study at a large public research university, granting me

generous access to funding and other non-material resources. My research has always explored power by examining the intersection of politics, identity, and lived experience. I have studied social movements, including those I've been involved with personally as a community organizer, and have never tried to separate my position as a researcher from that of a comrade working for transformative social change. Beyond my identity as a student, I also carry a deep love of food, have worked as a chef, am the daughter of bakers, and grew up on a biodynamic farm. This is to say I am as comfortable in the library as I am in the garden and the kitchen. I hope my comfort in these different social locations will allow me to speak to multiple audiences and aid in my "translation" work between spheres.

More broadly, I conceptualize this thesis as an exercise in connection and relationship-building; I am connecting myself with other scholars and sources of knowledge, connecting information and stories together with each other in new ways through my narrative, connecting the theory behind my research to tangible action at the grassroots, connecting the sphere of academia to the communities beyond, connecting thought to tangible action. What appears on paper as this thesis should be understood as only one part of a process, which I put more weight on than any product. This practice of connection is largely inspired and motivated by my own work as a community organizer and activist. In that work, networks and relationships are everything and I see my strength as someone who can cultivate connection. As I don't intend for my scholarship to stand separate from my activism, it only makes sense to capitalize on that strength in this thesis.

Limitations

Finally, I must acknowledge the limitations to this research project. First, my positionality as a non-Puerto Rican inherently limits my ability to capture and share Puerto Rican stories and I recognize that what I present will always be, to some extent, for better or for worse, from the perspective of an outsider. Differences in language, cultural norms, and life experiences shape my positionality in key ways. That being said, I hope that my contextualization of those differences will make them less a limitation than a valuable part of the texture of the work. I recognize the potential blind spots that using a largely ethnographic approach introduces to this work. In addition to not speaking with a wider range of perspectives, I also only engage briefly with legal and policy analyses and other quantitative metrics. A more heavily mixed methods approach could provide a deeper account for the stories I am telling. Yet in my work, I do not claim intellectual and analytical completeness nor complete authority on the themes discussed. I approached this project in many ways inspired by some of the goals of food sovereignty: to create an opening of space for more questions to emerge, to challenge rigid hierarchies and monopolization of knowledge, and to create a culture of sharing and circular knowledge creation. That entails reframing and welcoming “incompleteness.”

I am also aware that my work has been constrained by time, as all academic projects are when relationship work is forced into an artificial academic timeline. I spent less than two months physically in Puerto Rico, when these stories deserve lifetimes. Ethnographic work is always made better by deepened relationships, which

necessarily require time. Thus, my work, as deep as I feel it is, yet again does not claim to be complete. As for my analytical shortcomings, I focus particular attention to gender and sexuality but give less attention to race as I would have liked. My lack of attention should not reflect any assumption that it is less vital to center, only the limitations on my time and capacity. Here I offer a suggestion for further research, which centers the intersection of these identities and pays greater attention to race as it intersects with dynamics of sexuality and gender. My analysis also relies primarily on texts and analyses produced in English, which leaves out a rich set of literatures in Spanish and other languages on food, social movements, colonial critique, and gender. Lastly, there is the matter that some things are simply not legible nor translatable. This project was not pure intellectual exploration. My experiences were too profound to capture wholly in a meaningful way, in any format but especially in an academic text. Thus, I write knowing that what appears on paper is only that. So much more lives beyond: organic, boundless, alive.

Discussion and Analysis

Introduction: Narratives from the Field

We've been told plenty now that "another world is possible" (McNally 2002). But too often scholars and activists alike are left grasping at what that alternative world looks like. It is here where I find hope and inspiration in turning towards those working at the grassroots. A radical food politics provides generative place-based alternatives to the destructive logic of the colonial state and highlights the imaginative potential of thinking beyond what exists. It is here where my thesis roots itself, pun intended. I use, to employ de Sousa Santos' term, a "sociology of emergences" and document how food sovereignty work challenges colonial dynamics of extractivism, dependency, and disconnection and transforms conditions generated by the experiences of colonialism. As political practice, food sovereignty creates a future that is polycultural, diversity driven, horizontally organized, locally based, and community oriented. It is one that invests -- in human and more-than-human relationships -- in deeply sustainable ways and is rooted in a relationships-based approach instead of strictly resource-based one. It cultivates healing through mutual aid¹⁶ and community care, connecting resistant imaginations to tangible political possibilities.

¹⁶ Mutual aid, as I use the term in this paper, refers a form of political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another and changing political conditions by actually building new social relations that are more survivable (Definition adopted from trans activist, writer, teacher, and legal scholar Dean Spade. See his website for a wealth of information on mutual aid and community organizing in a range of media formats at <https://bigdoorbrigade.com>.) Mutual aid is direct action, yet also embodies a structural political critique; as much as it is about meeting basic needs it also points to how needs have not been met by the state and the status quo. As opposed to charity or philanthropy, which fit conveniently in a capitalist structure and retain power concentration at the top, mutual aid challenges hierarchical models of wealth distribution given its emphasis on reallocation of resources and prioritization of those who need it, not those who have "earned" it.

This action can be understood as prefigurative politics which is both subversive and insurgent in its resistance to the state. To better grasp how this operates in relation to the state's capitalist economic macrostructure, it is helpful to consider the idea of capitalist incorporation.¹⁷ Many poststructuralist and postmodern theorists have critiqued the idea of totality, raising the possibility that amidst hegemonic incorporation into the capitalist state, alternatives remain and resist the pressure of assimilation. As Graber (2004) writes, "totalities...are always creatures of the imagination." Acknowledging that incorporation is not complete nor homogenous reveals contradictions and diverse experiences. J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006) critiques capitalisms' "fantasy of wholeness," arguing that we must break the assumption of monolithism and inescapability in order to challenge it. This requires radical imagination and attention to spaces in which incorporation is not complete and resistance is fertile.

Accordingly, this section explores three broad themes (food as a site of resistance, food as a source of resilience, and food as a mechanism of resurgence) to answer my central research question: How do Puerto Ricans view and use food as decolonial resistance in the struggle for a radically new socio political reality? I also explore the central inquiry of how bodies and relationships experience, resist, and exert power. In each section, I bring the words and voices of those I interviewed into conversation with my personal reflections (see Appendix A for participant bios). First, I briefly explore critiques offered from participants of the state and the market. These

¹⁷ See Wallerstein 1974 and 1989 on a comprehensive historical overview of incorporation according to the world-systems theory.

critiques, most of which consistently maintain anti-Capitalist and anti-statist perspectives, establish the need for alternative political solutions and grassroots spaces for democratic participation.

“They sent Skittles dammit!”: Critiques of the Colonial State

A parasitic plant is one that derives some or all of its nutritional requirement from another plant. Tapping into the host plant’s xylem, they sap life slowly, usually carefully until only the brink of survival because they know a complete murder would result in their own demise. Codependence defines this relationship, the parasite not able to survive without the host. Wielding great power in its threat, it’s truthfully weak on its own. In contrast, mutualistic plant species live closely together but exist in a relationship with benefits extending on both or all sides of the relationship. In this dynamic, competition absolves and cooperation allows for mutual flourishing. Today, we are planting, intercropping corn, beans, and squash. Their mutualism is well-known and long-practiced. We trust that their sisterhood will feed us well.

Consistent across all my interviews was a dismissal that the government could be a source of meaningful political change or held the key to the solutions they were seeking. Nearly all of my participants identified “colonialism” as a key barrier to food equity and social justice, and highlighted colonial tendencies in the state’s policy patterns. Most of who I spoke with were at best jaded with politicians and the current political system which they viewed as fraught with corruption, corporate collusion, and anti-democratic tendencies. For example, Victor complained that “they are so far away” in reference to the dramatic separation between politicians and the population they are supposedly in office to serve. This dynamic of disconnection from politicians and the needs of Puerto Ricans on the ground is visible in a comment overheard at a community assembly I attended, where in discussion of the government’s disaster response to

Hurricane Maria, a community member exclaimed with exasperation, “They sent Skittles dammit!” Critiques of the US government's response to Maria centered mainly on the Jones Act (Merchant Marine Act of 1920), or “that crazy shitty dumb fucking law” in Paxx’s words. Nearly all interviewees brought it up without my prompting, describing the ways in which it limited access to food and basic needs, artificially separated from their Caribbean neighbors, delayed disaster relief efforts, and led to higher prices on goods even outside of the crisis context.

In my interview with Samuel, he characterized the political elite more viciously as “psychopaths...grabbing the whole world by their claws” who “only care about their money.” When asked about his faith in the formal political system in bringing about change, Julián offered an extended critique of electoral politics:

From my opinion, I don't think formal politics here really works. The two main parties, one favors statehood, the other favors the status we have now, and both have been historically accused of corruption and found guilty in some cases. For me, formal politics here is kinda like role playing. Like it only works if you pretend it works, or if you're in the pretending of it. They reduce to that today. They don't really offer anything to me.

This understanding rings true to the common sentiment that just because Ricky Roselló left the governorship, the problems were not solved. The protests did not dissolve on August 2nd when Roselló stepped down; criticism has shifted now to now-Governor Wanda Vasquez, the party, and formal politics at large.

These perspectives align with ample literature growing from the field of democratization, which has outlined the need to “deepen” democracy around the world by instituting more bottom-up participatory governance structures. Scholars from around the globe have recognized failing trust in government institutions given their

“democratic deficit” and encouraged us to reflect on how states’ practices often stray far from their professed democratic ideals (Skocpol 2003; Rice et al. 2015; Crenson and Ginsberg 2002; Cornwall 2002; Collier and Levitsky 1997; Gaventa 2006; Lukham, Goetz, and Kaldor 2000). While Puerto Rico is more extreme than many of these cases given the fact that Puerto Ricans living on the archipelago do not hold access to the electoral processes in any formal sense, theories of democratic deficit are helpful when considering similarities in experiences with other marginalized groups. Much like Puerto Ricans, other minority groups are also often incorporated into democracy only theoretically. Many face barriers, implicit and explicit alike, in accessing the democratic process, as the case of voter suppression. Democratic institutions and processes may exist, but if they are inaccessible or too far removed from marginalized citizens, one can’t help but seriously question their value. Lukham, Goetz, and Kaldor (2000) note that the political struggles of marginalized groups are only considered when they disrupt, creating conditions of urgency that demand attention. Furthermore, their incorporation is often seen not as a requirement to democracy in its own right but “solutions to the problems of political order or governability” (18). This second-hand consideration warrants our attention and supports the need to seek solutions beyond the state.

Beyond disillusionment in the local electoral government, many participants also expressed an openly antagonistic relationship with the US state, viewing it as working directly against their interests and wellbeing. Gabriella stated that “the American capitalist system is exploitative to the soil and to the people of Puerto Rico,”

connecting capitalist greed to ecological to social unhealth. Paxx described this process in more detail when discussing the monopolization of land by multinational biotech giant Monsanto (now owned by Bayer):

The government would rather give their investments to corporations like Monsanto. So it's like, we have all this land, but they're fucking it up and putting a shit ton of chemicals on it. Instead you could be growing stuff for the people!

The understanding that the government actively supports corporate interest at the expense of locals came up in my interview with Lorena as well, who told me that “their economy” doesn’t work for farmers. This informed her belief that “this revolution is going to have been very...como que bien comunitario y independiente del gobierno.”¹⁸

Who does “their economy” benefit we must then ask? In the food industry, it is clear that foreign capital in the form of multinational corporations, including fast food chains and big-box stores, are at the front. According to section 936 of the US Internal Revenue Tax Code, American corporations are given a tax exemption from income originating in US territories. In other words, corporations pay zero taxes on all profit made in Puerto Rico. The impact of this tax loophole, established in 1976 as an incentive to spur industrialization, is revealed in the fact that Puerto Rico ranks first in the world in concentration of Walmart’s and Walgreens per square mile (Cintrón Arbasetti 2014). Importantly, these tax breaks have not led to less expensive food. Quite the opposite is true, as grocery store prices are consistently higher than across the continental US given taxes on US imports and the need for food to come through US ports according to the Jones Act. Patricia described how going to the grocery store is

¹⁸ very community-based and independent from the government.

“depressing” to her, since the food is expensive despite the fact that it all “comes from some factory, made to last a war. It’s crap. War food, in tin cans.” Many of those I spoke with expressed frustration at the steep costs of food at large supermarkets. I personally felt this burden throughout my stay, paying consistently higher prices for products.

The idea of forced artificial dependency on the US was another key theme throughout conversations. This framing identified neoliberal state policies such as the corporate tax breaks as the source of food insecurity. It is here where we witness the way in which food becomes a mechanism of colonial reproduction as it forces Puerto Ricans into relationships with the colonial state where they lack power and control. For, as Joshua described, “si tu no comes te mueres y quien controla la comida en gran medida controla el mundo.”¹⁹ In my interview with Samuel, he described the impact of Operation Bootstrap on his family’s farm, which captures the way in which government-sponsored industrialization initiatives led to decreased self-determination and greater reliance on the state:

You ever heard about what a *trapiche* was? It was a mill with two pairs of bulls going around with steel rods. So my granddad's *trapiche* was one of the last ones to be dismantled in the early '70s. And I was like, “Whoa, Why should that have to go?” You know, I mean, it was a traditional thing here. But that’s the thing... as a kid I started to see how things just started to change... "Progress" [he is holding up air quotes]. The so-called progress that they are trying to implement wasn't really progress at all... It was just replacing one thing for another for somebody else's interest. And that's pretty much what has been happening here ever since.

Samuel told me more about what he sees as the “government agenda”:

¹⁹ if you don’t eat you die, and those who control the food to a large degree control the world.

Economically wise, we are like a gold mine for the US government. They've been exploiting us ever since we got invaded by them... We have to pop that question about who's living out of who? We don't get nothing from the US government! Because, you know, they want people [to believe in dependence]. We've been repeating like papagayos²⁰ forever, "Oh, we get the Pell Grants. We get the help from FEMA, we get this and we get that!" Are you kidding me? Are you serious? I mean, do the numbers, you do the math. Between nine and \$14 million invested on the island by the US government and at the end of the year they take over \$70!

Others I interviewed also cited the pervasiveness of deep-rooted beliefs in dependence among their fellow Puerto Ricans. Sitara described the "colonial mentality" as "the mentality that we cannot make it alone, that we don't have the resources." This belief, she told me, is not inevitable or natural but has been put into the brains of Puerto Ricans by the system:

We've created neural pathways in the brain that are so ingrained that [tell us] we can't support ourselves and we don't have the resources. We actually do believe it as the truth. But it's not true. It's just not.

Making a parallel between this belief and that which is characteristic of codependent interpersonal relationships, she told me that Puerto Ricans were "giving their power away." Interestingly, in a completely separate conversation, Tara also related Puerto Ricans' relationship with the US state to a person in an abusive partnership characterized by codependency. Tara told me that:

in the same way that people often are in denial about the abuse that is occurring in interpersonal relationships, so too are many Puerto Ricans not fully aware of the full depth of the exploitation.

Paradoxically, despite a wide-spread belief in their dependency, most Puerto Ricans also expect the government to fail them when crises arise (Lubben 2019).

²⁰ parrots

In response to this understanding, food provides a direct avenue to greater autonomy and independence from an abusive system. The common refrain, “if you can feed yourself, you can free yourself” holds great weight in this context where food has been such a clear tool of colonialism. Gabby told me that, “I don’t have faith [in the government], but I have energy to work.” This reframing asserts agency and opens the door to radical food alternatives. Lorena described the revolutionary nature of growing your own food in the Puerto Rican context when the system has actively forced imports on you:

I think just by harvesting something that you don't have to buy, you're totally doing some anarchist stuff. It's really revolutionary, because if you are cultivating your food, you don't have don't have to go to the grocery store, to buy into the system. When I'm harvesting and working on the earth it's very very revolutionary and creates autonomy and a lot of power. It creates a lot of empowerment, knowing that you can cultivate your food and not give a cent to their system.

Food also opens to the door to considering other radical political possibilities.

As Julián told me, “food paves the way for that kind of thinking [about decolonization]....how do we become more independent by being able to produce that which is indispensable, which is food?” The following sections explore exactly this question in more detail.

“Vamo’ a Compostar”: Food as a Site of Resistance

A metallic clanging emerges from behind me, jarringly breaking the midday air, now A metallic clanging emerges from behind me, jarringly breaking the midday air, now heavy with steamy moisture and bird chips. Must be compost time. I begin to smell it before I see it, the scent making its way into my nostrils as if to welcome us to the rotation of the cycle once again. There, on the sidewalk, a great pile of food remains sit, juices lazily collecting in a brown pool. The clanging emerges again as flat-head shovels make contact with the pavement, again and again in rhythmic synchronicity as the three shovel-holders rotate around in a circle chopping the food bits into ever smaller pieces. It’s quite satisfying to watch the gradual breakdown of a pile into mush, yet even more so to participate in the process yourself. The task consumes you, as your shovel makes way through a collection of eggshells, brown banana skins, and greens going brown, the chop chop chop suddenly, decidedly, your singular purpose in life. The smell is pungent, but you appreciate the way it challenges your nostrils because you know what will come of it, what this pile of mush will become, of what waste it has reduced. This pile of mush, steeped deep in admiration, will so generously give back. Give throw-away organic matter the gift of heat and time and you receive the nourishment that gives life! Invest what has lived, and you receive life anew.

Writing about the Occupy movement and the Arab Spring, philosopher Simon Critchley wrote that:

True politics requires at least two elements: first, a demand, what I call an infinite demand that flows from the perception of an injustice; second, a location where that demand is articulated. *There is no politics without location.* (my emphasis)

In the case of food politics in Puerto Rico, we clearly see a set of demands which respond to perceptions of injustice as described above and center around the democratization of the food system. The question of location requires more sustained attention. Some scholars have described sites of anti-colonial and anti-capitalist

resistance as “exilic spaces,” bringing attention to the politics of exit from a neoliberal hegemony. Grubačić and O’Hearn (2016) define exilic spaces as:

those areas of social and economic life where people and groups attempt to escape from capitalist economic processes whether by territorial escape or the attempt to build structures that are autonomous of capitalist processes of accumulation and social control. (1-2)

They posit that there are “cracks” in the capitalist world-system, which allow for two types of withdrawal: spatial (in the case of communities geographically separating themselves such as the Zapatistas) and structural (in which communities are not wholly separate but rather engage in a set of practices that reduce dependency and cultivate autonomy). I apply the term “exilic space” to describe community gardens in Puerto Rico, especially the La Huerta at the University of Puerto Rico Rio Piedras campus. As an exilic space, La Huerta cultivates resistant imaginations and fosters community self-determination. It is a material space that fosters education, creativity, joy, and radical utopic imagination.

Many participants described the critical role that education must play in this process of social transformation. Using the language of “unlearning,” they spoke to the way in which capitalism and colonialism comes with a set of expectations, worldviews, and normative assumptions. Speaking to the impact on ideas of food specifically, Gabriella told me that:

I think we need unlearning and relearning of how to produce and how to better eat. Accessible education is very lacking, about food and the food system in Puerto Rico. So we learn about agriculture from the laws and which type of agriculture our government is subsidizing and supporting.

This notion of learning from policies not only points to the inadequacy of explicit food education but also to the power and impact of the implicit or hidden curriculum of the

state.²¹ Political scientists have described the way in which policy shapes political behaviors, noting that the design of government programs and public policy influences civic engagement by channeling resources, generating interest, and shaping interpretive schema (Michener 2018; Mettler 2005). Jamila Michener (2018) writes that, “States are the teachers that draft the curriculum on which policy beneficiaries’ political learning is based” (71). In this case, US state policies favoring industrial agriculture and multinational corporations lay the foundation of the political education my participants received. Based on what they told me about their experiences of policy, it is perhaps not at all surprising then that they turn away from the state as an ally and seek “exilic spaces.”

From my conversation, it became clear that the garden provides a valuable space for popular education and hands-on pedagogy, where participants learn critical lessons about not only agroecology and food production, but also history, politics, power, social justice, and emotional intelligence. In contrast to a toxic formal political environment, characterized by zero-sum bipartisanship, antagonistic challenges, and relative powerlessness of the everyday citizen, in the garden, all voices are heard and all needs honored. Here, restorative justice and transformative healing is prioritized. Julián described how this process fosters deep community:

People build relationships here that are not just like, "Oh, We're here to work the land." Instead, we actually start to care a lot for each other, and we start to feel like a family, or just really open to understanding to work things out well. Like, sometimes within moments of tension, we've been open to having discussions in order to get that out and heal.

²¹ For an overview of theories of hidden curriculum, see Kentli 2009.

The lessons this process imparts have far-reaching consequences for those who engage in the garden, who are taught that another way of approaching needs and problem solving is possible. In La Huerta, personal growth is encouraged and supported. For example, Joshleen described how Huerta Semilla opened her up to more accepting views and a feminist appreciation of difference, otherwise unavailable to her in her home setting:

En mi casa no se me enseñó esto. Vengo de una casa totalmente machista. No tenía las herramientas para crear un acercamiento a personas cuir, a tener esa aceptación feminista y ha sido en este espacio en el que pues he crecido en ese aspecto y pues agradezco mucho el proceso de deconstrucción que me ha ayudado como persona y se que ha ayudado a otras personas que también vienen a Huerta Semilla.²²

In addition to a space of learning, La Huerta also provides a safe space for radical joy and pleasure. Victor described the value of a garden as a protected space: “The garden is about understanding the little ecosystem of flowers and food, it offers food and medicine, and also beauty and contemplation and gathering.” In a context where the colonial state’s policies actively works against joy and holistic wellbeing, this connection and the joy it brings is revolutionary. By providing the space to support collective gathering and bodily self-determination, especially for queer, feminized, and otherwise marginalized people, La Huerta holds great significance. Tara noted this in our interview, expressing their admiration for the work of Huerto Semilla, “because it’s not just about how we grow our food, it’s how we practice those very same practices on our own bodies and in our communities.” El Departamento de la Comida as an

²² In my household, I was not taught this. I come from a totally sexist/chauvinist house. I did not have the tools to create an approach to queer people, to have feminist acceptance and it has been in this space in which I have grown in that aspect. And I am very grateful for the deconstruction process that helped me as a person and I know has helped other people who also come to Huerto Semilla.

organization believes that queer and trans people of color and the most marginalized should be at the front of the food sovereignty movement. This belief is in part in response to, in Tara's words, "some really straight-out macho practices in agriculture that are just not creating a safe space." Accordingly, locations that provide this safe space are especially critical in the fight for food sovereignty and decolonization.

La Huerta is not the only site I observed where these dynamics are fostered. Paxx discussed the idea in relation to the kitchen of their restaurant and bar, Jungle Bird. As a trans chef having faced discrimination in the food industry, they have made an explicit point to create a safe space for queer and gender diverse chefs, while also introducing them to the local food network. In Paxx's words:

I'm trying to change that toxic environment [in the food industry]. For me that's political. I'm creating a safe space where you're not getting bullied, where your voice is heard. If I can have a beautiful safe place... that's you know, pretty magical, bien cabra. Also, you know if I'm going to be there I might as well teach them [his employees] about sourcing great food and building bridges with farmers and fish dudes. Making beautiful food and making the food accessible to everyone is what we try to do.

Las Semillas also extended the bounds of their work by occupying the streets in a public composting event. Taking over a side street near the UPR campus, Huerta Semilla hosted a public workshop with the goal of "making compost and relating its process to our healing." They engaged the public in three central questions as they processed food waste to build compost:

1. ¿Qué significa accionar "desde abajo como la semilla" y para qué lo hacemos?
2. ¿Qué futuras soñamos para nuestras tierras y cuerpos?

3. ¿Qué queremos compostar?²³

Beyond the clear political significance of their prompting questions, the very action embodies a decolonial challenge by reclaiming public space as collective commons, in line with larger political aspirations of democratizing Puerto Rico.

The issue of land access is especially critical to draw attention to in the conversation around the politics of location and space, as land is one of the most contentious issues in the discussion around decolonization. Many who I spoke with identified the inability to access land as the core barrier to food sovereignty work. As Sitara described, referencing state policies favoring foreign capital:

The land now belongs to the rich people and foreigners. It's crazy, you know. It's like our people don't have land anymore. People are nomads, homeless, they don't have land anymore. People need to have the land. We need to be given land, *our land* back.

The founding of La Huerta speaks to this challenge. The garden was established in 2010 as part of a general strike at the University of Puerto Rico, where students occupied ten out of the eleven UPR campuses for four weeks straight in response to over \$100 million of university budget cuts, the privatization of campus services, and austerity measures which disproportionately hurt low income students. Despite widespread support by unions, professors, and community members, the strikes received a harsh response by the state. After a general assembly of more than 3,000 students voted to continue the strike after the 24th day, riot police seized control of the main campus gates and attempted to deny food and water access to occupying students inside in order to break the strike (Goodman 2010). It was in this context that La Huerta was founded,

²³ 1. What does it mean to act “from below like a seed” and why do we do it? 2. What futures do we dream about for our land and bodies? What do we want to compost?

on a plot of land inside the occupied campus. To be clear, the land for the garden was not granted willingly by the university nor the state, but rather seized and occupied by students. The university now respects the students' use of the land, but still holds direct authority over land use and access. The precarity of this position is blatantly visible in the COVID-19 context. As I am writing in April 2020, las Semillas are barred from accessing the land given state-sanctioned closures of the campus. Unable to water crops and tend to the garden, las Semillas have been reminded yet again of the antagonistic relationship they hold with university administrators and, by extension, the state.

“Desde abajo, como semilla”: Food as a Source of Resilience

Obnoxious. The first word I associate with rhizome. As una semilla begins to talk about the turmeric's rhizome, all I can think of is pulling quackgrass back home. The never-ending task of extracting quackgrass from the soil, ripping her greedy white arms away from garden beds that belong to someone else. A plant that reproduces via rhizome shoots root stalks underground, horizontally expanding the plant's network as new roots are sent down and new stems up to the surface. Spreads like nobody's business. When you're weeding, this means you are guaranteed to break a sweat, curse more than your mother would appreciate, and wish rhizomes never dared to exist. But here we are, talking about the beauty of rhizomes as we admire the vitality of the turmeric plant, so eager to grow. You begin to see quackgrass in a new light: less obnoxious, more diligent, less irritating, more impressive. A weed is just something growing in the wrong place at the wrong time anyways, right?

Hopefully, it comes with no great surprise to assert that a diversified food system is more resilient to crisis, whether it be social, economic, or political. Investing in ecologically regenerative agricultural practices such as those promoted under a food sovereignty framework supports long-term soil health, encourages biodiversity, and reduces the amount of artificial inputs required for production. Planting a diversified

collection of crops promises to avoid the vulnerabilities of monocrop production, including biological risk given the increased crop vulnerability to disease and economic risk of heavy reliance on exports in a volatile market. Cultivating a diversified polyculture also allows for flexible customization of crops, responsive to environmental conditions and social needs. Consider the decision taken by many small farmers to plant primarily viandas²⁴ like taro, yam, and malanga in preparation for hurricane season. Unlike the crops cultivated primarily in monocrop such as sugarcane, corn, and banana which are easily destroyed by high winds, root vegetables withstand weather and remain in the ground, protected by their very design. Beyond the crops, agroecological farming practices produce good top soil (in contrast, monocrop and industrial agriculture produces notoriously poor soil that demands high inputs of synthetic fertilizer). Often overlooked, but immeasurably valuable, good soil provides the basis for all crops that grow from it and cannot be overlooked.

What I have described can not be understated with its direct impact on human lives. Simply put, it is what allowed Puerto Ricans to eat and survive after Hurricane Maria destroyed 80 percent of the island's crop value and humanitarian aid came both delayed and insufficient (Robles & Ferré-Sadurní 2017). Lacking other evidence but my conversations with many small farmers, I would offer an inclination that the 20 percent of crop value that did survive was mostly that of small-scale farmers who understood the risk of hurricane season and prepared accordingly as best they could. In an interview with the New York Times, a farmer reportedly said that after Maria, "There will be no food in Puerto Rico. There is no more agriculture in Puerto Rico. And there won't be

²⁴ Root crops

any for a year or longer” (Robles & Ferré-Sadurní 2017). I have no further information about his farm, but suspect he could have been one of the many using monocrop and industrial farming techniques. For this statement diverges sharply from stories I heard from my participants.

Most I spoke with expressed that despite the storm’s devastation, there was still food available at a local scale thanks to small gardens, whose outputs are often overlooked in statistics around food production since they operate in the informal economy. Furthermore, near immediate grassroots action was taken in order to repair farms, leading to a much faster recovery. Indeed, agroecological farmer Ian Págan Roig’s topsoil was so good that he was able to plant crops within days of the hurricane (Graf 2019). The use of traditional no-till farming methods also supported the immediate response, since without relying on a tractor, there was no need for fuel, which would have been unavailable thanks to widespread shortages across the island.²⁵ From those I spoke with directly, Tara was part of the initial crew who organized brigades under the project titled “Fondo de Resiliencia,” which eventually transformed into El Departamento de la Comida (Bayne 2018). The goal of the project evolved into sending brigades of volunteers to 200 Puerto Rican farms and food projects over the next two years. This project is still in progress and I myself was able to participate in it during my time on the island, planting soursop trees on Charlotte’s family farm. This story only goes to reveal the resilience and agency often overlooked in mainstream

²⁵ You can follow Ian’s farm, El Josco Bravo, on their website http://www.agroecologiapr.org/josco_bravo.htm.

accounts of devastation and crisis as well as the urgency of polycultural cultivation in disaster preparedness.

Beyond a diversified agroecological practice, those I worked with also stressed the importance of a diversified social ecological approach in building resilient disaster response systems. What I mean by this is a horizontally structured model of social organizing with a localized and anti-hierarchical power structure. This aligns with the five principles of the Puerto Rican network of Mutual Aid (Red Apoyo Mutuo): mutual aid, solidarity, community sovereignty, sustainability, and justice.²⁶ This also fits the description of an “equitable disaster response” as described by Bloom (2020). Imagine a rhizome, united in purpose but with many nodes distributed which each can give rise to a new plant. Rebe and Joshua described this socially rhizomatic design as it was in practice with Comedores Sociales, a grassroots mutual aid organization that fights food insecurity and has met critical needs in response to Hurricane Maria, this past winter’s earthquakes, as well as fed protesters during the strikes that shut down the island this past summer.²⁷ Rebe, who volunteers with Comedores Sociales and works at the affiliated activist-resource center and restaurant Cocina Rebelde²⁸ told me that it is “a really collective line of work” where volunteers and workers share tasks, leadership, responsibilities, and input in a deeply democratic way. She also described their flexibility and openness to change: “We welcome new people and are open to new ways of working.” Huerto Semilla similarly operates according to a very horizontal design.

²⁶ See their website to read more about principles and see them in practice <https://redapoyomutuo.com/>.

²⁷ See their website here: <https://www.cdpecpr.org/comedores-sociales-de-puerto-rico>.

²⁸ See their Facebook page here: <https://www.facebook.com/cocinarebeldepr/>.

Gabby linked this organizing structure with the groups' commitment to a queer and feminist approach:

So we're queer, feminist, and we have a more circular approach of work that allows the system to keep functioning when someone is missing maybe or when someone moves on to another project.

This description makes clear the way in which such a model for organizing (where power is dispersed and responsibility, horizontally distributed) is more resilient to the change and instability that inevitably arises with crisis. In the Puerto Rican context where time after time the state and large multinational NGOs have failed to respond adequately to crises, it has become incredibly clear that top down disaster relief is in no way capable of responding with the type of resilience that locally-based mutual aid is. Puerto Rican scholars have described this type of organizing using the term “autogestión” which roughly translates to autonomous organizing (Pérez-Lizasuain 2018; Garriga-López 2019). Pérez-Lizasuain (2018) writes that groups such as those mentioned engaging in solidarity work in the post-disaster context were able to “promote alternative sociabilities capable of exceeding the normative worlds of colonialism and private property” (53) revealing the radical impact that these practices of prefigurative politics had.

Importantly, the exchange networks established in response to Maria have proven to be effective beyond the immediate crisis context, supporting long-term resilience and disaster preparedness. The solidarity economy that emerged or was strengthened following Maria is rooted in principles of cooperation, exchange, mutualism, and equity and ensured basic needs were met.²⁹ Resources were distributed

²⁹ See Kawano 2018 for a detailed look at the principles of a solidarity economy.

according to need and led to innovative models of exchange. For example, Comedores Sociales usually charges for a plate of food in order to cover the cost of ingredients, but allows anyone to instead volunteer their time. They will never turn someone away. Huerta Semilla also collaborates with Comedores Sociales and Cocina Rebelde, donating extra harvest to their food supply. They do not sell the produce, but gift it in an exchange or “intercambio” for food waste which then becomes compost, contribution nutrients back into the soil which then supports a new generation of crops. Rebe, who works with all three groups describes this process:

How it works with Huerto Semilla is that we first divide our harvest with the people that are working the land and then comes giving to other people. That was an agreement that started with a Hurricane Maria because then people were living without eating and all that. We didn't have a lot of extra harvest then, but Comedores Sociales was given *cilantrillo* in the intercambio. And we have been collaborating a lot more this year. There is *Oregano Brujo*, which we use a lot in Cocina Rebelde. And since it's so easy to cultivate and not everyone harvests it, we give that to Cocina Rebelde. So sometimes when I'm working [at Cocina Rebelde] and we need some *Oregano Brujo*, I go to La Huerta and harvest. So that's another collaboration we have.

The ease in which such a horizontally distributed and reciprocally connected food system operates in direct response to need is impressive, cultivating meaningful community in addition to efficient process outcomes. This model of solidarity contrasts a capitalist approach to food production which is oriented not towards human sustenance and well-being but accumulation of profit for agribusiness. It is this focus - on profit not people - which explains the paradoxical reality of a rapid growth of food production and perpetuation of overproduction on one hand, accompanied by the reinforcement of social exclusion and the growth of hunger on the other (Magdoff, Bellamy Foster, & Buttel 2000).

Deep sustainability and resilience is also cultivated in the way in which farming becomes in many ways a spiritual practice, rooted in ritual and community. Many of those I spoke with described how cultivation, composting, harvesting, and cooking are viewed as far more than technical acts; they are deeply meaningful processes that allow for an exploration of the relationships between ourselves and each component of the wider food system. Describing this as he held up the plate he was eating breakfast from, Joshua said that:

Este plato nos ayuda a pensar que no somos necesariamente seres solitarios. ¿Por qué? Porque para que ese plato de comida llegue a mi mesa alguien tuvo que haber velado la gallina, alguien tuvo que haber transportado los huevos y alguien me lo tengo que comer y lo voy a botar. Así que todo esto nos ayuda a imaginar lo colectiva que es la vida.³⁰

During this interview, conducted while Joshua was prepping for opening at Cocina Rebelde, we admired and discussed the juice in our cups, reflecting on the way in which our food reminds us of our collective existence and mutual dependency. Each sip connected us with a network of beings, human and nonhuman alike. This informed his comment that, “para nosotros la comida es un vínculo, un vínculo a volver a nuestra humanidad.”³¹ Joshua also discussed the way in which (re)connection with the land was key to any meaningful decolonial work:

Parte de porque el proceso ha sido exitoso es porque nos han desconectado de la tierra a la cual tenemos un vínculo emocional, de energías y demás y pues en ese mundo ideal tiene que haber un vínculo

³⁰ This plate [of food] helps us think about how we are not necessarily solitary beings. Why? Because for that plate of food to arrive on my table someone had to have cared for the chicken, someone had to have transported the eggs and someone has to eat and now I am going to throw it away. So you see all of this helps us imagine how collective life is.

³¹ For us, food is a link, a link to recover our humanity.

de alguna manera u otra, una reconexión de donde venimos que es la tierra.³²

In Huerto Semilla, the discussion of the history of okra and no-till method similarly taught lessons in interconnectivity to networks beyond ourselves. In this space, the land, seeds, water, and harvest are viewed not as commodities but sacred in their own right in how they connect us to beyond. One night with las Semillas held special value in revealing this. During a brigada I attended, las Semillas held a collective ceremony in Taíno tradition in solidarity with indigenous Amazonians. At this time, Amazonian indigenous people were facing the impacts of devastating fires that ravaged ecosystems and challenged indigenous autonomy and lifestyle, reflecting the ever-encroaching colonial goals of Bolsonaro's state (Sims 2019). The deep solidarity expressed by las Semillas is reflective of the power of spiritual work in cultivating and supporting decolonial work across borders in a collective struggle for mutual liberation.

In my interview with Tara, they also described the meaning of food in explicitly spiritual terms:

Food is political but I would also like today that food is goddess. Because its power is not just political power. I think food is not just a vehicle [for social change]. So yeah, I just want to name it as if it were, you know, somebody else that's here in the room.

Tara further described their relationship with medicinal plants in particular, focusing on the way in which they have supported them in their healing and personal identity development:

³² Part of the reason why the process [colonialism] has been so successful is because they've disconnected us from the land to which we have an emotional connection with, and so I think that that ideal world has to reestablish that connection in one way or another; a reconnection with the place where we come from, which is the land.

I heal, learn, connect and also understand a little bit more about how I identify through my plants. I have learned a lot very specifically through medicinal plants as to what my body feels and and what it means for me to be queer in my own body. Somehow I've connected to other spirits, other dimensions, not just to other humans. I've been able to kind of ground myself and feel supported in other ways, as a queer person. And so I've started to relate - relate my androgyny with different plans, relate the way that I exist physically with different plans, relate my personality traits with different plans. I grow these plants but I also grow with them and next to them.

This understanding of engagement with food and herbs as a spiritual practice is not unique to those I spoke with in Puerto Rico. Thuhah, Tsuhah, and Scott (2020) describe farming as a spiritual practice in indigenous Indian communities where cultural festivals are connected with the agricultural calendar. Norgaard (2019) discusses ceremony in relation to salmon fishing in Karuk tribes of the Pacific Northwest. Indigenous traditions offer us valuable lessons in connecting ecologically sustainable practices to culture and spiritual worldviews. Indigenous scholar Dina Gilio-Whitaker (2019) discusses the role of the sacred in motivating protection of sites and resources, which reveals the way in which spirituality must not be separate from science nor ecological knowledge and that humans must not be absent from an environment for it to be conserved and cared for. World renowned Anishinaabeg scholar and environmentalist activist Winona LaDuke (1999; 2005) also speaks to the need to “recover the sacred” in order to heal from legacies of trauma and establish care in “all our relations.” Kyle Whyte (2018a) identifies rituals as the systematization of reciprocity and moral relationships and offers the example of salmon potlatch ceremonies as a grounded case study of the ways in which culturally revitalizing practices are simultaneously environmentalist in nature. Revealing how the intertwining of food systems and human

cultural institutions results in practices of democratic social relations as well as careful stewardship of keystone species such as salmon, he writes:

The potlatch, then, facilitated large diplomatic networks across houses, facilitating trust and reliability across houses and worked to make sure people recognized and were accountable for their interdependence. (Whyte 2018b: 353)

These examples reveal the ways in which spiritual and cultural practice is tied to ecological practice and supports sustainability and resilience in direct ways.

“Saborea la rebeldía”: Food as a Mechanism of Resurgence

One poke. Two poke. Three poke. After that they begin to blur and I focus on the sounds of the chirping coquis. Skin is pierced gently but firmly, broken like the soil it touched just a few hours earlier. It reddens as the form appears, as ink meets blood. A small teardrop-like seed. Una semillita. You remember hearing the saying. You know the one that goes “They tried to bury us. They didn’t know we were seeds.” But as this seed is tattooed on your body, you feel it like never before. The power in this symbol of rebirth, of resilience, of hope found in unexpected places, of the extraordinary magic too often overlooked in the mundane, of the radical world-shifting power of planting just one seed. Oh what glorious trees have grown from the smallest of semillas. I wonder what might come from this one.

Against notions of dependency, food allows a radical reconceptualization of what power people hold and provides the substance to reimagine alternatives. As Garriga-López (2019) describes, in "organising as mutual aid societies, people developed a new sense of their own capacities" (181). Crystal described this process of empowerment in the context of community building:

If we, as communities and as individuals are able to control what we eat, I feel like we're definitely changing our social -- our everything. If you do it in community more and less as an individual, then you're creating a

big social change. So I feel like if we are able to be sovereign of what we eat, we could change a lot of things.

In this way, food sovereignty provides the bridge to further social change. Changing relationships with the land especially is a powerful point of departure for broader political change since land dispossession is ultimately at the core of the colonial process. Tara discussed this concept too in relation to food as a language:

Food is political because it actually allows us to redefine a lot of really fucked up definitions that we have accepted and adopted, and that have been very, very hurtful for us as human beings. And so I think that food is political because it allows us to redefine what health and health insurance and politics and you know, economy, and all of these things. What does it mean to be rich? You know, food redefines that for me. It's a currency, it's a language...

Food allows a redefinition of core ideas, which allows for a reorganization of society according to the ideas. Joshua discussed this in relation to how his work is about more than food security, but gets at the root of hunger with a structural critique: “Que no solo busca distribuir comida y satisfacer el hambre, si no transformar las relaciones sociales que hacen que haya hambre en Puerto Rico y en el mundo.”³³ This belief informs Cocina Rebelde’s slogan “Mas alla de la mesa.”³⁴ They are chefs and farmers and food workers, but their work is always connected to larger political goals and activist agendas.

Paxx also discussed the political implication of his cooking when we talked about Puerto Rico’s so called “culinary renaissance.” (Squires 2019). Through careful design of their menus, which feature local ingredients, flavors, and traditions in innovative and bold ways, Paxx is renewing Puerto Rican pride and resisting culinary

³³ We are not only looking to distribute food and satisfy hunger, but also transform the social relations that cause hunger in Puerto Rico and the world.

³⁴ Beyond the table.

imperialism.³⁵ They described having local ingredients on the menu as “a pride point” and affirmed to me, between bites of fresh mango sorbet, “it’s only a natural thing for me to do. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Charlotte described a similar approach in her restaurant, Mimosa Brunch Farm to Table:

Evitar el comprarle el producto a megatiendas o productos que no son derivados de nuestra tierra porque todo tiene un comercio externo y muchas veces las personas de clase media baja persona solamente están adquiriendo productos que son de mala calidad para alimentarse y alimentar a sus hijos porque es lo que se le ofrece en los supermercados. Y pues yo creo parte del cambio debe ser comprar lo local para que se quede la economía en el país.³⁶

Featuring local products in a farm-to-table model is about flavor and quality, but as these chef’s describe, it is also about justice.

Food is deeply linked to national identity. This is visible in the slogan of the now famous food truck, Pagán’s Pernilería Los Próceres (or PLP for short): “Pernil es patria.”³⁷ As such, Puerto Rican food holds special political salience. By cultivating Puerto Rican pride through their food, these chefs engage in direct anti-colonial resistance. As cultural workers, chefs are on the frontlines of social change, serving up revolution each day.³⁸ This fight is not easy, but it is undeniably critical:

³⁵ See Chauhan 2014 for another case study of localized resistance against corporate culinary imperialism.

³⁶ [We] avoid buying the product from megastores [or products that are not derived from our land because everything has an external trade and many times people from lower middle class can only buy bad quality products to feed their children because that is what is offered in supermarkets. So I think that part of the change must be buying locally so that the economy stays in the country [Puerto Rico].

³⁷ “Pernil” is a slow-roasted marinated pork dish typically served with arroz con gandules [rice and pigeon peas]. “Patria” translates sentimentally to homeland.

³⁸ One of the sandwiches on the menu of PLP is aptly called “Revolución es Orden” in reference to the famous quote from Puerto Rican lawyer and leading revolutionary figure Pedro Albizu Campos: “Cuando la tiranía es ley, la revolución es orden.” This translates to “When tyranny becomes law, revolution becomes order.”

Because how are you gonna fight the fight against evil if you're eating crap? You need good shit to stand up against those fuckers. So yeah, food is very important. If you eat good you're going to be sound of mind and you're gonna have peace about who the fuck to fight. Hay un montón de trabajo³⁹ but we are here to do it. (Paxx).

³⁹ There is a mountain of work.

Conclusion

Lessons from Puerto Rico: Sovereignty, Solidarity, Sustainability

What then can we all learn from Puerto Rico? For one, I hope that I have shown how we are all implicated in the struggle for sovereignty because we are all enmeshed in the nested nexus of violence. We are all harmed by colonialism. Even those who may appear to benefit -- wealthy foreigners, corporate executives, political elite -- are not protected from the violence that colonialism imparts on the ecologies that inevitably exist in exchange with their material realities. Fundamentally, we all share this land, this water, this atmosphere, this galaxy of stars above us. Our inevitable interconnectivity means that we all feel the repercussions of harm, whether or not we are aware of it. Puerto Rico may feel far, but if we understand ourselves to be connected in this way, directly and indirectly, with our surrounding social and environmental ecologies as well as our collective body politic, we see Puerto Rico is really very close. The struggle for decolonization and for food sovereignty is our struggle too. And whatever “our” I am speaking of is irrelevant, because all of our “ours” are in relation. Here I am reminded of a quote I hold dear by Indigenous Australian feminist scholar, artist, and activist Lilla Watson: “If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound with mine, then let us work together.”

Second, we learn that food is a powerful political medium and source of agency in resisting the colonial state in the way it cultivates solidarity. The very act of eating, let alone growing, food contains within it radical potential. Through food, we are invited to practice creative political interventions that promote individual health and

wellbeing, while recognizing the interconnections between individual, collective, and ecological health. In creating mutualistic interdependency and resisting dynamics of codependency, a localized food system allows a radical reorganization of our political subjectivities. We are reminded of our own ability to exercise agency outside and beyond the state and the power of our collective community when we engage in practices of autonomous organization, community care, and mutual aid. A diversified and localized food system welcomes greater resilience in response to crisis, supports healthier communities, and builds bridges of connection.

Third, we learn that deep sustainability and substantive justice requires community and reconnection. Sustainability is by now a buzzword, tossed around by radical activists and neoliberal business moguls alike. Yet the idea is not one I am ready to throw away yet. How can we ensure our work for sustainability is not only maintaining systems but restoring and healing too? Here is where queer agroecology offers us insight. A queer ecofeminist decolonial future seeks a reality that has not yet existed. It plants a seed in this space of unknowing, ripe with creative possibilities awaiting the proper invitation to bloom. Thus, as we consider our response to crises, social, ecological, and political alike, I hope we may seek to grow back, not to what was, but instead to what could be.

Renewed Relevance and Urgency in the COVID-19 Context

“Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. Maybe many of us won’t be here to greet her, but on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing.”

Arundhati Roy

As I write this, the world is undergoing one of the most dramatic shocks it has experienced in decades: the COVID-19 pandemic. These circumstances have made this thesis all the more relevant and the voices contained within it all the more urgent to pay attention to. Already, we are witnessing the way in which corporations and elites seek to capitalize on virus-related death and suffering, raising the risk of what has been called Coronavirus Capitalism (Klein, Taylor, Taylor 2020). This reminds us that the “crisis” is far deeper than simply COVID-19. Yet simultaneously we are witnessing a generative turn “from emergency to emergence” (Koten 2020). As the federal government has failed to adequately respond to public health and community needs, instead focusing on saving Wall Street, grassroots mutual aid networks are flourishing across the country (Goldfield 2020; Diavolo 2020). I myself have been actively part of organizing a mutual aid network in my own community, coordinating food and service distribution among neighbors, fellow students, and the larger Lane County population (Lueneburg 2020). I have been torn from writing about mutual aid and food sovereignty to *do* mutual aid and food sovereignty, always more urgent than my academic work. As I type now, my nails are still caked in soil from my garden where just a few hours ago I planted kale and cabbage.

This context warrants paying particularly close attention to communities that have successfully experienced and responded to crisis, including Puerto Rico. As crises continue to appear at ever increasing rates due to climate change, we would be mistaken if we overlooked the wisdom, experiences, and insights communities who have dealt with crises and survived have to offer. No doubt the current moment is fraught with

uncertainty. Rebecca Solnit (2020) described it using the analogy of a caterpillar becoming a butterfly: “when a caterpillar enters its chrysalis, it dissolves itself, quite literally, into liquid. In this state, what was a caterpillar and will be a butterfly is neither one nor the other, it’s a sort of living soup.” So here we are, in the liminal state of soupness. As we wonder what we may come, it would behoove us to take word from Puerto Ricans and other food sovereignty activists around the world who I believe are further along in their metamorphosis.

Luckily, the need for locally-based regenerative food systems has not gone unnoticed. Many people have become aware for perhaps the first time the extreme vulnerability of relying on a supermarket and globalized systems for complete sustenance. Facing closures, food shortages, price hikes, and the very risk of exposing yourself to the virus in public, many are recognizing the value in greater community and self-sufficiency. First-hand experience and reports alike show that people are turning towards localized food systems and growing their own food at ever increasing rates. Interest in home gardening has spiked, paralleling the Victory Garden movement during WWII, leading some to call them “Corona Victory Gardens.” While the practices of community gardening and farming have long been an important key to survival and independence for marginalized people, wide-spread attention by the general US populus is significant and speaks to the unprecedented moment we are living through (Brimm 2020). Calls for cooperative gardens have used Craigslist and hashtags as organizing tools and digital networks have blossomed, holding virtual spaces to create solidarity,

share experiences and knowledge, and support local capacity.⁴⁰ If that is not rhizomatic organizing then I don't know what is. Nate Kleinman, farmer and founder of the Experimental Farm Network (an organization currently hosting such a space of digital networking) wrote that “cooperative gardens speak much more to building something together, not just defeating something.” Perhaps a more food sovereign world is that something.

Beyond this Paper: Knowledge Mobilization and Further Projects

As I conclude this paper, I look forward and beyond its bounds according to a goal of knowledge mobilization. I ask myself what I often overheard at the end of the community assemblies that I attended: *que hoy?*⁴¹ Anderson & McLachlan (2016) identify “knowledge mobilization” as part of a transformative research paradigm which involves a close collaboration between researchers and community actors as co-inquires as part of a broader agenda for progressive social change. It centers on the question: “to what use can this knowledge (complex or simple) be used, through processes of social transformation, to create a more just and sustainable world?” (306). This process of knowledge mobilization attempts to transgress the border between “academic” and “nonacademic” and communicate with wider audiences in order to make critical information more widely available and accessible. They identify three core strategies, which I draw on in conceptualizing my own process: 1. Layering, 2. Building Bridges, and 3. Transmedia. Layering refers to using different knowledge distribution forms and

⁴⁰ Follow a grassroots and quickly evolving movement of food workers online at <https://www.experimentalfarmnetwork.org/project/28>; see another example of digital food organizing for local resilience at <https://cropmobster.com/how-it-works>.

⁴¹ What now?

strategies aimed at various audiences and with a variety of purposes. For example, using videos, blog posts, policy briefs, and op-eds not just academic papers. Building Bridges recognizes that “different knowledge mobilizers are separated by epistemological, discursive, and disciplinary divides” (307) and uses keywords, examples, objects, metaphors, and discourses in order to bridge those carrying different politics and interests. This has in part inspired my inclusion of metaphors and vignettes. Transmedia refers to using different forms of media approaches to tell stories to reach a wider and more diverse audience. This approach affirms what feminist methodologies have suggested, namely that the ultimate purpose of knowledge production is to reach audiences who are not necessarily in academia (Harding 1991; Haraway 2004).

Accordingly, beyond the thesis that you are reading, I have worked diligently to translate and transmit the knowledge I’ve collected in this research process into other forms. Throughout my fieldwork and following few months of drafting and editing, I documented my process heavily using social media platforms (especially Instagram and Facebook). Primarily through photos, videos, and short text blurbs, I posted about my day-to-day activities, key insights from my participant observation, highlights from academic texts I was drawing on, and the challenges I was facing as part of a broader effort to share my research journey and make research less intimidating and more accessible to my undergraduate peers, the majority of my followers. As someone interested in the autoethnographic process (Foley 2002), I also shared personal poetry, journal entries, and art that explored my own connection to the topic (including the vignettes interwoven in this text). I have also been collaborating with graduate students

and faculty from various departments on campus as part of an emerging People's Knowledge group, working to create a home for participatory, action-oriented research for social change in Oregon.

I am also deeply committed to sharing this work in communities beyond academia in forms that are accessible to wider audiences. Outside of the strictly academic sphere, I gave a talk open to the public on my thesis, as part of UO's Food Studies Lunch Talks series, and plan to continue to give more teach-outs in the community, partnering with local food justice organizations, chefs, and farmers. These teach-outs center on my research findings but also intentionally open a dialogue about how non-Puerto Ricans can work to decolonize spaces and frameworks and practice meaningful solidarity with communities we may not be directly a part of. In a conversation with Tara, we discussed how the process of decolonization must happen on both sides and requires our own introspection. For, in their words, "It's both of us! It's all of us." I also hope to link my local community to Puerto Rico by participating in an emerging seed exchange, led by El Departamento de la Comida. Excitingly, I also am working collaboratively on a creative project with the plan of combining research findings, stories, recipes, photography, poetry, and art in a bilingual zine on food sovereignty in Puerto Rico. In the moment that I am writing, I have yet to know how these projects will turn out nor the impact that they will have. But I am eager to find out.

Appendix

A: Participant Bios

- **Paxx D. Caraballo Moll** is a chef and restaurateur, recently recognized by Food & Wine magazine as one of 2019's best new chefs. They currently live in San Juan, running their restaurant and bar, Jungle Bao Bao. During COVID-19 with their restaurant closed, they are volunteering to cook for World Central Kitchen disaster relief. You can follow and support their work by following the hashtag #queersinthekitchen.
- **Tara Rodríguez Besosa** is the co-founder and co-director of El Departamento de La Comida, organizer, entrepreneur, and by now one of the key faces of Puerto Rico's food sovereignty movement. You can follow and support Tara's work at <https://www.eldepartamentodelacomida.org/> and with the hashtag #quenosepierdalasemilla.
- **Joshua García Aponte** is a chef at Cocina Rebelde and organizer with Comedores Sociales de Puerto Rico. You can follow and support his work on the website: <https://www.cdpecpr.org>.
- **Sitara Sylvia Maldonado** is a yogic practitioner and healer, born and raised in Puerto Rico. We met my first week in Puerto Rico staying at the same AirBnB and again on the brigada hosted by Departamento de la Comida, where she told me stories about her parents, both Puerto Rican revolutionaries active in the 50s. You can follow and support her work on her website <http://sanacionsitara.com>.
- **Lorena Román Aulet** is a student of sustainable agriculture at University of Puerto Rico Utuado campus. She is also a midwife and runs a food stall at the local farmer's market with her sister.
- **Charlotte Rivera** is a chef and small farmer who runs a farm-to-table restaurant on the West side of the island. We met through a brigada I participated in with El Departamento de la Comida, where she served the best lunch I have had in years. You can follow and support her work on Facebook at "Mimosa Brunch Farm to Table."
- **Victor Dacosta** is a community member living in Caguas, where he helps run the local community garden.
- **Samuel Gasgot** is a musician and sustainable farming advocate living in Santurce San Juan. He has worked as a taxi driver and in the tourism industry. We met at a Community Assembly in Santurce, where he spoke passionately about food sovereignty.
- **Patricia Rodríguez Ajodelpais** is one of the directors of Land + Heart Project, a project which seeks to "restore relationships with land and people" by supporting ecotourism and helping connect volunteers with small farms. You can follow and support her work at <https://www.landheartproject.org/>.
- **Rebe Encarnación** is a current student of social work at UPR Rio Piedras campus, currently working at Cocina Rebelde and volunteering with Huerta

Semilla and Comedores Sociales. She also organizes with the UPR Student Movement and the Colectiva Feminista en Construcción.

- **Crystal Cruz** is a dedicated member of Huerta Semilla living in Rio Piedras.
- **Joshleen Cirino** is a current student at UPR Rio Piedras campus and a dedicated member of Huerta Semilla. She also works as a teacher in nearby elementary schools.
- **Gabriella Collazo** is a recent graduate and botany lab technician at UPR Rio Piedras and dedicated member of Huerta Semilla.
- **Gabriel Julián** is a current student at UPR Rio Piedras campus and a dedicated member of Huerta Semilla. He designs their very cute posters and publicity materials, which you can see on their Instagram page @huertosemilla.

B: Interview Guide

Introduction

- Explain the project, my motivations, and my desire to make this experience participatory
 - Thank you for being a part of this!
- Review informed consent + sign IRB form
- Exchange contact information for future reference
- Time and vibe check

Basics

- Tell me a little bit about yourself.
- What makes you Puerto Rican?
- Tell me about your work.
- Describe your affiliation with _____ [organization]. (if applicable)
- What do you want me to know about your work?

Issues/Status/Politics

- What do you view as the most critical issues facing Puerto Rico today? How does your work address that?
- What are your opinions around the current and future political status of PR (e.g. do you favor independence, statehood, or territory status)?
- Do you feel that the dominant political parties (PNP and PPD) are adequately representing Puerto Ricans and their wishes? Are they responsive to your needs?
- Do you have faith in formal politics to bring about the changes you want to see?

Food

- What food do you regularly have access to? How do you feel about that?
- Where do you get your food? (e.g. grocery store, farmers market, etc.)
- Do you think food is political?
- (if applicable) Why is food sovereignty important for you? For Puerto Ricans?
- Do you see a connection between food sovereignty and Puerto Rican political sovereignty?
- What are the greatest challenges in working to advance food sovereignty in Puerto Rico and how have they changed since Maria?

- What do you think other food sovereignty and environmental justice movements can learn from Puerto Rico?
- How would you like to see the Puerto Rican food system change? In an ideal world, what does the food system look like? How do we get there?

Maria, Ricky Renuncia, and Crisis Response

- What was the impact of Hurricane Maria on your life/operations/activism?
- What do you make of the protests this summer? Have you participated? How?

For Farmers

- What do you grow? How long have you been farming?
- What does an agroecological approach mean to you? (if applicable)
- Do you think Hurricane Maria's devastation open up new possibilities to promote and advance sustainable farming?

Wrap Up

1. Anything you would like to add or tell me?
2. Do you have any questions for me?
3. Recommendations on other people I should speak with or events I should attend?
4. How do you think non-Puerto Ricans can best support your work?
5. THANK YOU!

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