

# TESTIMONIO AS STITCH WORK: Undoing Coloniality Through Autoethnography in Puerto Rico

Aurora Santiago-Ortiz

**Abstract:** In this testimonio, I bridge the political, academic, and personal by situating my experiences as an autoethnographer conducting research in Puerto Rico during the months following Hurricane Maria. As a Puerto Rican living in the diaspora, not being in the archipelago with my parents during the storm and its aftermath produced a sense of loss, grief, powerlessness, and survivor's guilt. I grapple with questions such as: what multiple subjectivities do I inhabit as a researcher visiting my home island? How do I negotiate those subjectivities and identities within myself and with others? In answering these questions, I offer a nuanced account of my intersecting identities and how they impact my interactions with those in the field and how they impacted my choices as an emerging researcher. I argue for a decolonial approach to autoethnography anchored in collective practices, particularly solidarity.

**Keywords:** *testimonio; autoethnography; participatory action research; nepantla; decoloniality; coloniality; solidarity*

On September 20, 2017, hurricane Maria barreled into the Puerto Rican archipelago. With winds over one hundred and fifty miles per hour, the category four storm left death and destruction in its wake. It also removed the colonial veil for many that live in the islands, exposing a dysfunctional local government as well as the federal government's apathy towards rebuilding and providing aid to the U.S. territory. People who steadfastly supported Puerto Rican annexation to the U.S. (including some in my own family) shifted their thinking and understood that Puerto Ricans are indeed colonized, and subject to "second class citizenship" (Malavet 2000). There were others, including myself, that understood that the disaster following

Maria was hardly natural—a product of centuries of colonial subordination, government mismanagement, and a crumbling infrastructure.

That day in September—as well as the days that immediately followed—are moments that my memory will likely never betray. I was living in Nonotuck land, or what is known as Western Massachusetts, starting my second year of doctoral studies. I was in the initial stages of researching an undergraduate program located in the eastern regional campus of Puerto Rico’s public university. The Action Research Program (ARP) trains students in participatory action research (PAR). PAR is an experiential methodology that brings together academic researchers, local communities and/or grassroots organizations, with the goal of collectively producing practical and liberating knowledge for the benefit of oppressed groups (Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991). Rather than being a rigid set of practices or steps, PAR “is an open-ended process of life and work... toward an overall, structural transformation of society and culture” (29).

I was particularly interested in understanding the collaborative practices and relationship among students, faculty, and community partners in the ARP program. However, Hurricane Maria irrevocably changed the marrow of everyday life in Puerto Rico. As such, ARP had to pause their usual course of research in favor of addressing the immediate needs of community members. I traveled to Puerto Rico in November 2017, two months after the hurricane hit to begin fieldwork at one of the ARP sites. With them, I visited a community of about 900 residents in the northeastern region of the main island of Puerto Rico. I met Dr. González, the ARP faculty member, and the cohort of students he supervised on a community trip to distribute water filters provided by Helen and Ophelia,<sup>1</sup> two employees from an international nongovernmental organization (NGO) that were going to teach the

community how to install them. This testimonio offers an autoethnographic account of that one-day visit to the community, which forced me to not only adjust my expectations about the PAR work that occurred that day, but also impelled me to consider my role as an insider/outsider researcher.

This testimonio was written in the immediate months following Maria. Since then, a robust corpus of literature examining the storm's multiple dimensions has emerged (see Bonilla and LeBrón 2019; Garriga-López 2020; Lloréns 2018b; Lloréns and Stanchich 2019). Activists, writers, scholars, and a combination of the three have grappled with the political, economic, environmental, psychological, and social implications and consequences of Hurricane Maria (García-López 2018; Molinari 2019; Ortiz Torres 2020; Roberto 2019; Valcárcel 2019). My own contribution to this conversation through autoethnography seeks to bridge the political, academic, and personal to take responsibility for my "situated experience... to practice forms of non-exploitative interactions and to create spaces for healing" (Marte 2020, 52). This type of ethical and decolonial practice provides the methodological space needed to contemplate my role as a researcher, the beneficiaries of my research, and the ways it may provide me healing from loss, grief, and the wounds inflicted by colonialism.

As a Latina feminist scholar committed to decolonization and decolonizing methodologies (Smith 2013; Tellez 2005), I use this testimonio to examine the ways in which I am accountable to the communities I work with, the ways I enable colonial dynamics, as well as the ways I resist them as an ethnographer. I also explore pathways for building research relationships with my participants that are premised on solidarity. Additionally, I contend with the following questions: what multiple subjectivities do I inhabit as an ethnographic researcher visiting my home island? How do I negotiate those subjectivities and identities with myself and with others?

I begin this project with a reflection of my various positionalities. I then offer a brief overview of autoethnography and testimonio, as they have been used and theorized by Chicana/x and Latina/x scholars, noting the points of convergence to these approaches. Then, I offer a series of vignettes to comprise my own testimonio about this critical and compounded ethnographic research experience.

### **Navigating Liminality Through Nepantla**

My experience growing up between Puerto Rico and New York had a profound impact on my identity development. Moving back and forth between diaspora and archipelago four times by the time I went to college taught me to adapt to my surroundings, yet I was often questioned about my “Puerto Ricanness,” or lack thereof. My mother would explain my liminality as the result of being bicultural. She was referring to two having Puerto Rican identities: the one in the metropole, and the one in the archipelago. These identities were inextricably merged in me, as opposed to operating as “divided borders” (Flores 1993).

This biculturality results in a positionality that is both insider/outsider, leading me to continually engage in self-reflection about my colonial subjectivity, as well as Puerto Rico’s colonial status. As part of the Puerto Rican diaspora, not being in the archipelago with my parents during this catastrophic event produced a sense of loss, grief, powerlessness, and survivor’s guilt. Admittedly, being able to travel to and from Puerto Rico with relative ease before and after this disaster is a privilege not afforded to the majority of Puerto Ricans, both in the archipelago and the diaspora. At my mother and stepfather’s house, I had access to a generator that powered a refrigerator to ensure access to food; a mosquito net and a small fan that allowed me to sleep in relative comfort; and a cistern that provided us with running water and a warm shower. These middle-class luxuries were the result of my parents’ superseding their own working class and

poor upbringings, enabling me a middle-class positionality and corresponding comforts not available to many in the archipelago.

My reckoning with class privilege is further complicated by my gender, racial, ethnic, and other identities; however, these are also contingent upon my location. Being cognizant of this requires continually examining my relationship with all of those involved within any of my research sites, but in this case, it means being mindful of my positionalities as I moved about the *isla grande* (Lengel 1998). Reflecting on my identities in the context of research pushes me to problematize my complicity in coloniality as a member of the academy as a brown Puerto Rican woman that simultaneously experiences exclusions from that very space (Villenas 1996; Reyes Cruz 2012). Moreover, as a graduate student and researcher based in the U.S., I have an added responsibility to not impose dominant modes of thought and being that are North American to Puerto Ricans living in the archipelago. Conducting research in my own ethnic and geopolitical community requires an awareness “of the politics and privilege of my researcher role and my relation to research participants” (Villenas 1996, 715) across all these multifaceted intersections. I excavate these *choques* (Torre and Ayala 2009) through autoethnography and testimonio, to parse out my positionalities in the field as a fellow Puerto Rican “yet outsider as researcher” (Diversi and Moreira 2016, 19).

While many scholars have theorized and written about the hybridity of Puerto Rican identity (Flores 1993; Aparicio 2003; Negrón-Muntaner 2006) and theorized it from multiple epistemological and theoretical frameworks, I situate my understanding of my identities in a constant state of flux, or *nepantla*, “which articulates life between two cultures... reaffirm[ing] the effects of colonial and neocolonial regimes in the articulation of bicultural [and polycultural] subjectivities” (Aparicio 2003, 21). *Nepantla*, a Nahuatl word

Gloria Anzaldúa adopted in her conceptualization of borderlands refers to the “liminal space where transformation can occur” yet it also “indicates spaces/times of great confusion, anxiety, and loss of control” (Keating 2006, 8).

Anzaldúa’s theories provide a way for me to bridge the particularities of Puerto Rican experience within broader Latina/o/x and Latin American struggles for decolonization and liberation through autoethnography and testimonio.

### **Autoethnography and Testimonio as Sites of Decoloniality**

Autoethnography and testimonio are methodological and pedagogical tools that merge the personal, the political, and the collective. Both eschew claims to objectivity in the research process, and instead “connect the personal to the cultural” (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011, 739). Autoethnography as methodology allows me to reclaim my situated knowledge and experience, treating research as a political act and practice (Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis, 2015). It enables a research practice grounded in self-reflection and the dialectical tensions between the individual and the social, the personal, and the political (Russel y Rodriguez 2007; Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis 2015). Blurring disciplinary boundaries that “centers the self as a site of inquiry,” autoethnography draws and builds from “ethnography, narrative, testimonio, phenomenology, and critical identity theories (Marx, Pennington, and Chang 2017, 2). Autoethnography, much like testimonio, builds bridges that seek forms of being and relating anchored in solidarity through the act of writing performatively, embracing vulnerability, and creating a relationship with the reader or audience (Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis, 2015).

Autoethnography offers decolonial possibilities by confronting “the racial, gender, and sexual hierarchies that were put in place or strengthened by

European modernity” (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 261). My work stems from my own colonial wound, *una herida abierta* (Mignolo 2007; Anzaldúa 2012, 25). It is a reminder that I come from a centuries-old colony that continues to resist economic, social, and political forms of domination. My commitments to research methodologies that are antiracist, feminist, and decolonial are not only a manifestation of my oppositional consciousness (Sandoval 1991) but are also grounded in the very real forms of colonial, racial, and gender violence that the most precarious and vulnerable experience in Puerto Rico. Yet I cannot negate the contradictions of doing this work within “the belly of the beast,” to borrow from José Martí.

Testimonios are both a methodology and pedagogical tool to theorize from lived experiences, “recreat[ing] new identities beyond the fragmentation, shame, and betrayal brought about by oppression, colonization, and patriarchy” (Cervantes-Soon 2012, 374). Testimonio emerged in the late twentieth century to document and call attention to the struggles of the oppressed and colonized, such as indigenous peoples in Latin America (Brabeck 2003; Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, Flores Carmona 2012). Perhaps the most well-known is the pathbreaking work of Rigoberta Menchú (1984), whose testimonio brings us to bear witness to the repression faced by Mayans during the Guatemalan civil war (Brabeck 2003). Witnessing is fertile ground for building coalitions across differences, from the locus of the “struggles of women of color” (Figueroa-Vásquez 2020, 69). Decolonial Black Puerto Rican feminist Yomaira Figueroa-Vásquez, citing María Lugones’ (2003) concept of faithful witnessing, views the practice as a decolonial tool that renders visible both multiple forms of domination as well as resistances to these forms of oppression. She brings forth the notion of *destierro*, as both a shared condition among the colonized or previously colonized, and as a response to colonial violence (personal communication, November 13, 2020).

My testimonio maps my experience of being uprooted, living in a perpetual vaivén of border crossing (Figuroa-Vásquez 2020; Alexander 2005).

Chicana/Latina feminists have explored the tensions of researching one's communities through testimonio (Villenas 1996; Russel y Rodriguez 2007; Nájera 2009; Tellez 2005). Michelle Tellez (2005) explored the tensions between activism and scholarship when engaging in community-based projects. Tellez recognized that her position as "a Chicana informs [her] way of observing, interpreting, and understanding the world" and placed herself "in the center among those involved in creating this knowledge" (49). Her multiple identities forced Tellez to confront not only her status as "Other" in the research relationship, but also her own power and privilege. Jennifer Nájera (2009) grappled with her positionality as both insider and outsider, when writing about her fieldwork in her mother's South Texas border town with both Anglo and Mexican immigrant residents. Nájera, who is Mexican American, combined autoethnography and testimonio to document the relationship-building work needed to gain access to the field site. Mónica Russel y Rodriguez (2007) explored the "messy spaces" or the complexities of writing from her own location, recognizing these spaces as "productive sites of theory building" that go beyond self-reflexivity (103). Confronting and living in the messy spaces are create possibilities for a "liberating praxis" by exploring the complexities of multiple and shifting subjectivities (108).

Linking the individual to broader collective experiences create points of connection through a praxis of solidarity across different positionalities (Villenas et. al 2006). As an emerging researcher with similar epistemological views, I, too, position myself in the collective and in the relational, interrogating my contradictions and working in solidarity with others towards mutual liberation. This notion of solidarity is defined as "mutuality, accountability, and the



recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities” (Mohanty 2003, 7).

The testimonio I bring forth in this article about autoethnographic work I conducted in Puerto Rico weaves in and out of different periods of my life. These vignettes are intimate familial moments, self-reflections, and events juxtaposed amidst a natural and colonial disaster. These interludes also signal pauses within the autoethnographic fieldwork I carried out in Puerto Rico in November 2017. I invite the reader into the complexities of my positionality and to sit alongside me in the discomfort of my contradictions.

### **Of Hurricanes and Colonial Disasters**

*September 19, 1989*

I am seven.

I am fearful yet excited, adrenaline flowing.

Hugo is coming with his merciless howl.

The air is cool

It is raining hard

I go to the *balcón* with a bedsheet

Laying down on the cool *terrazo*

Watching flashes of lightning

And occasionally getting wet

With gusts of violent rain.

When Hugo hit, I was living in Puerto Rico. It was my turn to be with my dad. Or, should I say my dad’s turn to be with me? I don’t know which. I laid down in the *balcón*, cool tile against my cheek. I heard the swish and howl of the wind, my face pelted with angry rain. Tree limbs strewn across the street, severed. I ate cheese and drank hot chocolate, feeling a sense of excitement

living in the dark. I showered in the cold rain, shaking yet ecstatic with the disruption of life's monotony. My dad let me get away with much more because he wasn't as pendiente of what I was doing.

Back with my mother in Old San Juan, life was harder in my seven-year-old mind. We walked downhill, on beautiful blue Spanish cobblestones to fetch water in the oasis at one of the colonial town squares. I am tired, lugging heavy buckets of water, full to the brim, uphill so we can flush the toilet and take baths with hot water we boiled. I became an expert in using one pot of water to bathe my small body, quickly, before the water lost its heat. This went on for months on end, but I didn't mind it too much, seeing it as an adventure.

As a child, I romanticized hurricanes, remembering nights playing dominoes, listening to the radio, telling ghost stories. As an adult, I now understand there is nothing romantic about living in a nightmare of 500-plus years of colonialism that keeps bearing down, suffocating you with just enough reprieve to let you catch a little breath. I, too, know "what it is to live under the hammer blow of the dominant norteamericano culture" (Anzaldúa 2012, 85), under a Junta that decides our future,<sup>2</sup> repartiendo el bizcocho como si fuera de ellos (giving out the pieces of cake as if it were theirs).

---

*October 2017*

It had been three years since I moved to the U.S. after living ten consecutive years in Puerto Rico. I was in the throes of doctoral coursework. Every year since I moved up north, I returned to see my parents and the Caribbean Sea at least three times a year, a privilege not lost on me.

On a cold fall afternoon while studying in what is known as New England, my father called.

“Your uncle is in the hospital,” my father said.

My uncle is dying. Bloated and bored, with no power to keep his mind away from his Coors Light or brandy.

My uncle is being kept alive by my father, an internist, at one of the hospitals where he treats patients.

His kidneys are giving their last-ditch effort.

First cirrhosis.

Then a stroke.

Kidney failure, multiple pneumonias, prostate infection, labored breathing.

It is only a matter of time before he joins the 911 incinerated bodies with no name, that are part of thousands more that died of “natural causes” so these lives wouldn’t be tallied, resulting from the second hurricane.<sup>3</sup> The one where governments and their agencies allowed bodies to decay and rot, under the auspices of “foreign in a domestic sense” and “belonging to, but not a part of.” Every day planes take hundreds to the empire because they cannot survive in a place that has been systematically evicting them. Me. Us. More than 200,000 gone and counting.<sup>4</sup>

---

As the sun burned the morning fog on my way to the airport, I thought,

I’m scared of what I will find.

That it won’t be home.

I’m on the plane.

Moments before we fly over land

I think about shutting my eyes

But I want to remember it.

The blue tarps on blown away roofs  
 Trees with nubs for branches  
 Buildings exposed, vulnerable. Run down.  
 This is not my home,  
 But I belong to this constellation of islands.  
 I sense I won't be the same.  
 An ontological shift,  
 Where home will be  
 "A vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an  
 unnatural boundary" (Anzaldúa 2012, 25).

---

As I write these words, the vultures are scheming  
 To empty out our islands  
 And settle them with ghosts.  
 Juridical fictions called corporations  
 Cryptocurrency playgrounds  
 Cryptocolonialism,<sup>5</sup>  
 A crypto utopia for "benevolent capitalists building a benevolent economy."<sup>6</sup>  
 Where the colonizers are called "ex-pats,"  
 And people like me cannot grow old here.

*November 10, 2017, San Juan, Puerto Rico*

Watching the news tonight at my mother's house  
 TV powered by a generator.  
 There's a diabetic lady with rotting skin and no teeth talking about dirty water  
 Shit coming out of faucets  
 Toothless townsfolk denouncing the liquidly sludge.  
 I am paranoid about bathing here.

---

There are many Puerto Ricos (Diversi and Moreira 2016).

The one where people drink shit

And the other where people drink Martinis in air-conditioned restaurants fueled  
by generators.

People like me.

How do I develop a tolerance for contradictions? (Anzaldúa 2012).

“[N]othing is thrust out,

The good, the bad and the ugly,

Nothing rejected,

Nothing abandoned” (101).

*November 9, 2017, San Juan, Puerto Rico*

Christmas came especially early

In the form of capitalist propaganda

Like nothing happened.

Forget your troubles!

Put up your Christmas tree

That you won't be able to see at night.

Darkness surrounds

Like a hand clutching a throat.

Suffocating.

---

*December 11, 2017, stolen Nonotuck land*

“Your uncle is dying.” There, my father said it. I called him on his birthday.

“It's better that he dies. He is suffering too much.”

I ask my father, “What is it now?”

Everything. Full body shut down.”

He has renal failure and is on dialysis every day. His gut is so swollen, about to pop. I hope he makes it until next week, I think selfishly. I want to say goodbye.

*December 16, 2017*

I am studying at the library, with social media breaks in between. As I scroll through the pictures, I stop at a photo. My uncle. Young. Under the photo is a caption. His date of birth. A dash. And another date. Two days ago. And those three letters. I am shocked and angered at my father. He did not call to tell me my uncle died. His brother. His patient. I call him, biting back tears. He says, “I didn’t want to bother you.”

“I would have come to the funeral!” I tell him.

“You need to work on your exams,” he retorts. Always the pragmatist.

I am engulfed in sadness. I am crying in the staircase, throat dry from talking to my dad, my mom, and other family members. The burial is tomorrow. I won’t be able to make it.

*Re-searching the other Other: Liminality in action*

I began my research

Deep in los intersticios (Anzaldúa 2012)

For I am still bound to the empire’s academy

One foot over there/here and another here/there.

I am colonized

Resisting the trap

Of becoming colonizer in my work (Villenas 1996).

I am both self and other,

In a constant dialectic

Of the inescapability of my own marginalization and the guilt of my complicity (716).

*Fieldnotes. November 9, 2017. Eastern Puerto Rico.*

I join the Action Research Program (ARP) team led by Dr. González on their community visit on November 9. We met up with Helen and Ophelia, two Israeli international relief workers, at the town square of Luquillo before going to a former school that has been converted to a community distribution hub. The community adjacent to the distribution hub had been invited by Dr. González to receive training on how to use the water filtration system before receiving free filters for them to use.

When we arrived at the community center where the water filters would be distributed, no one from the community was there. There were, however, open boxes of food donations by Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) revealing apple sauce, beef jerky, and candy.<sup>7</sup> After a deliberating about next steps, the team decided that a rapid assessment survey of the community needed to be conducted to find out about their water situation. During these interactions, we would provide information about the free filters and extend an invitation to a workshop on the use and installation of the filters we would conduct later that afternoon.

Aid workers Helen and Ophelia requested I accompany them on the impromptu research trip. As we went to each house in the community, I asked them how they came to be working in Puerto Rico. Helen tells me their story. She works in international development and Ophelia is a hydrologist. They were sent to Puerto Rico by their NGO, with no connections to anyone on the island and went to the government base of operations set up for aid to offer their assistance and expertise. They told me that no one in the Puerto Rican government offered to help them get set up to distribute the filters. I recalled thinking about how the government can barely manage, let alone help those that want to help.

I asked Helen how much she knows about Puerto Rico. She responded that she knows nothing, except for the song *Despacito* (Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee 2017).<sup>8</sup> She had been finding out more, little by little. I explained to her our colonial status. I told her of my wariness of international NGO's as these enterprises often colonize or impose belief systems disguised as aid. In the sociopolitical moment of their presence, Puerto Rico was (and still is) experiencing extreme vulnerability, opening it/us up to the possibility of being taken advantage of. And I shared how this was already happening to it/us, with an unelected Fiscal Control Board imposed by U.S. Congress on the archipelago. This Junta decides how to handle the debt the Puerto Rican government has been accumulating for decades (Molinari 2020). Much of this debt is illegal and unconstitutional, yet the colony has no recourse for bankruptcy. Calls for the audit of the debt have been ignored, and instead, la Junta has instituted budget cuts and austerity measures, exacerbating forced mass migration, economic inequality, and institutional violence. When we give our goodbyes later that afternoon, Helen handed me her card, telling me “We’re not all that bad.”

---

I rode along with Dr. González and we talked throughout the day about the environmental challenges the archipelago faces because of its subordinate relationship to the U.S. Access to potable water after the hurricane was a challenge. Contaminated waterways resulted in dozens of cases of leptospirosis, a bacterial disease found in mice urine and droppings. Many Puerto Ricans collected rainwater or lined up at superfund water sites, which are unsafe to drink (Lloréns and Stanchich 2019). Issues of environmental injustice are inextricably linked to poverty, racism, and gender inequities.



Part of our conversation also addressed how Puerto Rico is considered an environmental justice community<sup>9</sup> by the United States because its inhabitants are racialized and categorized as “Hispanic, mixed race, or minority” (Lloréns 2018a, 147). In the aftermath of Maria, the economically advantaged had access to clean water, electric generators, and food, yet that was not the case for the millions of Puerto Ricans living below the poverty line (46.1 percent of the population), who have been burdened by a deep depression that began in 2006. Although Puerto Ricans in the archipelago are represented as a sum of racialized subjects in the U.S. media, “the hurricane’s impacts and the recovery process have not been the same for everyone” (García-López 2018, 102). Predominantly Black and Afro-Puerto Rican communities experience higher poverty rates than non-Black Puerto Ricans and are subject to increased environmental violence through pollution caused by corporations and the government (Lloréns 2016, 2018a).

The students, aid workers, Dr. González and I arrived at the roadside restaurant for lunch. Fifteen of us sat at the tables arranged in a rectangular shape. There were only about five menu options due to the lack of access to food after the hurricane. Ophelia asked the wait staff if any of the meat is local. I laughed internally. Due to aggressive industrialization that erased most large-scale agriculture and cabotage laws that impede international trade, Puerto Rico imports about eighty-five percent of its food (Mares 2019). Some of the members of our party asked for bottles of water. Ophelia told the waitress not to serve them and instead demonstrated the filtering system. A student leaned in to tell me she wanted cold water, not lukewarm water, and proceeded to order a soda. Before this performance, Ophelia did not ask the rest of us what we preferred to drink.

During my fieldwork that November, I became a cultural buffer in a contact zone between Ophelia, Helen, and the community we went to, by translating

for them and speaking to residents in accessible language that was culturally appropriate (Pratt 1992). I infer that my position as outsider/researcher and insider/Puerto Rican that speaks fluent English allowed the aid workers to feel comfortable asking me to accompany them. However, I took up the role of cultural and language translator as a form of solidarity with the residents of the community, as well as with the local students and professor involved in the program I was studying. The Puerto Rican students that were part of the program interacted very little with the aid workers, which can be attributed to the language barrier, but I suspect there were other reasons as well.

I also saw my role as cultural buffer as a way to subvert colonial narratives that portray Puerto Ricans as uneducated or irresponsible with natural resources. Helen repeatedly commented her disapproval of the residents' choice to drink bottled water. Neither of the aid workers, or the organization that they worked for tried to understand the sociopolitical conditions of Puerto Rico, which are connected to the ways in which low-income communities consume. The mayor of the town we were in gave people boxes of bottled water, disincentivizing the use of filters on collected rainwater. Why complicate life when, as someone from the community said to me, one can simply twist a bottle cap?

**Theory Through Practice, Practice Through Experience:  
Solidarity as Decolonial Praxis**

My trip to Puerto Rico in November 2017 was the start of an exploratory study of an undergraduate research program teaching PAR. I set out to ethnographically study the ways people from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds work together towards social change. I believed an autoethnographic approach would allow me to problematize the events through the lens of my own positionalities and to explore my role as a diasporic researcher returning to the archipelago. Although ARP was initially supposed to be my dissertation site,

for a variety of reasons, this eventually changed.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, the lessons I learned from this preliminary study impacted who I am as a researcher and the methods I continue to employ in my research (Santiago-Ortiz 2020). I pursued autoethnographic research to decenter pain narratives that exploit marginalized communities and portray them as damaged (Tuck 2009). I chose not to write about my conversations with neighborhood residents, who shared their experiences after Maria with me during this trip. I realized their pain was not for my consumption or use. In the moments when they shared these stories with me, I was not a researcher to them. I was not an academic. I was a fellow Puerto Rican, invited into the living room of an abuelita that reminded me of my own, given a gift of conversation and sustenance.

While I will continue to treasure and guard those stories, my testimonio about that trip discloses the political violence Puerto Rico continues to experience for more than five hundred years. Through these personal experiences, I hope to connect the ways my individual identity “express[es] the complexities of our communities as a whole” (Latina Feminist Group 2001, 20-21) and a way to build theory out of my practice and vice versa (19). I entered the field site intent on foregrounding a praxis of solidarity as a deeply personal, ethical, and political commitment. The Puerto Rican students in the ARP program asked me many questions about my research and about what going to graduate school in the U.S. was like, and I gladly shared my experiences and knowledge as a small way to reciprocate how they shared their experiences and knowledge with me.

My identities as a Latina, caribeña, puertorriqueña, and Latin American who grew up in both Puerto Rico and the U.S. made code-switching between the aid workers and the Puerto Rican students very easy. I expressed my solidarity with the students, community, and Dr. González by intervening to shift the ways Ophelia and Helen addressed the students, their narrow view of Puerto

Ricans, or the condescending way they regarded the residents of the community we were visiting. At the end of the day, I was there to be accountable to the community, students, and Dr. González, and to leverage whatever resources I could offer. Nonetheless, my solidarity did not negate my complicity in the colonial project of humanitarian relief as it was implemented by the aid workers. Dr. González shared with me that he was also cognizant that by accepting aid from an international NGO there were problematic implications for the project he led. This ideological tricky ground and contradictions were outweighed by the need to prioritize the community's lack of potable water. Even though this rationale was justified, I was aware that when the aid workers left, I needed to be "responsible, accountable ... part of an exchange" (Patel 2016, 73) that went beyond the researcher role. Research is secondary or even irrelevant when survival is at stake, particularly when the state has left the most vulnerable without resources or pathways to address their most basic needs.

During my time there, a voice inside urged me to tell the aid workers that we didn't need their filters conditioned by their colonial knowledge. Yet I am guilty of not doing so. Instead, I used my educational privilege and my forked tongue (Anzaldúa 2000) to tell them about our culture, about who we are, so that they did not see us as another faceless mass of disorderly bodies that they parachute into, condescendingly provide "aid" to, and leave without knowing our stories or our colonial subjugation. To offset my own collusion with Helen and Ophelia's efforts, I purposefully interacted with community residents in culturally responsive ways to facilitate their access to a water filtration system. I also made sure to tell the aid workers about Puerto Rico's colonial history and status, as well as work to reveal to them a Puerto Rican culture that was richer and broader than one depicted by stereotypes. Part of me did not want them to know us so forthrightly, so I chose what I said, careful not to give too much away. I instead prioritized the needs of the community and

eschewed the traditional research agenda academe demands. These actions were “small spontaneous subversive strategies and acts of resistance” (Villenas 1996, 725). I brought these strategies of refusal, accountability, and alignment with communities rather than institutions in my eventual dissertation research. While coloniality is part and parcel of the academic project, these strategies serve to open up possible coalitions and collaborations that catalyze political agency that make decolonization a possibility (Santiago-Ortiz 2020).

I felt compelled to write about these experiences to hold myself accountable to those I work alongside with. I have transcribed my pain, guilt, and my resistance. I document my efforts to theorize *destierro* (Figueroa-Vásquez 2020). I write about these choices to articulate the necessary ruptures one must cause to interrupt “competitive ways of being, doing, and knowing” that academic research demands (Patel 2016, 1). Indeed, this testimonio invites you to witness how as a bicultural, diasporic colonized researcher, I inhabit *nepantla* and use this space to locate anchor points for unanimity that I privileged over academic gain. The liminal space of *nepantla* is where I decide how to attend to these gaps. It is where I wrestle with my own *conocimientos* and seek liberation through a praxis of solidarity. Solidarity as a relational theoretical framework is guided by the work of Black and women of color feminists (Figueroa 2020; Hooker 2009; hooks 1986; Lugones 2003; Sandoval 2000; Uttal 1990). Their work points to the ways difference can be mobilized in the pursuit of decolonization and liberation, without flattening or erasing differences in race, class, sexuality, ability, and citizenship. Because my scholarship and political commitments are entwined, decolonization is not solely an academic project. Thus, solidarity as decolonial praxis does not remain within the realm of inquiry. It is a concrete commitment to creating and sustaining relationships rooted in the collective, while recognizing and grappling with differences between all. By opposing and refusing colonialism and coloniality via relational

ontologies, non-Eurocentric epistemologies, and a mutual aid politic, decolonial futures can and *are* being enacted in the present.

Yet, what does decolonization look like?

We have never seen it before.

It is science fiction

for it has never happened.

I have seen it take the form of solidarity. Solidarity is playing dominoes with the light of a quinqué with next-door neighbors that you had never met before. It is making sure your vecina has an extension cord, so she can plug in her refrigerator or dialysis machine to your source of electrical power. Solidarity takes the form of mutual aid collectives, communal kitchens where everyone present can all break bread. It is the fuel for May Day protests, because Puerto Ricans have had enough promesas. A praxis of solidarity “as many, temporary, and decentralized gatherings... solidarity that looks like chaos to the master but is foraging and rebuilding to those who situate their histories in and alongside radical marronage” (Ellis Neyra 2017, n.p.). I invite you to envision another way of life made up of these instances of reciprocity and mutuality. And I call on you to join me in building it.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> Junta de Control Fiscal, or Financial Oversight and Management Board for Puerto Rico, created under the PROMESA law. This board was imposed by U.S. Congress in 2016 and is in charge of Puerto Rico’s debt repayment, mostly through budget cuts and austerity measures that threaten Puerto Rico’s essential services including public education, pension plans, health care, the Puerto Rico Electrical Power Authority, and the University of Puerto Rico.

<sup>3</sup> A study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that the death toll due to hurricane María was 4,645.

<sup>4</sup> According to census.gov, between 2010 and 2018 an estimated 531, 004 people have left Puerto Rico See <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2018/estimates-national-state.html>.

<sup>5</sup> The term was originally coined by Michael Herzfeld (2002), referring to territories that “were compelled to acquire their political independence at expense of massive economic dependence” (900-901).

<sup>6</sup> Said by Lottery.com co-founder, Mr. Clemenson. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/02/technology/cryptocurrency-puerto-rico.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Studies found that the food distributed by FEMA did not meet nutritional standards. See Colón-Ramos et al, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> *Despacito* is the 2017 song performed by Puerto Rican singer Luis Fonsi and Puerto Rican rapper Daddy Yankee. *Despacito* was the most watched YouTube video for almost three years, until late 2020. The video was shot in La Perla neighborhood, at the fringes of Old San Juan. La Perla is a historically marginalized, racialized neighborhood, portrayed as a dangerous place in the Puerto Rican imaginary (Rivera-Rideau and Torres-Leschick 2019). After the video, tourist groups visited the neighborhood in droves, seeking a glimpse to the idyllic, tropical landscape portrayed in the video.

<sup>9</sup> An environmental injustice community is a designation of more than ten percent poverty rate, a higher concentration of particle pollution, and higher risk of cancer. See [https://www.aqmd.gov/docs/default-source/clean-air-plans/socioeconomic-analysis/scaqmdfinalreport\\_113016.pdf?sfvrsn=6](https://www.aqmd.gov/docs/default-source/clean-air-plans/socioeconomic-analysis/scaqmdfinalreport_113016.pdf?sfvrsn=6).

<sup>10</sup> My eventual dissertation site was an interdisciplinary PAR course I taught at a campus of the University of Puerto Rico. I made this decision to focus on studying and understanding the collaborative process in PAR from beginning to end. See Santiago-Ortiz 2020.

## References

- Adams, Tony E., Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis. 2015. *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Alexander, M. Jacqui. 2005. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 2000. *Interviews/Entrevistas*. Edited by Ana Louise Keating. New York: Routledge.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2012. *Borderlands: La frontera: The New Mestiza*. 4th ed. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2017. “Chicana Artists: Exploring nepantla, el lugar de la frontera.” NACLA Report on the Americas. <https://nacla.org/article/chicana-artists-exploring-nepantla-el-lugar-de-la-frontera>.
- Aparicio, Frances R. 2003. “Latino Cultural Studies.” In *Critical Latin American and Latino Studies*, edited by Juan Poblete, 3-31. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Brabeck, Kalina. 2003. “Testimonio: A Strategy for Collective Resistance, Cultural Survival and Building Solidarity.” *Feminism & Psychology* 13(2): 252-258.

- Bonilla, Yarimar and Marisol Lebrón, eds. 2019. *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Cervantes-Soon, Claudia G. 2012. "Testimonios of Life and Learning in the Borderlands: Subaltern Juárez Girls Speak." *Equity & Excellence in Education* 45(3): 373-391.
- Colón-Ramos, Uriyoán, Amira A. Roess, Kim Robien, Pietro D. Marghella, Ronald J. Waldman, and Kathleen A. Merrigan. 2019. "Foods Distributed During Federal Disaster Relief Response in Puerto Rico after Hurricane María Did Not Fully Meet Federal Nutrition Recommendations." *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* 119(11): 1903-1915.
- Delgado Bernal, Dolores, C. Alejandra Elenes, Francisca E. Godinez, and Sofia Villenas, eds. 2006. *Chicana/Latina Education in Everyday Life: Feminista Perspectives on Pedagogy and Epistemology*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Delgado Bernal, Dolores, Rebeca Burciaga, and Judith Flores Carmona. 2012. "Chicana/Latina Testimonios: Mapping the Methodological, Pedagogical, and Political." *Equity & Excellence in Education* 45(3): 363-72.
- Diversi, Marcelo and Claudio Moreira. 2016. *Between Talk: Decolonizing Knowledge Production, Pedagogy, and Praxis*. New York: Routledge.
- Ellis Neyra, Ren. 2017. "Towards an Un-American Solidarity: Thinking with Puerto Rico After Hurricane María." *Independent Curators International*, October 30. <http://curatorsintl.org/research/towards-an-un-american-solidarity-thinking-with-puerto-rico-after-hurricane>.
- Ellis, Carolyn, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner. 2011. "Autoethnography: An Overview." *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* 36(4): 273-290.
- Fals-Borda, Orlando and Mohammed Anisur Rahman. 1991. *Action and Knowledge: Breaking the Monopoly with Participatory Action-Research*. New York: The Apex Press.
- Figuroa-Vásquez, Yomaira C. 2020. *Decolonizing Diasporas: Radical Mappings of Afro-Atlantic Literature*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Flores, Juan, ed. 1993. *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity*. Houston: Arte Publico Press.
- Fonsi, Luis and Daddy Yankee. *Despacito*. Digital download. Universal Latin Music, 2017.
- García-Lopez, Gustavo A. 2018. "The Multiple Layers of Environmental Injustice in Contexts of (Un) Natural Disasters: The Case of Puerto Rico Post-Hurricane María." *Environmental Justice* 11(3): 101-108.
- Garriga-López, Adriana María. 2020. "Debt, Crisis, and Resurgence in Puerto Rico." *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 24(2): 122-132.
- Herzfeld, Michael. 2002. "The Absence Presence: Discourses of Crypto-Colonialism." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101(4): 899-926.
- Hooker, Julie. 2009. *Race and the Politics of Solidarity*. New York: Oxford University Press.



- hooks, bell. 1986. Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women. *Feminist Review* 23(1): 125-138.
- Keating, AnaLouise. 2006. "From Borderlands and New Mestizas to nepantlas and nepantleras: Anzaldúan Theories for Social Change." *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-knowledge* 4(3): 5-16.
- Latina Feminist Group. 2001. "Introduction. Papelitos guardados: Theorizing Latinidades Through Testimonio." In *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*, 1–24. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Lengel, Laura. B. 1998. "Researching the 'Other,' Transforming Ourselves: Methodological Considerations of Feminist Ethnography." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 22(3): 229-250.
- Lloréns Hilda. 2016. "In Puerto Rico, Environmental Injustice and Racism Inflammate Protests Over Coal Ash." *The Conversation*. <http://theconversation.com/in-puerto-rico-environmental-injustice-and-racism-inflammate-protests-over-coal-ash-69763>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2018a. "Imaging disaster: Puerto Rico Through the Eye of Hurricane María." *Transforming Anthropology* 26(2): 136–156.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2018b. "Ruin Nation: In Puerto Rico, Hurricane Maria Laid Bare the Results of a Long-term Crisis Created by Dispossession, Migration, and Economic Predation." *NACLA Report on the Americas* 50(2): 154-159.
- Lloréns, Hilda, and Maritza Stanchich. 2019. "Water is Life, but the Colony is a Necropolis: Environmental Terrains of Struggle in Puerto Rico." *Cultural Dynamics* 31(1-2): 81-101.
- Lugones, Maria. 2003. *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Malavet, Pedro A. 2000. "Puerto Rico: Cultural Nation, American Colony." *Michigan Journal of Race & Law* 6(1): 1-106.
- Maldonado-Torres, Nelson. 2007. "On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept." *Cultural Studies* 21(2-3): 240-270.
- Mares, Teresa. 2019. "Cultivating Comida: What Maria Exposed to US." *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* 9(1):1-5.
- Marte, Lidia. 2020. *Cimarrón Pedagogies: Notes on Auto-ethnography as a Tool for Critical Education*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Marx, Sherry, Julie L. Pennington, and Heewon Chang. 2017. "Critical Autoethnography in Pursuit of Educational Equity: Introduction to the *IJME* Special Issue." *International Journal of Multicultural Education* 19(1): 1-6.
- Mignolo, Walter D. 2007. "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality." *Cultural Studies* 21(2-3): 449-514.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 2003. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing*

*Solidarity*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Molinari, Sarah. 2019. "Authenticating Loss and Contesting Recovery: FEMA and the Politics of Colonial Disaster Management." In *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm*, edited by Yarimar Bonilla and M. LeBrón, 285-295. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2020. "The Public Reckoning: Anti-debt Futures After #RickyRenuncia." *Society and Space*, February 25. <https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/the-public-reckoning-anti-debt-futures-after-rickyrenuncia>.
- Nájera, Jennifer. 2009. "Auto/Ethnography and Reverse Migrations in South Texas: An Anthropologist's Testimonio About Method and Meaning in the Gathering of History." *Chicana/Latina Studies: The Journal of Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* 9(1): 48-61.
- Negrón-Muntaner, Frances. 2006. "Bridging Islands: Gloria Anzaldúa and the Caribbean." *PMLA* 121(1): 272-278.
- Ortiz Torres, Blanca. 2020. "Decoloniality and Community-Psychology Practice in Puerto Rico: Autonomous Organising (Autogestión) and Self-Determination." *International Review of Psychiatry* 32(4): 359-364.
- Patel, Leigh. 2016. *Decolonizing Educational Research: From Ownership to Answerability*. New York: Routledge.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. 1992. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. New York: Routledge.
- Reyes Cruz, Mariolga. 2012. "Ni con dios ni con el diablo [Neither with god nor the devil]: Tales of Survival, Resistance and Rebellion from a Reluctant Academic." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 1(1): 141-157.
- Rivera-Rideau, Petra, and Jericko Torres-Leschnik. 2019. "The Colors and Flavors of My Puerto Rico: Mapping Despacito's Crossovers." *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 31(1): 87-108.
- Roberto, Giovanni. 2019. "Community Kitchens: An Emerging Movement?" In *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm*, edited by Yarimar Bonilla and M. LeBrón, 309-317. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Russel y Rodríguez, Mónica. 2007. "Messy Spaces, Chicana Testimonio and the Un-Disciplining of Ethnography." *Chicana/Latina Studies: The Journal of Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* 7(1): 86-121.
- Sandoval, Chela. 1991. "US Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World." *Genders* 10(Spring): 1-24.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2000. *Methodology of the Oppressed*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Santiago-Ortiz, Aurora. 2020. "Mapping Collaboration as Resistance to Neoliberalism: A Case Study of Participatory Action Research in Puerto Rico." *Tracce Urbane: Rivista Italiana Transdisciplinare di Studi Urbani* 8(4), 270-289.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 2013. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books Ltd.

- Téllez, Michelle. 2005. "Doing Research at the Borderlands: Notes from a Chicana Feminist Ethnographer." *Chicana/Latina Studies: The Journal of Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* 4(2): 46-70.
- Torre, María Elena, and Jennifer Ayala. 2009. "Envisioning Participatory Action Research entremundos." *Feminism & Psychology* 19(3): 387-393.
- Tuck, Eve. 2009. "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities." *Harvard Educational Review* 79(3): 409-428.
- Uttal, Lynet. 1990. "Nods That Silence." In *Haciendo caras/Making Face, Making Soul: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color*, edited by Gloria Anzaldúa, 317-320. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Valcárcel, Xavier. 2019. *Aterrizar no es regreso*. Carolina, PR: Ediciones Alayubia.
- Villenas, Sofia. 1996. "The Colonizer/Colonized Chicana Ethnographer: Identity, Marginalization, and Co-optation in the Field." *Harvard Educational Review* 66(4): 711-732.
- Villenas, Sofia, Dolores Delgado Bernal, Francisca E. Godinez, and C. Alejandra Elenes, eds. 2006. *Chicana/Latina Education in Everyday Life: Feminista Perspectives on Pedagogy and Epistemology*. Albany: Suny Press.

