

Denaturalizing Surviving: Domestic Violence, Narrative, and Social Justice in the Aftermath of Hurricane Maria

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According to Proyecto Matria's *La Persistencia de la Indolencia*, an average of one woman was murdered in Puerto Rico per week between 2014 and 2018. Following the landfall of Hurricane Maria in 2017, devastation of infrastructure such as telephone lines and major roads negatively impacted reporting of contributing factors such as domestic violence. Among the types of domestic violence that went under-reported were intimate partner violence and child abuse. According to the Puerto Rican Government's Oficina de la Procuradora de las Mujeres in 2017, although not specified in relation to pre- or post-Maria timeframe, there were 8,217 reports of domestic violence, 11,331 requested orders of protection, and 14 deaths.¹ While current rates are still to be gathered for child abuse in Puerto Rico, Kanako Ishida et al.'s "Child Maltreatment in Puerto Rico" documents a high prevalence of child abuse in Puerto Rico (even as reporting levels are lower than believed to be occurring), and higher victimization rates than the U.S. In addition, the Puerto Rican Institute of Statistics, as documented by Disdier, et al. in "Perfil del Maltrato de Menores en Puerto Rico," show that in 2012 Puerto Rico saw an average child abuse rate of 9.6 per 1,000 children in comparison to the 9.1 average from U.S. mainland regions in the same year (11). No specific statistics currently exist that can accurately account for the rates of domestic violence or violence towards children immediately following the storm. However, as Alleen Brown reports in "Dozens of Murdered Women are Missing from Puerto Rican Police Records, New Report Finds," increases in rates of women seeking out domestic violence shelters and requesting assistance from violence in the home have been documented as increasing in 2017 and 2018 from the year prior to Maria.

Multiple studies offer evidence that disasters can increase the prevalence and severity of domestic violence and have compounding effects on women's post-disaster recovery. Jennifer First et. al, document in "Intimate Partner Violence and Disasters" that domestic violence rates rise after natural disasters. Similarly, "Black Feminism and Radical Planning" by Fayola Jacobs identifies that race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status can greatly influence both community experience of "natural" disasters in the mainland U.S. and also the ways in which healing after them occur. In the same vein, Sera Gearhart, et al. document in "The Impact of Natural Disasters on Domestic Violence" that, in the case of Florida, "people experiencing inter-personal violence during the postdisaster recovery period may face unique barriers to receiving assistance or escaping their situations" (88). These different studies provide insight into a disturbing pre- and post-disaster fact: women in socially-vulnerable communities are at increased, long-term risk of violence when natural catastrophes occur. Analysis of this research also points to a vital component of Puerto Rican women's experiences pre- and post-Hurricane Maria, and something that currently exists as a lacuna in the research: the impact of colonial status.

This article attends to this gap by offering a multi-step model of denaturalizing the concept of "survival" when identifying and analyzing domestic violence data within colonial settings post-natural disasters. We believe this multi-part process is necessary given the complexities of both human experience and the dialogues that currently frame them. Discourses regarding environmental catastrophe consistently position those who endure these events as "survivors." We

do not argue against that designation. However, what we seek to challenge is the idea that what happens in the aftermath of that disaster is a “natural” outcome, or an inherent manifestation of what “natural disasters” create. Instead, we contend that what happens after something such as Hurricane Maria, or the more recent earthquakes, is quite simply *unnatural*. Further, we argue that the unnatural nature of such experiences cannot be attributed to the “nature” of Puerto Rican men and/or a pathology of the people. Following the work of Roe Bubar in “Decolonizing Sexual Violence,” we believe that the rise in gender violence must be situated within the context of a history of social injustice and the colonial structures that enable violence (527).

The socio-historical particularities in which post-natural catastrophe experiences of domestic violence occur must be understood as multi-dimensional in terms of a temporal moment as well as social structures of the society. For instance, gender violence must be understood as an issue that is not unique to natural disasters, alone, and Puerto Rican women as not passive victims innately designated for violation. We can look to the publications such as 1988’s “To Make the Personal Political,” in which Katherine Angueira documents the reality of gender violence on the island, and notes that “the testimony of a 24-year-old female rape survivor who has dared to speak out and use her experience as a consciousness-raising tool serves a twofold purpose: it draws attention to the immediate problem of coping with the act and aftermath of rape, while at the same time calling for the eradication of the conditions that perpetuate violence against women” (67). This article was published roughly 30 years prior to Hurricane Maria’s landfall on the island. Thus, even as gender violence might be increased after a natural disaster, the disaster itself should not be framed as its own root cause. It is also important to maintain the integrity of Puerto Rican women within discussions of domestic abuse and genderized violence. We mark this point as integral to denaturalizing survival because it would be easy to return these women’s experiences to the two frameworks that the quote points toward: being placed in colonial narratives as either victims to be saved from machismo or as resilient survivors struggling within the confines of an oppressive culture. While elements of both stereotypes draw from Puerto Rican women’s lived realities, neither attend to the nuances that exist for women who both circulate in colonized worlds but are themselves *more* than the sum of narratives produced within the colonial imaginary.

Attention must therefore be paid to the frameworks engaged when conducting analysis of domestic violence rates following severe disasters on the island. For instance, David Spurr’s *Rhetoric of Empire* has identified different discursive technologies of domination deployed to ideologically position colonized people at the mercy of colonial structures. Spurr has written of colonial strategies such as the right of “surveillance,” in which the colonial gaze asserts its right to “view” those brought under colonization with no reciprocity of returned viewing (13). Additionally, other rhetorical strategies such as “appropriation” have been used to transform colonized people’s experiences into tools with which the coloniality either justifies its violence by diverting responsibility onto the colonized, or by using those who are colonized as mirrors on which to project images of itself and its beneficence (32, 34). Other narrative techniques similarly position people experiencing colonization into positions such as that of exotic objects and erotic fixtures (50, 182). Inherent to these, and what this article seeks to avoid when denaturalizing the concept of survival, is the collapsing of individuals caught within a colonial structure to singular narratives that belie the complexity of currently manifesting social phenomenon.

This article seeks to consider ways to research rates of domestic violence in Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria, and other catastrophic natural disasters such as recent earthquakes, that position this data—and narratives that emerge from it—in a manner that eschews demonizing a population already under duress. We begin with a basic premise: there is nothing natural about

what happens after environmental disasters. This premise is vital because, and as Aurora Levins Morales writes in *Medicine Stories*:

The culture that inequality creates around itself is saturated with pain, confusion, alienation, a sense of the unreality of our own experiences and that of others, an inability to name the abuses we experience, perpetrate, and witness on a daily basis. Part of what leaves us numb is the massive scale on which these abuses occur. We are a society of people living in a state of post-traumatic shock: amnesiac, dissociated, continually distracting ourselves from the repetitive injuries of widespread collective violence. (13)

The process of gathering data about painful experiences from a community already enduring violation must attend to the complexity of needs and layering of experience that the information embodies. Importantly, statistics regarding domestic violence cannot be used as emblematic proof of Puerto Rican men's pathology, or as demonstrating the continued need for U.S. intervention. Instead, the statistics and data must be positioned within their emergence as part of a colonial structuring and history. Involved in this latter component, and foundational to shifting discourses regarding what the information means for future intervention and cultural responses, we also consider the importance of not losing sight of the very real, tangible realities of that violence on the ground level.

This article articulates a model for, and of, de-naturalizing the concept of survival. This model requires three steps: first, identifying the long, historical trajectory of social structures that are present within a colonial setting and inform post-disaster social interactions; second, demarcating the colonial impositions that shape pre- and post-natural disaster experiences; third, engaging a decolonial turn to shift how domestic violence in colonial settings is narrated and intervened in during the aftermath of natural disasters. This third step is informed by research in decolonial studies, as well as Latino psychoanalytics, as part of a process to denaturalize narratives regarding Puerto Rican women's survival as an ontological resilience that belies the truly political nature of their experiences. This final step, and as we address towards the conclusion of this article, must also nuance discourses of agency and autonomy within these discussions.

Puerto Rico: Historical Makings of a Perfect Storm

The islands of Puerto Rico are situated in the Caribbean Sea. Its history, in the last roughly 500 years, has been intricately connected to the destinies of major colonial forces such as Spain and the U.S. To begin, the Island first entered European colonial imagination in 1493, when Columbus's ships first made contact with it (Pierce-Flores 2010).² However, it was not until several years later that Puerto Rico formally came under Spanish imperial occupation. The dawn of the 16th century witnessed Spanish imperial brutality on the Island, with near decimation of the indigenous Arawak's Taíno nation, importation of enslaved Africans, and creation of the first ecclesiastic seminary taking place in its first decades (Haslip-Viera 2001). The establishment of Spanish authority on the Island was constructed via social systems that were founded on violence, and these have lasted for centuries.

Indeed, sexualized violations integral to Spanish domination were informed by colonial mores. Narratives of Puerto Rico—and Latin America more generally—during the early colonial years centralize Spanish atrocities, including those of sexual encounters. For instance, Ramón Gutiérrez writes:

The Spaniards who came to America were largely young and single men. From the start of the Conquest, they exercised their sexual dominion over native women and men. The conquest of the Americas was a sexual conquest of Indian peoples. Indians were made objects both of desire and of derision, vessels that would reproduce a new people and that would provide the domestic labor to reproduce households, and ultimately, the profitability of a massive mercantile empire. (14)

Sexualization emerges as a key component for executing domination over bodies brought under colonization. The eroticization of colonized flesh, in the historical moment of Spanish conquest in the Americas, alters how specific people in specific places transformed into objects marked for control via their sexuality. Importantly, and as Spurr has noted (183), this technology of domination has long lasting effects. And this assertion of power, the establishment of physical dominion via sexual violence, is present and visible in our current moment.

The interconnectivity between racialization, sexualization, and violence in the Americas is not singular to the Amerindian communities present at the time of Spanish conquest. Certainly, examining the realities of African and Afro-descendant communities in the Americas is of pressing importance.³ Gutiérrez notes that little is known of the sexual ideologies of enslaved Africans during early colonization, but that sexual assault of both male and female enslaved peoples, of all ages, is a documented fact (36, 26, 27). Awareness of this reality is vital for interventions of the “tres raíces” mythology present in depictions of the cultural and genetic roots of Latin American people. This narrative highlights three groups—Spanish, Indigenous, and African—mixing to become the Latinos of today.

Present but often elided in this depiction is the violence through which such a narrative emerges. Indeed, scholars such as Lillian Comas-Díaz have pointed to cultural awareness and simultaneously layered avoidance of this reality when noting a common question about someone’s “grandmother” that is brought up when discussing mixed-race experiences in Puerto Rico. Comas-Díaz notes in “LatiNegras” that “emphasis on the femaleness of the black ancestor derives from the collective memory of dark females being sexually enslaved and raped by conquistadores or other white Europeans. This emphasis acknowledges the intersecting influence of misogyny and slavery” (171). In this example, attention is paid to the history associated with one particular type of body and its meaning within the colonial situation: the black, female, sexually dominated body. In contrast, whiteness is not associated with “rape,” or the identity of being a “rapist,” or having derived from a history of a “rapist”—which, given the history of colonization, would render white male identity on the Island as inherently connected to perpetration. At the core of such a distinction, and the ability to victimize one type of identity while not placing responsibility on to the other, is the manner in which violation is naturalized in the Americas while simultaneously erasing responsibility of the structure that enables and fosters harm.

Integral to this discussion, and the process of denaturalizing “survival,” is a question of how to avoid reifying narratives of victim/survivor to better account for the complexities of experiences within a colonial setting. The first step in denaturalizing survival requires attention to historical examples of social resistance in colonial settings. This provides greater historical knowledge to avoid evacuating Puerto Ricans of critical resistance and subversion. We believe this inclusion is necessary because, as Spurr has argued, colonial rhetorical strategies seek to obfuscate colonized people’s agency. In the case of Puerto Rico, we can look to examples such as exist in the legend of Yuiza—a Taíno cacique—which tells of a female village chief who was murdered by neighboring caciques for engaging in a sexual relationship with a conquistador.

Within the story, Yuiza established relations with Pedro Mejías—a Spanish soldier believed to be of Moorish descent—in order to maneuver protections for the people of her community. Caciques from nearby villages plotted to kill her, and eventually did assassinate her, for treasonously engaging with a man who was there to colonize them. Although vilified by these murderers, her story is one of redemption, and she is now celebrated in the city of Loíza—which bears her name—for her navigations on behalf of the people. This story defies colonial rhetorics, even as it ends in Yuiza’s death. She exerted sexual agency rather than becoming a passive victim; though persecuted for this choice, she transcends her own time and her name becomes a literal site of resistance.⁴

Other examples that eschew an “only victim to be viewed” identity also exist in more recent times. For example, during the nineteenth century, members of the Island’s population took up the call for revolution, inciting the Grito de Lares on September 23, 1868 that was a trumpet for ending Spanish domination. Feminists such as Lola Rodríguez de Tió also championed independence for the Island, arguing for increased women’s political rights. The push for independence continued well into the last decade of the 1800s, with a brief—indeed, only one month—period of transition in Puerto Rico. During this one month, the Island had its own acting government as it moved from Spanish colonization to what should have been recognition as an independent nation as documented in *Foreign in a Domestic Sense*.

Yet, awareness of this resistance cannot be used to ignore ongoing colonial issues. For instance, 1898 witnessed the end of this month-long enterprise and the re-establishment of the Island as a colonial holding: this time, as property of the United States. Scholars have documented that the Spanish-U.S.-Puerto Rico-Guam-Cuba-Philippine War of 1898 resulted in both a continued and re-colonization of Spain’s last colonial holdings by the emerging imperial U.S. nation. Under the Treaty of Paris, signed in 1898, Spain ceded its remaining territories—several of which were either already independent or in the interim of shifting to independent status—to the U.S. as bounties of war. Under the treaty, each of these holdings would receive different treatment, with, for instance, Cuba listed not as colonial possession but that being the case for Guam. Regardless of the letter, the intent of the treaty was to establish the U.S. as a colonial holder in the Spanish Caribbean as well as within Asia. And it worked.

Following 1898, the experiences of Puerto Rican people shifted. U.S. domination over the Island took on a newly minting guise that differed in specific aspects from that of Spain. For instance, whereas Spain held formal title of the Island under a colony/colonizer relationship, the U.S. does not formally list the Island as a colony, thereby being able to enact colonialism without having to fully embrace the responsibilities of being a colonizer. Following 1898, a series of U.S. Supreme Court cases ensued, known as the “Insular Cases,” predominantly dealing with issues of taxation of goods from the Island to the mainland, and what to call Puerto Ricans given their quasi-colonial/subject citizen reality. From these emerged the prophetic term “foreign, in a domestic sense,” which would govern U.S. policies with the Island. The 1900’s witnessed the signing of The Foraker Act as well as the Jones-Shafroth Act of 1917, the latter of which rendered all Puerto Ricans U.S. citizens and established U.S. dominion over the Island in terms of elements such as economics.

Also important to the Island’s more recent history is migration to the mainland U.S. As U.S. citizens, mandated through the Jones Act, Puerto Ricans can move to and from the Island to the mainland without a visa or specialized paperwork. This fact distinguishes Puerto Ricans from other Latinos or individuals in Latin America, and has a very real impact on the Puerto Rican population. Currently, and as D’Vera Cohn et. al. note in “Puerto Rican Population Declines on

the Island, Grows on U.S. Mainland,” the population of Puerto Ricans living in the mainland U.S. exceeds the population on the island and has done so since at least 2006. This bifurcation splits the community, as well as what it means to be “Puerto Rican” within a particular time and place. Important to this history, and as scholars such as José Torres-Padilla and Carmen Haydée Rivera in *Writing off the Hyphen* have documented, major “waves” of migration that have happened throughout the 20th century, and more recently a new exodus has occurred as a result of the continued economic problems and devastation related to Hurricane Maria occurring on the Island. These experiences of movement will continue to shape and reshape what it means to be “Puerto Rican” and the importance of specifically-tailored methodologies when exploring experiences on the Island.

Puerto Rico: Colonial Makings of a Perfect Storm

Puerto Rico is frequently described as the world’s oldest colony. And with good reason. It is. With over five hundred years of existence as a colonial possession, Puerto Rico remains the longest lasting colony in the world.⁵ Although the U.S. federal government has never officially listed the Island under this designation, the U.S. Supreme Court case *Puerto Rico v. Sanchez Valle* forced documented court acknowledgement of its status, and more recently PROMESA board (Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act of 2016) hearings that occurred from 2015-2018 resulted in Puerto Rico being acknowledged as a colony by high-ranking U.S. officials (Cabán 2017). However, the Island is officially designated as a “commonwealth” of the United States, holding its own constitution and elected officials. Puerto Ricans cannot vote in federal elections and do not pay federal taxes. These distinctions, while important, also belie the fact that language in the Puerto Rican Constitution enables the U.S. federal government to engage in such activities as removing democratically elected Puerto Rican officials when it deems necessary to do so, and authority to alter/remove/enact laws when it sees fit even when these activities go against either the Puerto Rican laws in place or the will of Puerto Ricans. While recent political resistance on the Island, as witnessed in the “Ricky Renuncia” summer and more recent protests against the Island’s current governor after the finding of continued political corruption, these examples must be put into their larger colonial context to identify their place in the Island’s political tapestry.

Since 1898, the U.S. has controlled the Island. As previously noted in this article, under the Jones Act, Puerto Ricans were forced to become U.S. citizens. Early U.S. colonial policies on the Island indicate how the Island’s meaning transformed and took shape within the new empire’s colonial imagination. For instance, land redistribution occurred alongside attempted imposition of English-first laws that sought to make Puerto Ricans English-dominant, or establish English as the main language of the Island (Descartes 1943; Suárez 2005). This latter task, as well as the re-spelling of Puerto Rico to Porto Rico, failed (Barreto 2001; Gallardo 1947; Jones Act).

Other U.S. colonial policies found much more insidious, nefarious, and long-lasting success through the appropriation of political activity on the Island, and these give insight into the structural machinations undergirding post-disaster experiences. For example, the early 20th century witnessed the rise of women’s reproductive rights advocacy among feminists on the Island. Although often ignored in U.S. textbooks, these women actively fought for the right to make decisions for family planning and access to birth control. As action for Puerto Rican women’s rights advanced, however, they were doing so against and within the U.S. colonial structure. What resulted was mainland U.S. eugenicists appropriating the fight for reproductive choice into

justification for population-control maneuverings. Integral to this shift was the transformation of Puerto Rican women into symbols of how the U.S. would assist these women with surviving—and even advancing—their culture and community.⁶ What ensued was years of exploitation in which levels of estrogen and progesterone were tested on Puerto Rican women to make “the pill” safe for consumption by women in the U.S. mainland. Simultaneous to this project, and also supported by U.S. politicians and eugenicists, was the Zero population growth policy instituted by the U.S. government. This policy, emerging out of a Neo-Malthusian doctrine, resulted in over one third of women on the Island being reproductively sterilized by 1981, and tubal ligation remaining one of the most popular forms of birth control among Puerto Rican women both on and off the Island (Safa 2003; Mass 1977; Lopez 2008; Briggs 1998; Briggs 2002). Puerto Rican women’s body within the U.S. colonial structure has thus never been safe.

Also important to understanding the colonial context of domestic violence in Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria is the economic control that the Island experiences at the hands of the U.S. empire, which led to the economic crises in the first decades of this millennium. Under the Jones Act, the Island is not able to trade in the international market without going through the U.S. This means that the Island is beholden to its colonizer for any and all economic activity. While this technique is not unique to the U.S. colonial state, as documented by individuals such as Eduardo Galeano in *Open Veins of Latin America*, the impact is unique given the realities of U.S. neo-imperialist tactics that are engaged throughout the world. Undoubtedly, this reality indicates the truly heinous nature of U.S. “assistance” after the hurricane, and the need to understand how the President’s throwing of paper-towels acts not as metaphor but as actual, concrete representation of how the island is treated by its colonists.

To begin to understand this reality, while the events of Hurricane Maria, and even the more recent earthquakes rocking the Island, are not inherently caused by disaster capitalism or the Anglo-U.S. colonial state, the ongoing problems resulting from these “natural disasters” is undoubtedly caused by them, or at the very least linked to them. For example, as Nick Thieme writes in “After Hurricane Maria, Puerto Rico’s Internet Problems Go From Bad to Worse” that “Hurricane Maria downed 1,360 of Puerto Rico’s 1,600 cell phone towers and 85% of above-ground telephone and internet cables” (2018). Undoubtedly, this loss made emergency phone calls impossible for many people. In the time after the hurricane, the ability for the Island to rebuild this infrastructure was dependent on U.S. federal funding. The Island was not able to engage in negotiations with foreign entities to expedite the rebuild because the Jones Act requires the U.S. to consistently function as either the middle-man or full on controller.

It is helpful, here, to consider why U.S. “aid” on the Island after the hurricane must be situated as a colonial act designed to keep Puerto Ricans dependent on its seeming “beneficence.” For, and as Centro’s “Rebuild Puerto Rico” guide notes (6), although FEMA is available to the Island, the Island and its people have no separate control over it. Thus, while the world watched as people wrote in large lettering that they were alive and needed water so that aerial filming crews would see them, entire warehouses filled with water bottles languished. It could be argued that local authorities on the Island are solely responsible for the lack of distribution. However, these authorities were doing nothing more than using their privilege as agents of empire to decide who and when something as vital as water would be distributed. The nature of their very decision-making process is overwhelmingly symbolic of how corruption works as part of the overall tapestry of imperial impact on the Island, even as it shows micro-level corruption.

Currently, the Island has an extremely high debt to the U.S. Impacting this issue is the reality of increases in sales taxes and unemployment rates (Caraballo-Cueto 2018). This

millennium has witnessed the transformation of the Island's debt into a colonial money-making enterprise under the guise of "financial debt restructuring." The PROMESA board encouraged and—in many cases—increased the decimation of public programs by removing funds from them to line the pockets of private share-holders. Among some of the effects felt on the Island is the slashing of minimum wage, closing of public schools, slashing of funding for universities, and the gutting of public works programs. The most recent "debt deal," which purports to erase more than \$24 billion of Puerto Rico's \$129 billion debt, has continued to gouge an already starving infrastructure (*Democracy Now!*). However, nothing can be more symbolic of U.S. engagement with the Island during this period than the U.S. president throwing rolls of paper towels at Puerto Ricans following the devastation of Hurricane Maria in 2017.

In addition, while experiences of water distribution might impact all Puerto Ricans, there are more specifically genderized impacts of natural disasters. As Gearhart et al. and First et al. have shown, rates of domestic violence increase following a natural disaster. As we have already argued, even as Hurricane Maria was a natural disaster, the very likely increase of domestic violence in its immediate aftermath is anything but natural. Indeed, it is centuries in the making, with its current manifestations embodying both the Island's longer history as well as more recent developments in colonial strangling. Importantly, and as Francisca Vigaud-Walsh notes in "Hurricane Maria's Survivors" "According to women's activists with whom RI spoke, police officers were often unwilling or unable to record new cases of GBV immediately following the hurricane" (2). Additionally, news reports from 2019, such as published by Alleen Brown, show that police also failed to record murders of women accurately, contributing to a uniquely positioned issue of how to research domestic violence rates given how evidence is documented and treated.

Nothing is natural about this colonial history or about Puerto Rican women's experiences of domestic violence either before or after environmental catastrophes such as Hurricane Maria. We have attempted, in this second step, to "de-naturalize" the outcomes of a natural disaster by showing the very constructed colonial context in which they arise. However, these two steps alone are not enough to inform technique and consciousness of researchers when they engage the task of documenting and interpreting Puerto Rican experiences of domestic violence after natural disasters.

(Un)Natural Survivors: Theoretical Framework for Interpreting Data

The previous sections of this article have attempted to outline the kinds of information that should be sought out regarding social histories and colonial contexts when researching domestic violence rates post-environmental catastrophes in Puerto Rico, or a colonized location in general. This provides an informed entry point into the geo-temporal moments following Hurricane Maria on the island. However, this information alone cannot be what guides the gathering and interpretation of data. Instead, we contend that they enable the final step of denaturalizing the concept of survival as a means of shifting analysis to provide a platform for social justice initiatives. We believe that this last step is vital to the process because, even as natural disasters can make something such as domestic violence worst, long-term solutions are required because intimate partner violence and child abuse are not unique to post-Hurricane Maria Puerto Rican experience.

Thus, seeking data regarding how natural disasters exacerbate such experiences of violence requires focus on what it means to live the unnatural state of colonialism in combination with environmental catastrophe. Structural inequality, as Levins Morales notes (13), has negative

effects on communities and becomes something that people navigate in order to maintain *life*—actually being alive. It can hardly be argued that as the world’s oldest colony, Puerto Ricans have not endured centuries of violence. The fact that Puerto Ricans continue to be *alive* would, on the surface, appear to indicate a kind of “resilience” in the face of adversity. It would also indicate that there exists some sort of ontological quality that Puerto Ricans are *naturally* faced with such adversities and *intrinsically* capable of “overcoming” them.

The passivity implied within that narrative contributes to an image of Puerto Rican people as languishing in violent structures but somehow always able to make it through. Narratives regarding the construction of resilience have, in general, as Luther, et al. describe in “The Construct of Resilience,” historically suffered from not only the vagueness of the concept but also a lack in distinction between the “characteristic” of resilience, which is an innate, passive quality as opposed to resilience as a process of adaptation. For Puerto Ricans, the concept of “resilience” suggests a survival mechanism of always overcoming adversity. This narrative belies the extreme struggle needed to remain alive, and requires a nuance to attend to the active resistance that is an ongoing feature of the Island’s population.

Questions might exist regarding the validity of linking domestic violence rates in Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria with the reality of its colonial status: it might be viewed as quite a reach, given that it was hardly U.S. government officials themselves committing acts of physical violence. Integral to such questions is a need to better understand the psychological impact of colonization both in times of extreme strain as well as across time and generations. A. Facundo’s “Sensitive Mental Health Services for Low-Income Puerto Rican Families” notes how the political status of the Island, and the ramifications of this in terms of social organization, can indeed impact mental health of Puerto Ricans and modes of interaction (134). In her analysis of this research, Comas-Díaz notes in “Puerto Ricans and Child Sexual Abuse,” “sexual oppression and victimization may have been internalized as an aspect of colonization and simultaneously as an identification with its negative effects. In other words, sexual abuse may represent a familiar behavior within the polarities of power and powerlessness, and domination and subjugation” (35). Thus, it is possible to see the cause behind developing aggressive coping techniques within the Anglo-U.S. colonial status that in turn can contribute to rates of domestic violence, with the home being one of the few places where frustration can be exerted because of privacy.

It is not to argue that Puerto Ricans, and specifically Puerto Rican men or parents, are allowed to be violent because of the colonial structure. It is, however, necessary to contextualize how a particular social structure fosters and manifests behaviors that are damaging to the community, as Bubar has noted. Facundo contends that “[a]lthough abuse and violence against a spouse or children should never be condoned or justified, the practitioner must clearly understand the causes of the abusive behavior before relevant effective, and helpful clinical interventions can be undertaken” (133). Contextualizing recorded violence is not an attempt to justify or condone it. Instead, it is strategically needed in order to identify the true root cause of it, which in turn avoids pathologizing the Puerto Rican community instead of holding accountable the system that encourages and may even require violent tendencies. And, most importantly, it can provide better-informed methods of healing for the community’s needs.

This article contends that such nuances should frame the processes for researching domestic violence rates on the Island after a major environmental catastrophe. We contend that the final step in this process is to decolonize the methodology undertaken when researching these rates. We turn here to Anibal Quijano’s analysis of the coloniality of power, and the two major axes along which it manifests: that of the “body” and that of “labor.” The coloniality creates a

system of power through the exploitation of specific bodies in order to not only assert authority but gain from it, as indicated by the rise of modernity throughout Europe via the gains made by colonizing the Americas (2000, 2007).

In order to avoid reifying logics that manifest within and as part of that system, and fully engage the insights provided by Facundo, here we note the need for what Nelson Maldonado-Torres describes in “Thinking through the Decolonial Turn” as a “decolonial turn” (2). This “turn” occurs when shifting to see the distance and difference between coloniality and those that are trapped by it in order to refute its all-encompassing logic. As María Lugones has demonstrated in “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” gender is at the center of coloniality. The very processes of genderization have assisted in rendering some “bodies” as human and others as not, some bodies specifically narrated as available for particularized forms of exploitations and others not. The turn that Maldonado-Torres marks enables a shift to what Lugones, as well as Xhercis Mendez in “Notes Towards a Decolonial Feminist Methodology,” call a decolonial feminist approach, which analyzes the coloniality for how gender functions as its core in a manner that enables the system of power to maintain.

Within this turn, we engage Iris Lopez’s “integral approach” for the nuances that her concept and praxis make for shifting the frameworks engaged when researching domestic violence following natural disasters in Puerto Rico. In “Sterilization and the Ethics of Reproductive Technology,” Lopez defines an “integral approach model” when analyzing rates of mass-sterilization on the Island of Puerto Rico in conjunction with Puerto Rican women’s own need to achieve autonomy in accessing reproductive technologies (2). As previously noted in this paper, Puerto Rican women were fighting to access birth control, and the Anglo-U.S. coloniality of power appropriated their activity in order to work out its own colonial designs. It is important to maintain awareness of what the U.S. government and its agencies were doing in this situation. However, integral to Lopez’s approach is a refutation of Puerto Rican women as only victims with no sense of self activity to assert their rights to autonomy. In fact, quite the opposite is true: Puerto Rican women were fighting. Just as Puerto Rican women and families continue to fight in light of recent displacements to U.S. mainland due to hurricane Maria. According to the Netflix documentary “After Maria,” evacuees’ trauma is perpetuated every day as they struggle for survival, living in precarious situations, seeking jobs with a living wage and trying to provide for their children in a continued struggle for the basic services they are entitled to, but can hardly access. The seeming paradox in these situations emerges as a result of the colonial imposition. However, the decolonial turn previously described enables both experiences to occur simultaneously as well as enabling both to remain simultaneously true of reality. Accepting this paradox is vital to de-naturalizing the concept of survival when researching domestic violence rates: rendering Puerto Rican women as passive victims further victimizes them, and also evacuates the possibility for agency even when not contending with a coloniality of power.

This shift in approach provides the foundation for a new framework when analyzing rates of genderized violence on the Island and denaturalizing discourses surrounding Puerto Rican women’s experiences at the intersections of coloniality. Inherent to this foundation is the understanding, as Levins Morales writes, that “the frequency with which adult women report that they were sexually abused by their families as children requires a story. That story must either radically redefine how the nature of family is understood in popular culture, or locate responsibility for these reports on the psyches of the women making them” (14). Exposing systems of oppression is not enough to change the structures that enable violence. But what it does do is show a need for

nuancing how that information is to be treated and the integrity required to render processes of dehumanization inherent in creating the initiating issue appear as they are: unnatural.

One issue previously marked in this paper is lack of data immediately following Hurricane Maria, and potentially other natural disasters that have impacted the Island more recently. Indeed, and as we have identified, lack of records is directly connected to the active refusal of those with the ability to document things such as murder to do so. Levins Morales writes of “woman-shaped holes” that form in historical records that must be filled in, if not by actual data than what can be gleaned from the spaces of absence within recorded information (27-28). In the case of Puerto Rico, the gaps in data immediately following the landfall of Hurricane Maria might not, in all cases, be willful. However, the maintenance of those gaps in the years to follow cannot be labeled as mere coincidence or oversight. Indeed, the very reality of over 100 murdered women not appearing in police records *across* a four-year period that begins *prior* to the hurricane substantiates the claim that while the hurricane might have exacerbated certain scenarios, it most definitely did not originate the ongoing feminicide on the Island.

With such a stark reality in place, it might be easy to see these gaps and lapse into the victim/perpetrator narrative. However, and as we contend, it is possible to maintain the decolonial turn and continue to shift the discourses for attending to the data that does not exist. We turn here to “*Spirita: Reclaiming Womanist Sacredness into Feminism*,” in which Comas-Díaz describes how:

I coined the term *Spirita* to designate women of color’s spirituality. The spirit of liberation among women of color (*Spirita*) is a way of life. *Spirita* nurtures a deepening of women’s cultural values and fosters a reconstruction of their identity. It enhances women’s awareness of oppression and promotes a racial gender empowerment. In short, *Spirita* mobilizes women to take control of their lives, overcome their oppressed mentality, and achieve a critical knowledge of themselves. (13)

She offers a culturally-tailored and nuanced methodology that attends to the needs of those who are “naturalized” as victims within a colonial structure. In the transformation of how they are witnessed, it becomes possible to shift discourses that center Puerto Rican women as either in need of saving or as shuffling to receive aid from a beneficent colonial overseer. Instead, the decolonial turn will enable researchers to present members of this community—who otherwise would appear as pawns to be used in colonial imaginaries—as human beings with the capacity for self-knowledge and social consciousness.

Such a centering of the decolonial turn at the core of “denaturalizing survival” transforms how data can be gathered and interpreted, and the potential for recommendations based on this data to be guided by a social justice praxis. Such an initiative emerges from Comas-Díaz’s note that “*Spirita* reminds women of color why they came to this world. As a way of life, *Spirita* celebrates a love of spirit and reclaims sacredness in all...*Spirita* savors the struggle for justice as one of the main reasons for living...advocates collective healing, and global liberation” (“*Spirita*” 16, 17). In removing the concept of passive resilience from this narrative, Puerto Rican women can be centered as integral to the move for change rather than as being swept up by the activities of others. No longer defined as “dependent” on outsider beneficence, Puerto Rican women can be witnessed as having—and sharing—the ability to shape alternatives for future interventions.

(De)Naturalizing Survival: Framing Methodology and Findings

There is nothing natural about the impact of natural catastrophes that happen in colonial settings. There is nothing natural about the way that infrastructures function to maintain both dependency and victimization in the aftermath of hurricanes, earthquakes, and more. The idea of the Puerto Rican woman as a natural survivor of atrocity is one that has created complex justifications for the ongoing treatment of her as a pawn within colonial structures. Reliance on narratives of “resilience” have rendered “natural victims” with no ability to fight, and—even more importantly—removed critique of structures that maintain violations to the current day.

As unfortunate as they might be, natural disasters offer opportunities to uncover oppressive social structures rooted in colonialism. Indeed, natural disasters highlight the need to address sexism not only during that specific situation/timeframe but to mobilize communities and policy makers to recognize, address, and fight sexism on a macro-systemic level. This paper has put forward a model of denaturalizing the concept of “survival” to shift how researchers enter into the process of gathering data within a colonial setting as well as how to frame data in order to avoid reifying the very discourses that make the aftermath of catastrophes so...natural. This paper does not seek to be prescriptive or limiting in its scope. However, it does seek to provide groundwork for how we can shift the discussion. Only after doing so can actions and policies be put forth to eradicate such violence in colonial settings. As such, we call for future work in research domestic violence rates in the Island, particularly in relation to intimate partner violence, transgenerational violence, and child abuse that maintain the integrity of Puerto Ricans as more than pathological pawns in a coloniality of power.

Endnotes

¹ Please see <http://www.mujer.pr.gov/Estad%C3%ADsticas/OrdenesDeProteccion/Estadisticas%20Orden%20de%20Protecci%C3%B3n%202017-18.pdf>. This pdf has several slides that include regional breakdowns of requests for orders of protection, as well as rates for reporting of violence.

² Puerto Rico is comprised of one large main Island with several smaller Islands around its coasts. Typically referred to as “the Island,” this article will use this term but does not seek to erase the experiences from individuals in locations such as Vieques.

³ Since the first submission of this article, the murder of Black Trans-women has continued with the most recent murders in 2020 of Riah Multon and Rem’mie Fells. Specific to Puerto Rico, April also witnessed the murder of Layla Peláez and Serene Angelique Velázquez as part of an epidemic of violence against people of the LGBTQ community on the island. Importantly, although these women are listed in news outlets with only the label “Puerto Rican,” the realities of mestizaje on the island necessitates that we also include the realities of their own racialized—as well as ethnically demarcated—subject positions both on the island and in the U.S. Additionally, we note here that there is indeed an impact on domestic violence rates in relation to gender orientation as well as presentation, as noted by scholars such as Kae Greeberg (2012), Kristie Seelman (2015), and Kevin Ard and Harvey Makadon (2011). While our current article focuses on heteronormative, female anatomied “women” on the island, we contend that the methodology and concepts that are put forward in this article can be deployed—with necessary adjustments and awareness of the intricacies entailed—to attend to experiences beyond this specific group. Additionally, we consider that such attention requires an initial exploration of/for/from each differently impacted community to ensure the integrity of representation, even as we acknowledge that, once these projects are completed, they be put in conversation for a larger, more authentic exploration of how to de-naturalize survival.

⁴ Importantly, this same city became a haven for individuals escaping enslavement and was finally officially recognized as a municipality by the Spanish in the eighteenth century.

⁵ The nation of Guam also remains a colonial holding of the U.S. However, Guam was not colonized by Spain until the 1520s, thus making Puerto Rico, which was officially colonized in the 1490s, the holder of this title.

⁶ Please see Hurtado, Roberta. *Decolonial Puerto Rican Women’s Writings: Subversion in the Flesh* for detailed descriptions of U.S. eugenicists’ narratives regarding Puerto Rico, Puerto Rican women, and the narratives of population control as a colonial technology of domination.

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