

Sexual Citizenship in the Caribbean 1899-1956:
Re-articulating Body Politics for Afro-Puerto Rican Women

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To:

Fierce and beloved Afro-Puerto Rican women,
who encounter themselves within the sacred and unapologetic
process of becoming...

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ABSTRACT

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M.A. Thesis by
Alexandra Rosado-Román

This thesis examines the concept of sexual citizenship in three historical and political processes sponsored by the United States government in Puerto Rico that produced restrictive policies which had a direct impact on the body of the Afro-Puerto Rican women from 1899 to 1956. The historical evidence of colonial activity in Puerto Rico and its more than 500 years of colonial history show that it has been a strategic territory for imperial and geopolitical purposes. For generations, Puerto Ricans have received the direct impact of the colonial oppression, but it has been visible, through the discussion of the Afro-Puerto Rican women struggles, how intersections such as race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and citizenship, function. Nevertheless, from my subjectivity, as a woman who is both, Caribbean and Afro-Puerto Rican and who utilizes a feminist decolonial approach, I aim to discuss the first approach towards an ethics of wholeness that can allow the Afro-Puerto Rican women to recover the autonomy over their bodies, and its manifestations of freedom. This ethic of wholeness includes a critical discussion about the sacredness of the Afro-Caribbean, the sacredness of the Afro-Puerto Rican women's bodies, of which both are strengthened by a non-binary view of the body and their own spirituality, particularly, the sacredness within the varied manifestations of sexuality.

“The woman's body is never neutral; rather the body is subject to scandal. Its representation evokes fear, fascination, mockery, greed, in addition to lasciviousness, because it has come to mean sexuality, the continuity of the species and death itself.”

—María Solá,
Emeritus Professor of Puerto Rican and Hispanic American literature
at the University of Puerto Rico

Introduction

Growing up in Puerto Rico was a captivating and unique experience. I am honored to be from a beautiful island in the Caribbean, where the warm sun and refreshing breeze serve as allies of anyone who experience the beaches, mountains, and rivers. But, living on the island brings other experiences that help explain the core of my argument here. For example, being raised in a conservative household, far removed from political debates, I never asked questions about patriarchy, gender dynamics, or colonial status. Additionally, as the daughter of a Pentecostal pastor, I was nurtured in rigid standards, guided by a restrictive moral code of "decency." Everything seemed to indicate that I was also a daughter of colonial assemblages. In other words, I was not raised to develop *la facultad*, the capacity to see beyond the surface deeper meanings and structures at play.¹

Through my socio-religious engagement during the past five years, I have been able to listen to testimonies and experiences of Puerto Rican women who, like me, were not educated to recognize the complexity of our Spanish, Indigenous, and African *mestizaje*, and the power dynamics behind some of our socio-religious and cultural practices. In general, many Puerto Ricans cherish with longing the indigenous heritage, appropriate the Spanish heritage to claim the white race, and implicitly or explicitly despise their African heritage. At the same time, more than 400 years of colonial activity and influence have complicated the task of identifying the daily intracultural and intercultural conflicts that emerge from the intersections between race, sex, gender, and citizenship. Also, those realities have worsened our ability to identify the negative implications of these intersections for those women who claim and identify with their Afro-Puerto Rican identity.

¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 38.

In her book, *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom* Mimi Sheller coined the term *sexual citizenship* to discuss how the inter-relations between race, gender, and sex worked within the imposition of citizenship throughout the Caribbean. Because of the level of complexity that Afro-Puerto Rican women face when these variables intersect, in this study, I want to investigate the concept of sexuality in relation to Afro-Puerto Rican women's citizenship. I believe that, to date, this concept best captures the complexity of the status the Puerto Rican citizenship, revealing the socio-religious implications that have been manifested on the island through our past and present colonial history.

In general terms, citizenship is defined as "a status bestowed on those who are full members of a certain community. All who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed."² Contrary to the theoretical and/or basic definition of citizenship, Sheller defines citizenship as "a set of intertwined practices and collective repertoires for defining, legitimizing and exercising rights over bodies."³

As one can see, both have serious implications. But while the first definition captures what citizenship is supposed to mean and grant, the second one captures a different dynamic that can offer the possibility to harm or manipulate through the use of political power. The concept of sexual citizenship also helps me to identify the centrality of the control of the women bodies within the U.S. imperialistic agenda in Puerto Rico. Through the implementations of public policies, the distortion of social ideologies and the demonization of cultural practices, the bodies of the Afro-Puerto Rican women have been among of the most prominent places in which political dynamics and the production of a kind of restrictive morality have taken place. Sexual

² Ruth Lister, *Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives* (New York: NYU Press, 2003), 14.

³ Mimi Sheller, in her book, *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 21.

citizenship, is a concept that brings awareness to the transformation of the moral values of the conquered territory into the moral values of the empire, and it is also used to systematically normalize and self-discipline the newly colonized.

Sexual citizenship denotes regulations of the collective designating who can be sexualized and disempowered within the most vulnerable sectors of society.⁴ Sexual citizenship is achieved through systemic violence against the racialized body. Sexual citizenship also reproduces sexual hierarchies, and produces restrictive moral codes that encourage women's to pursuit imperialist notion of "decency."⁵

Using the definition of sexual citizenship— and identifying the multiple ways in which colonization in Puerto Rico has directly impacted the possibilities of governance, the process of identity formation and the political implications reflected in socio-religious dynamics—suggests that women's bodies are never a neutral entity in the face of oppression. Instead, the body becomes the site of manipulation, structural oppression, and commodification. For these reasons in this study I explore how the "civilizing project" implemented in Puerto Rico by the United States from 1899 to 1956 stigmatized the Afro-Puerto Rican women's body. Will be examine how the "civilizing project" altered the process of identity formation of the Afro-Puerto Rican women today; as evidenced in their limited articulations of a narratives appropriately reflecting their creativity, empowerment and subjectivity.

The restrictive morality strategies that the "civilizing project" introduced, the ones promoted to facilitate social, political, and religious control over the body of black women, are embedded in the contemporary morality that constraints the free expression of the Afro-Puerto Rican women's embodiment. Because the restrictive morality and nature of the "civilizing

⁴ Sheller, 41.

⁵ Ibid., 9.

project" has been entangled with a Christian religious narrative, the Afro-Puerto Rican women, in general, has struggled to find the nurturing way of performing their spirituality.

Thus, the process of identifying what the political and cultural dynamics that restrain them from claiming ownership over their bodies can allow Afro-Puerto Rican women to re-articulate the narrative in which their free exercise of spirituality and understanding of sexuality will complement their search for wholeness. In other words, this study aims to explore how the Afro-Puerto Rican women can claim ownership over their bodies within a social context that values and preserves the colonial value of "decency," while also evaluating how spirituality can be an integral part of the liberating process of their bodies.

As colonial subjects, Afro-Puerto Rican women have been limited in the production of their intellectual exercise in the process of political, social and religious awakenings. As colonial subjects, we also struggle with the legacy against white supremacy, heteronormativity, androcentric views, racism, and sexism, which have served the process of oppression. Because of this, Afro-Caribbean women have been using their minds, body, and spirit to rearticulate narratives of empowerment and wholeness in the face of their current political status and having a sexual citizenship. I hope that the project I put forward here can serve as an awakening tool that enables our capabilities to be unapologetic resistant in our quest for freedom and wholeness.

In chapter one, I begin my analysis of sexual citizenship by concentrating on the history of citizenship rights attached to the process of colonization, among many things, included the expansion of the U.S. markets through the implementation of a "civil religion" entangled with decency codes of morality. Now it is important to acknowledge that although Afro-Caribbean women have shared similar difficulties throughout history, thus Afro-Puerto Rican

women's inter-subjectivities are intertwined with the long history of struggles and resistance to colonial power within the Caribbean setting.⁶

In chapter two, I discuss how the United States' "civilizing project" implemented moral reforms that consisted of taking ownership of the Puerto Rican women's bodies, restraining their sexual expressions, and their right to have full control over their bodies. This discussion highlights the fact that part of the American government's colonial strategy was to recalibrate racial composition. For example, to grant Puerto Ricans citizenship, the U.S government had to "whiten" the island. Unfortunately, the racialized woman's body was the ground within which this process took place. The "civilizing project" sought the regulation of prostitution and the control over the population on the island through sterilization and nonconsensual use of contraceptives in women.

After the discussion of the details and negatives effects of the "civilizing project," it is important to offer possibilities of what we ought to do in order to continue the project of reconstructing wholeness. Chapter three explores the first stages toward the construction of an Afro-Puerto Rican women's ethic of wholeness. At this stage, it is important to re-create a narrative that counters the value of sexual decency with the value of the sacredness of the body that includes ownership and autonomy over their bodies and their sexuality as the key. To acknowledge the live-giving gift of agency, the Afro-Puerto Rican women will be able to understand that the incorporation of the diasporic African knowledge, in Puerto Rico and in the Caribbean, is vital towards their daily empowerment and daily experience of wholeness.

⁶ Enrique Dussel, identify as one of the founders of the Philosophy of Liberation movement has developed an ethics of liberation to attend to the current crisis of the exclusionary "world system" through a critique of the hegemonic validity that is still present in ethical and philosophical theories. Dussel's ethics of liberation shows the proactive and material interpretation of utopia from the symmetrical inter-subjectivity of the victims. This meta-ethic has the purpose of providing a path for the necessary articulation of the excluded masses that, as victims, will emerge as new historical-critical subjects.

The conclusion includes an analysis of this project as a reaffirmation that, the most important element for Afro-Puerto Rican women who seek wholeness is actually emphasizing Afro-Puerto Rican women's agency and capabilities. This process which, in itself, becomes a personal and political struggle, leads to the creative emancipatory practices not only for themselves, but also for other women, deprived of a secure educational space. The importance of articulating wholeness as a process, rather than a final goal, is for the Afro-Puerto Rican women to comprehend that, through the affirmation and use of their agency, they are able to free themselves from restrictive moral codes that have not allowed them full exploration of their spirituality or their free sexual performativity, including total control over their bodies.

Living in wholeness does not alienate Afro-Puerto Rican women from structural resistance but, on the contrary, empowers them to increase the visibility of their social, political and religious struggles. It is important that, going beyond a reactionary paradigm against the colonial value of decency, they strive to continue the process of gathering or constructing creative tools for us to be politically educated, awakened, and healed. This process is made for us, in the present, and for the generations to come.

Chapter 1

Situating the Body: Afro-Puerto Rican Women's Body in the Caribbean

"There are three surfaces on which she writes: the page, the body, and the history."

—Aurea María Sotomayor

Overview of the Caribbean Geopolitics

The diverse character of the Caribbean is an impressive phenomenon. It can be represented in different cultural manifestations, in multiple languages, in various religious and philosophical expressions, in their typical dances or, even, in the diverse culinary tendencies. But, in the same way, this region can be described in light of the different political and social reactions to colonial enterprises and heritage. Countries such as Spain, Great Britain, France, Netherlands, and the United States are not only part of the colonial history of the 19th century, but continue to be part of the present colonial structures impacting the Caribbean in the 21st century.⁷

Any assumption or category used to study the Caribbean as a whole, or any individual island, must be challenged and de-constructed in light of the presence of colonial discourses throughout the Puerto Rican history. For this reason, this chapter is intended to help the reader identify how the decolonial and feminist method repositions the inter-subjectivity of the Afro-Puerto Rican woman into a conversation about the Caribbean and its geopolitical struggles. Through a critical historical account, it will become visible as the relationship between the colonial state, the public policies generated by the state government on the island from 1899 to 1956, and the role of religion expands and exemplifies the discussion on sexual citizenship in Puerto Rico. This decolonial and feminist method also helps to explain why a discussion of particular subjectivities is needed to deepens analyses of geopolitical dynamics throughout the Caribbean.

⁷ The Caribbean still struggles with the stems of colonialism in their everyday life. Caribbean people, especially racialized women and the Afro-Puerto Rican women have not achieved total decolonization within its economy, politics, in the way they perceive their sexuality, and how they perform their spirituality.

In the same vein, through this chapter I wish to assert that, although American citizenship has been imposed on Puerto Rico since 1917, it must be considered in the discussions on the historical and present struggles in the Caribbean. In the same way, through this chapter I wish that the Afro-Puerto Rican women are aware of the need to consider Puerto Rico as part of the Caribbean. This move will make possible for us to position Puerto Rico within a major geopolitical history, while allowing us to rearticulate narratives with emancipatory potential that will help us to continue defining and challenging the concept of sexual citizenship applied in Puerto Rico.

It is important for the Caribbean people to identify how the colonial discourses about restrictive code of "decency" have affected the process of identity formation for Caribbean citizens, and been informed by the geopolitical dynamics of power, control, and stigmatization over the female body. Also that the colonial empires that invaded the Caribbean have systematically overshadowed its heterogeneous nature through the insertion of a different understandings of citizenship, race, gender, and sexuality.

Through the implementation of this colonial understandings of sexual decency, historical bodies have been subjected to physical, ideological, emotional, and religious violence. Additionally, the Caribbean must be reflected as a geographical place where thousands of indigenous people and African slaves were slain by the colonizers' systematic exploitation. It is within this context that Afro-Caribbean women continues to accumulate racialized intercultural conflicts, as if these were the embodied fruits of colonial plantations still in production.⁸

Puerto Rico, as part of the Caribbean, has not escaped the oppressive geopolitical dynamic and aftermath of colonization of the body and the mind that has commodified our

⁸ Antonio Gaztambide, *La invención del Caribe a partir del 1898: Las definiciones del Caribe revisitadas* (Rio Piedras, PR: Universidad de Puerto Rico, 2008), 2.

combative responses to a gratefully acceptance of imperial commands. Puerto Rico has confronted more than five hundred years of colonization starting with the Spanish invasion of 1493. The Spanish colonial rule included Christianization through colonial missionary activity and the establishment of the European way of life on the island. This two-fold colonial strategic plan functioned as a normalizing agent through which the colonizers stripped Puerto Rico of its natural resources and its inhabitants. As a colonial enterprise, the Spaniards brought their understanding of the world/system ideology; an ideology that brought the modern capitalist values of liberalism, eurocentrism, *machismo*, racism, ethnocentrism, and the destruction of the natural environment of the Caribbean.

After the Spanish-American War between the United States and Spain the Treaty of Paris was signed on December 10, 1898. Through this diplomatic agreement Spain was forced to cede several territories under its rule, among them Cuba and Puerto Rico.⁹ This means that in addition to this period of European colonization, Puerto Rico has also endured a hundred nineteen years under the *pax Americana*. The neocolonial activity on the island by the U.S. empire, among other things, was justified by the implementation of a colonial invasion led by an understanding of a "civil religion."

The United States government embarked on a missionary quest to remove the heritage of Catholicism within the island through the introduction of Protestantism, as a way to legitimize a different social, political and cultural regime. After more than five hundred years in which Catholicism the religion of the state, the United States implemented the separation of church and state. The introduction of Protestantism was used to break with the core beliefs about sacraments, priest's confessional authority, and the Catholic Church as divine authority. The enforcement of

⁹ Luis Rivera-Pagan, *Essays from the Margins* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 45.

an understanding of individual salvation, accompanied by the political and theological concept of “civil religion,” granted legitimacy to any political decision in the name of God.

An example of how the “civil religion” functioned happened eight months before the U.S. *occupation*. On July 13, 1898, in New York City, seven missionary organizations of different denominations, among them Presbyterian, Methodist, Disciples of Christ, Baptist, Congregational, United Brethren, and the Christian Churches, met to divide the Puerto Rican map into different *missionary fields* to which each denomination was responsible to evangelize.¹⁰ Thus, the participation of these denominations was vital in the plan of colonial expansion and invasion of several territories.

These two empires (Spain and the United States) are responsible for keeping Puerto Rico under colonial status for more than five hundred years, through the strategic blending of their expansionary agendas and religious ideologies of a conquering God. The imperial vision of a conquering God has not only allowed our colonizers to invade the island, but also the body, mind, and spirit of the Puerto Rican. The particular case of the U. S. invasion and their oppressive understandings of race, gender, sexuality, and citizenship allow them to create a comprehensive colonization program that also affected deeply the spirituality of the islanders in general. For the purpose of this project, the Afro-Puerto Rican women and the diasporic African heritage in the island, are going to be seen as sexualized object that went through a further specialized surveillance and stigmatization.

¹⁰ Samuel Silva Gotay, *Protestantismo y Política en Puerto Rico 1898-1930: Hacia una historia del protestantismo evangélico en Puerto Rico* (Rio Piedras, PR: Universidad de Puerto Rico Press, 1997), 113.

Afro-Puerto Rican women's bodies as epistemological source

Recognition of important events about the colonial history of Puerto Rico allows the analytical space to reposition the subjectivity of the Afro-Puerto Rican woman as an epistemological source within the discussion of sexual citizenship. Following the Frantz Fanon line of thought, it is the colonizer who continues to create the colonized subject and who continues to manipulate her/his identity.¹¹ Thus, the term, "Afro," is incorporated into this work, as a necessary decolonizing lens that counters destructive political manipulation within the identity formation. Using the Afro-Puerto Rican women as a source of knowledge, is not only a decolonizing act but also a feminist one, since it allows us to de-stabilize combined ideologies present in the concept of sexual citizenship that support racial subordination and gender stereotyping of Afro-Puerto Rican women.

One of the ways to counter racist and patriarchal colonial ideologies is to recognize the African diasporic heritage reflected in the culture and religiosity of Puerto Rico. Also to know that great part of that diasporic African heritage was repressed, and thus manifest differently in order to survive. An example of one African diasporic heritage that is still present in Puerto Rico is the *Santería* religion, the creolization of the African Yoruba culture and spirituality. In this sense, it is also necessary to understand that the diasporic African culture that manifested itself in Puerto Rico, and which I claim can be a liberating tool, does not possess the same qualities and attributes as those exhibited on the African continent.

Therefore, in this work, the importance of the term, "Afro," does not reside in the recovery of an original African identity. Rather, I seek to highlight how the colonial history of Puerto Rico included the repression of that part of our *mestizaje/mulatez*. In other words, the

¹¹ Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 2.

incorporation of the "Afro" it is not a reclamation of the African diaspora bloodline, but an affiliation of the awareness of how racism has functioned in the island and the systematic appropriation of our particular, yet diverse, African cultural heritage. Being that this a full act of intentionality, and acknowledging racism as a factor of our structural system, the identity signifier, "Afro," in this work will be discussed particularly around Afro-Puerto Ricans women whose capabilities have been impacted due to racism.

Now, in order to understand how the marginalization of Afro-Puerto Rican women has worked, one needs to grasp the idea that racism is not the only oppressive discourse at work in this situation, as sexism is clearly working with other oppressors such as classism, heterosexism, citizenship, ethnicity, gender normativity, all of which are embedded within colonial activity. Puerto Rican women, in general, have experienced inequalities due to a patriarchal society and androcentric system throughout history, but not all of them have experienced them in the same manner and level.

Thus, being women and black means subjugation under colonial system that often maintains their impoverishment, lower levels of education, illiteracy, less remuneration for their work, and limited access to health care.¹² This is the case of the Afro-Caribbean woman, who, because of the fusion of racism and sexism, has become more vulnerable, and marginalized. Other marginalized groups such as homosexuals, lesbians, transsexuals, intersex people, gender non-conforming and all sexual people,¹³ have been also falling into the trap that sexual citizenship creates and have not have the opportunity to nourish their identities and spiritualities freely.

¹² Reiter Bernd and Kimberly Eison Simmons eds. *Afro-Decendance, Identity, and the Struggle for Development in the Americas* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 232.

¹³ Inclusive term for all kinds of sexualities in Barbados.

The critical discussion of the colonial history of Puerto Rico and the sexual status of their citizenship, together with the inclusion of Afro-Puerto Rican women's subjectivity, also allows me to identify how some decolonial theorists, even with the sincere intentions to signal gender disparities within the decolonial theories, have relegated the significance of Puerto Rico as the last colony of the Caribbean.¹⁴ Even in works that address Caribbean struggles, the participation of Puerto Ricans or the inclusion of Puerto Rico as a topic of consideration, have been underrepresented.

Another reason why the discussion of how sexual citizenship has impacted Afro-Puerto Rican women is because it enables our critical lenses to identify what Nelson Maldonado-Torres calls “colonial heterogeneity.” This concept refers to the various forms of dehumanization based on racial ideas about social dynamics that emanate from the racialized groups.¹⁵ One example of colonial heterogeneity is the racist ideologies and practices among racialized subjects like, in our case, the Puerto Rican women. It can be a common occurrence to hear us identifying ourselves as light brown, dark brown, *mulatta(o)*, *mestiza(o)*, brunette or white, in order to reject, consciously or unconsciously, the category of black. This means that a black Puerto Rican woman may not necessarily identify herself as black or of afro-ancestry in hopes to avoid the stigma, a “lower” status, discrimination, and racial stereotypes.

¹⁴ María Lugones states: “Unlike colonization, coloniality of gender is still with us [...]” So two important questions have to be raised: what does it mean to be a colonized women of color in the XXI century? How different will be the decolonial understanding when by shifting the geography and the geopolitics of knowledge people can read from firsthand about colonization rather than studying the colonized? Is not to prioritize one knowledge over the other, but rather to embrace new inter-subjectivities that will engage in the process of decolonizing epistemologies. María Lugones, “Methodological Notes Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” In *Decolonizing Epistemologies: Latina/o Theology and Philosophy*, ed. Ada María Isasi- Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta, (New York: Fordham Press, 2012), 75.

¹⁵ See more of the ‘colonial heterogeneity’ in Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Sobre la Colonialidad del Ser: Contribuciones al desarrollo de un concepto,” in *Giro Decolonial: Reflexiones para una diversidad epistémica más allá del capitalismo global*, ed. Santiago Castro-Gómez and Ramón Grosfoguel (Bogotá: Siglo del Hombre Editores, 2007), 127-167.

A census is an accurate method employed to demonstrate an identity appropriation within racialized territories. The last census conducted in Puerto Rico was completed in the year 2010. At that moment, Puerto Rico' had a population of 3,725,789 residents. Around 2.8 million (75.8%) the "white" ethnic group, 12.4% choose the "black or African Americans," 7.8% "Some other race," and 3.3% selected "Two or more race." Interestingly, a 0.5% of Puerto Rico's residents are "Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islanders," a 0.2% are "Asian" and a 0.1% are "American Indian Alaskan Native."¹⁶

Of the 3,725,789 inhabitants lived in Puerto Rico in the 2010 census, 1,338,889 men and 1,486,211 women for a total of 2,825,100 citizens marked the white ethnicity. Of the same total, 231,794 males and 229,704 women for a total of 461, 498 marked Black or African American ethnicity. In the same vein, 59,436 males and 62,810 women for a total of 122,246 marked the two or more races ethnicity.¹⁷

This census shows important results that have important implications when speaking about the Afro-Puerto Rican woman as an identity category. The composition of the census, in terms of the racial categories it offers, shows that it was not created to take into account the complexity of Puerto Rican *mestizaje/mulatez*. No category offers the opportunity to identify as a mixed or mulatto, which may indicate that many of the citizens chose to identifying themselves as white rather than identifying as black. In the same vein, the preference of marking themselves as white before black offers a rationale on how the colonial racist influence is geared in our system which makes the discussion about race and racism decrease in visibility.

¹⁶ More information about the Puerto Rican census in <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/cph-1-53.pdf>, accessed on 10/28/2017.

¹⁷ More information about the Puerto Rican census in <https://suburbanstats.org/population/how-many-people-live-in-puerto-rico>, accessed on 12/3/2017.

In other words, the category of our *mestizaje/mulatez* is not offered as an option within the creation of the census by the United States, that reflects the traces of racist ideology in the creation of the census that not embrace racial diversity. On the other hand, the selection of self-nomination of the majority of the Puerto Rican as white, knowing that our *mestizaje/mulatez* is composed of three races mainly—white, indigenous and black— reflects traces of our colonial state in which, in the face of the absence of the *mestizaje/mulatez* as a racial category, we opt to select the white race over the black race. The same dynamics and results occur in the census carried out in 2000, with close to 3 million of the 3.8 Puerto Ricans living on the island declared themselves white.¹⁸

Even so, this work does not fall into the identity politics' trap of imposing nor arguing that the Afro-Caribbean identity is the original identity for black women in Puerto Rico or that Afro-Puerto Rican women must recover their identity as a singular or static concept. My intention is to re-position the identities of the Afro-Puerto Rican women from the margins to a central aspect within this particular narrative, as a symbol of colonial resistance today. Since there are many efforts that have contributed to the eradication of African heritage in Puerto Rico, the re-claiming of this heritage will not arise organically, but can emerge through an intentional exercise of our agency.

Though this chapter I examined the geopolitical history of the Caribbean as one that have direct impact to the body of Afro-Puerto Rican women and one that has intervened in their process of identity formation. I have offered a rationale for understandings how the invasion of the United States and the implementation in Puerto Rico of a moral and colonial religious

¹⁸ “Censo reabre el tema racial en Puerto Rico, donde 80% se reconoce blanco” in

Primera Hora News Paper, <http://www.primerahora.com/noticias/puerto-rico/nota/censoreabreeltemaracialenpuertoricodonde80sereconoceblanco-374557>, accessed on 10/28/17.

understanding can also impacted the process of spiritual nourishment for Afro-Puerto Rican women.

Finally, I have discussed precondition in need of examination for how to undertake this analysis from the subjectivity of the Afro-Puerto Rican woman that allows us to begin to form a counter-narrative that liberates us from the restrictive morality and the search for colonial "decency." This analysis has also allowed me, to identify ideologies such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, androcentrism, patriarchy and classism simultaneously operating within the complicated process of searching for holistic sense of health and wholeness. It has also allowed me to identify other oppressive social dynamics that are generated from racialized communities which produce intra and intercultural conflicts.

All of this discussion will serve as a platform and critical lens for the development of chapter two, in which it will be pointed out how sexual citizenship has impacted the Afro-Puerto Rican woman's body through the restriction on autonomy over their bodies, as the "civilizing project" implemented by the United States during 1899 and 1956 was governed by a restrictive moral code which directed the Afro Puerto Rican woman to aspire to colonial "decency."

Chapter II

Civilizing the Body: Imposing Decency

Disciplinary power is both restrictive and productive. It does not depend on public displays of force; rather, it penetrates into the most intimate recess of people's lives. Ultimately, it disciplines them into a self-discipline.

-Eileen J. Suárez Findlay

Any discourse that establishes the boundaries of the body serves the purpose of instating and naturalizing taboo regarding the appropriate limits, postures, and mode of exchange.

-Judith Butler

This chapter critically revises events, strategies and colonial political discourses, that generated narrative of dependence, self-hate, inferiority, and lack of intellectual capacity of self-governance during the implementation of the "civilizing project." Of course, that does not mean that during that time Puerto Rico passively accepted colonial abuse. It is important to affirm that throughout this time we find fearless leaders who have fought against oppression because of race, class, and gender.¹⁹

Even so, the colonial value of decency imposed by the United States has had the ability to often clouded our vision with the purpose of not identifying disrespectful behaviors applied toward us from the empire. Has often conditioned our audition to respond to the Anglo-Saxon narrative, and has influenced us to reproduce stereotypical narratives that are based on racial and gender prejudices. But, before discussing how the colonial influence through the restrictive morality has impacted the Afro-Puerto Rican women on a large scale in the past and in the present, we must start to ask why the control of the women's bodies, the manifestation of their sexuality, and the implementation of heterosexual gender roles so frequently functions as the foundation of an imperialistic agenda?

Judith Butler offers a feminist conceptualization of bodily subjugation that helps one to understand why the point of departure of colonial and neo-colonial strategies rehearse gender relations and regulate sexual behavior as a way to consolidate power.²⁰ Here Butler is using the

¹⁹ *La Masacre de Ponce* (1937), *La insurreccion del 1950* led by Pedro Albizu Campos and the Nationalist Party against the "Yanki" empire, Lola Rodriguez de Tió, considered one of the earliest Puerto Rican feminist and who was deported to Cuba for the composition of *La Borinqueña Revolucionaria*— a revolutionary national anthem against colonial powers,— Luisa Capetillo, a feminist writer, labor leader, and anarchist who was the first women to wear 'masculine' pants challenging societal gender binaries and the accompanying androcentric discourses towards women, Lolita Lebrón, the Puerto Rican independence activist who led three others to attack the U.S. House of Representatives with guns in 1954, Oscar Lopez Rivera as the oldest political prisoner in the Caribbean with thirty-five years of being charged with seditious conspiracy against the United States inducted earlier on this year 2017, among others.

²⁰ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (London: Routledge Press, 1993), 117.

disidentification conceptualization to counter some of the normative understandings regarding the social identification of gender and gender identities. At the same time, Butler is considering the threats of the normative gender identities, claiming a strategy that can be socially used to *disidentify* ourselves from some of the policies that are used in the service of a political goal.²¹ Butler further stresses her claim stating that “a gender identification can also be used to repudiate or participate in a race identification; what counts as "ethnicity" frames and eroticizes sexuality, or can itself be a sexual marking. ” This implies that, it is not a matter of relating race, sexuality and gender as if they were separable sources of power because it has been the separation of the sources of power one of the political strategies to sustain normative ideologies and regulatory policies in neoliberal states.²²

Butler’s analysis takes seriously how the interconnection between normative ideologies regarding gender function and how it becomes important to rearticulate them to enable the visibility of oppressive dynamics functioning simultaneously. Butler’s *disidentification* concept might help us while is used at the service of a particular struggle like the “civilizing project” and a particular context like Puerto Rico. In other words, my use of Butler’s conceptualization of body subjugation, does not go against her understanding or the concept itself. Rather, I am expanding the possibilities of it use while making a similar yet particular claim.

My use of the *disidentification* conceptualization examines how the U.S. “civilizing project” generated a religious, political and cultural *disidentification* to promote a specific colonial agenda. This was enforced with the identification with the diffusion of colonial values of family composition, female reproduction, gender roles, and Afro-Puerto Rican women’ decency during 1899-1956. Thus, thee examination of how the “civilizing project” implemented

²¹ Butler, 4.

²² Ibid., 116.

by the U.S. in Puerto Rico produced political, religious and cultural *disidentification* of moral, and cultural values that were present in the colonized territory can facilitate the reconceptualization of the colonized body.²³ That reconceptualization will take form through the reiteration of hegemonic norms, moral codes, and “civilizing projects” that are going to be sexualized and marked as indecent in order to be manipulated or removed.

Discussing Butler’s theory of *disidentification* also helps us to identify how during the “civilizing project,” social prejudices and hierarchies were delineated by codes of decency and indecency that enabled the colonizers to differentiated exclude, or perpetuate racial boundaries, masculinity, compulsory heterosexualism, and reproductive sex.²⁴ In other words, the of *disidentification* that consolidated the economy of repudiation²⁵ and rejection of racialized subjects, homosexuality, and non-reproductive sex. Through this chapter, I will offer examples of how the *disidentification*, through a considerable period of time also generated an economy of rejection of the diasporic African heritage. This rejection was achieved through an effort of strategic colonial *deculturization*, reinforced through Protestant evangelization, and political policies that were based in restrictive moral codes of sexual decency.

In the way that the sexual citizenship was implemented in Puerto Rico, and in how the *disidentification* functioned during this period—1899-1956—one can grasp how women’ bodies were affected in multiple ways. Although the value of colonial decency had to be embodied by all women, only white, upper-class, and married bourgeois women could continue to have procreative sex.²⁶ In other words, while women in general could continue having children if they

²³ Butler, 4.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

²⁶ As I will explain further, poor and racialized women were advised to take contraception, to apply for a sterilization or to only have one child.

wanted, the type of behavior that seemed to be accepted as decent, on an implicit way, was the heterosexual family composition, religious and legally married with a worker or military man with a wife who was expected to work at home. This model of decency offered often the possibility of having an extramarital relationship with a colored prostitute.²⁷

For the Afro-Puerto Rican population, which consisted of 75 to 80 percent of women who were native born Africans or people who had African decent at the time of the invasion,²⁸ the implementation of the colonial value of decency was related to an education and public policies that promoted non-reproductive sex, through specific campaigns of control of women's behavior, contraceptives, and sterilization. Through the sustained colonial effort and the production of cultural *disidentification*, the U.S. colonial enterprise retained and sustained the stigmatization against the Afro-Puerto Rican women with great force.

Women' Sexual Behavior: Prostitution

The legacy of colonialism is ever-present among Puerto Ricans and it is manifested in multiple socio-cultural spheres, as it is passed from generation to generation. An example of this can be found in the Puerto Rican classification of music. Puerto Rican cultural music such as *bomba* and *plena* are seen and experienced as a native aspect that colonization could not snatch, often used to manifest our patriotic selves. Notwithstanding, one verse of a *plena* says: "The whore I know is not from China or Japan, because the whore comes from Ponce, comes from the neighborhood of San Anton." ²⁹

²⁷ Briggs, 40.

²⁸ Christina Duffy Burnett, and Burke Marshall eds. *Foreign in a Domestic Sense: Puerto Rico, American Expansion, and the Constitution* (Durham, NC: Duke Press, 2001),161.

²⁹ As quoted in María Sola M. ed. *Aquí Cuentan las Mujeres: Muestra y Estudio de Cinco narradoras puertorriqueñas* (Rio Piedras, PR: Ediciones El Huracán, 1990), 65. The original stanzas of this *plena* said: "La plena que yo conozco no es de China ni de Japón, la plena que yo conozco viene del barrio de San Antón"

Through this musical piece, one can see an example of how the Puerto Rican cultural pride is complex and deep. It is complex and deep because this example shows the dialectics between the historical struggles of Puerto Rican women living in the town of Ponce in 1890, and the preservation of this type of music used as a method of celebration of the Puerto Rican culture and resistance. It shows how the colonial value of decency was present among the different cultural manifestations, including those that were used as a method of resistance and how the intersection of racism, sexism, and patriarchy was disproportionately affected Afro-Puerto Rican women.

The regulation of women's sexual behavior was part of both period of the Puerto Rican history of colonization, but also very importantly to recognize the research conducted by U.S. officials on the island in Puerto Rico in 1890. Often, Puerto Rican who wanted to exercise their ownership of their bodies, particularly the black and poor women, were seen as women of bad reputation, sexually loose, and with an unrespectable femininity.³⁰

Thus, the re-conceptualization of an ideology of respectability of the body for the Puerto Rican women purportedly necessary. These notions about how to control women's sexual behavior and reproduction were the ones that motivated the implementation of the "civilizing project." that Project was based on the pursuit of sexual "decency," through the reinforcement of hetero-patriarchal gender roles, marriage, reproductive sex, and monogamy. That is why prostitution represented for them a huge ethical problem, considered to be immoral and indecent problem to be solved.

Within the colonial context, sexual decency was thought of as a respectable value that regulated and controlled the directly or indirectly the women's autonomy over their bodies. The

³⁰ Eileen J. Suarez Findlay, *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico 1870-1920* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 96.

colonial value of sexual decency was also based on a hetero-normative ideology that educated women on how they should or should not act, dress, speak.³¹ Immediately after the invasion in 1898, a moral and political campaign against prostitution, and an Afro-cultural cleansing began.

Prostitution, as a way of living, has always been a contradictory phenomenon that can be interpreted in different ways.³² Prostitution can be seen as an act of forced labor, and economic accumulation, or as a sexual action that empowers women, in other scenarios is often used to transgress gender roles, colonial expectations of decency, and a way to recover the autonomy over their bodies. Prostitution has also been a field of the mediation of powers, and a challenge to social structures, both of which dictate gender roles, family composition, and sexual reproduction within marriage as the correct and only way to express women's sexuality.³³ It is interesting to note that, although part of the expectations of the "civilizing project," which consisted in educating towards sexual decency, the U.S. government on the island decided to regulate prostitution instead of trying to eliminate it. The regulation of prostitution also served as an opportunity for scientific research and as a way to validate further policies and regulations over the Afro-Puerto Rican body.

The use of scientific research within the "civilizing project" included necessary tools employed to extend authority, especially as it relates to women's bodies.³⁴ The gathering of "scientific" information about diseases transmitted through prostitution was important because,

³¹ Many liberationist movements, on their seeking of liberating practices, fall into the heteronormative trap of forgetting those people who did not fit into the imperial socio-economic model condemning them to the margins. The use of "decency" functions as a critique of that imperial model of normalization that was applied to Latin America and the Caribbean. See more in *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), 27.

³² Suárez Findlay, 22.

³³ Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science and U.S. Imperialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2002), 26.

³⁴ Briggs, 20002, 27.

not only gave them power over women's bodies, but also generated "scientific" information that was vital to reinforce racial and gender stereotypes. These stereotypes, then, justified official measures that restricted the possibility of self-governance and sexual freedom. Medical inspections, registration, and incarceration in locked hospitals were some of the measures applied among prostitutes.

One example of how the "scientific" data generated the opportunity to reinforce racial stereotypes was the statement of U.S. representative Slyton.³⁵ He stated that "people who lived within 20 degrees of the equator could neither comprehend nor support representative governments constructed on the Anglo-Saxon plan."³⁶ In his view, the tropical weather seems to heat the blood, enervating the people who inhabit these regions, making them in consequence savages who were incapable of logical and intellectual capacity.

Another example of how the officials of the United States justified the lack of self-governance by the Puerto Rican through the regulation of prostitution and the data generated, was a statement issued by Gavin Payne, an associate of the Red Cross who stated that: "Puerto Rican did not fear venereal disease because they are not even cognizant of their discomfort... the disease was ubiquitous on the island [and] roughly coterminous with the ontological state of being [of the] Puerto Rican."³⁷

Puerto Rican people were understood as literally synonymous with disease and their cognition as impervious to a desire for health. Moreover the stigma for the racialized Puerto

³⁵ The book does not offer his full name and the party that he belongs.

³⁶ Christina Duffy Burnett and Burke Marshall eds. *Foreign in a Domestic Sense: Puerto Rico, American Expansion, and the Constitution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010, 160.

³⁷ As cited in Laura Briggs p.60 the primary source or original report of Gavin Payne comprehend three letters (see Puerto Rico, Office of the Attorney General, Special Report of the Attorney General of Porto Rico to the Governor of Porto Rico 48-49); one for the military (see "Vice problem in Porto Rico," RG 393, box I, folder 80, I-4 9, National Archives I, D.C.) and one in Social Hygiene, the journal of the American Social Hygiene Association (see Payne, "The Vice Problem in Porto Rico").

Rican women worsens when Gavin Payne also stated that “the hunting fear of venereal diseases is not as common among Porto Rican men in temperate zones.”³⁸ Clearly, all Puerto Rican were in need of being controlled from transmitting venereal diseases but the racialized women was the one that was “attempting” towards the health of the U.S. soldiers, the ones who were haven sexual relationship with prostitutes.

The scientific findings compiled with the help of the regulation of prostitution also concluded that tropical people were physically sick because they live in warm weather, and are infected with tropical parasites. In this sense, venereal diseases were foreign diseases that could not come from tempered zones.³⁹ These scientific exercises with venereal diseases were also developed to protect, in a gendered way, white military males in Puerto Rico. Also, through the United States’ health concern of contagion with malaria, cholera and yellow fever, they were able to tell people in general, what kind of sexual activity were allowed under the perimeters of the “decency” standards.⁴⁰

These practices exemplify the moral apparatus of U.S. government officials who enforced norms to portray Puerto Rican as women in need to be controlled, along with the regulation of prostitution that went from an issue of sexual immorality to a sanitary issue and health concern, which ultimately led to the “data” that reinforced racial and natural differences, were creating more differences between the colonizer and the colonized and between men and women.

The importance of identifying how the intersections of patriarchy and sexism is also to possible examine the fear of the elite Puerto Rican men of that time who thought that decent

³⁸ Ibid., 59.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Briggs, 33-35.

upper class women would reproduce the freedom embodied by female prostitutes inside their homes. Thus, males within the elite joined the campaign of the “civilizing project” and the education of sexual decency in order to preserve the status of female subordination inside their homes.⁴¹

Moreover, it is necessary to identify the role played by religion within the “civilizing project,” and the influence in promoting the moral values of the U.S. empire within this issue of prostitution and the control of women’s sexual behavior. One example of how an interpretation of the Christian narrative blended with the colonial pursuit of women’s sexual decency was expressed by a group of religious women named the American Women's Christian Temperance Union.

The American Women's Christian Temperance Union was an organization that allied itself with governmental policy in its civilizing agenda towards the sanctification of womanhood. The combination of government policy and religious interpretation by these women was complex. This organization felt the need to defend and help colonized women who could not restrain their sexual instincts, but who, at the same time, were being persecuted by the government's policies and the constant repudiation of feminism within the local newspapers.

The AWCTU's alliance with the U.S. government, under the guise of protection of the Puerto Rican women, establish a subgroup called Police Women’s Reserve Cop. This subgroup was in charge of helping the official the Police to identified prostitutes, and their places of gathering, while also distributing “Clean Your City” posters, to the different cities on the island.⁴² The civilizing campaign sponsored by the government, along with men within the elite men in Puerto Rico and the AWCTU's religious support, was the basis for creating the next step

⁴¹ Suárez Findlay, 84.

⁴² Briggs, 48.

that would “scientifically” prove the need for female repression on the island. It was no longer just a governmental and religious affair; it was also a scientific enterprise that would have repercussions on health policy.

According to Laura Briggs, in 1918, the United States military and the AWCTU worked together to enact a repressive prostitution policy in Puerto Rico. This policy required the mandatory incarceration of all prostitutes on the island in order to “control” the dissemination of venereal disease among the U.S. soldiers in the island. Thus, this policy not only stated that Puerto Rican women were in need of punitive restrictions, but also they were in need of care.⁴³ A year after the imposition of a second-class citizenship to Puerto Ricans in 1917, all prostitutes had to undergo a weekly medical examination with non-sterilized metal instruments.⁴⁴ And, although medical records of prostitutes do not specify race, during the civilizing project indecent women discursively “turned black,” regardless of their ancestry.⁴⁵

Also, any behavior, appropriation or manifestation of the Afro-Puerto Rican culture—such as Patron Saint festivals or traditional music, dances, and culinary practices—were associated with prostitution, and hence public stigma.⁴⁶ Even before the United States invasion of Puerto Rico in 1895, the Afro-Puerto Rican dance, *bomba*, was already considered as *bailes de prostitutas* or a prostitute dance by the Spaniards colonizers.⁴⁷ Hence, black women and any claim of the African heritage were banned and used for purposes of social, religious and political persecution through sexual stigma.

Women’s Reproduction: The “Pill”

⁴³ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁴ Suárez Findlay, 89.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 90

⁴⁶ Ibid., 119.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 96.

After World War II—1945—the civilizing project in Puerto Rico evolved. At this time the focus was not prostitution primarily, but health policies of birth control to fight the “overpopulation” in the island. The basic premise or justification for the U.S. government to move policy in this direction was the concern with the high level of poverty, caused by the overpopulation on the island. This move includes a re-education on family planning, paying attention to the supposedly modern notions to the family. These notions of family were based on keeping the family small, with one or two children. Thus, it began a promotion of using contraceptives to avoid tropical contagious diseases, and/or immediate sterilization.

Another example of how the *disidentification* process was implemented can be seen in the idea of overpopulation that was developed over the time, and through stages. In the case of overpopulation, what the *disidentification* was working was with cultural notion of abundance by having large families regardless of class status. What would change would be the implementation of which "modern conceptions" would be educated so that the composition of the families was small with one or two children, by reminding them of their class and racial status of being black and poor.

The U.S. government on the island, already influenced by the notions of the negative impact of tropical weather on the islanders, noticed that the Negro birth rates were too high. This led to the belief that the overpopulation “crisis” was due to the excessive births of working class women, and the poverty produced within the lower classes. Then, after 1930, the rationale changed, as it was no longer the excessive births and its relation to poverty. Now, the problem of overpopulation was due to the hypersexuality of racialized woman, who needed to be helped and

the controlled.⁴⁸ But, regardless of reasoning, the problem of overpopulation was seen as responsible for the increase in poverty, delinquency, homelessness, prostitution, and diseases.⁴⁹

In 1933, Governor James R. Beverly offered his own rationale about why the control of the overpopulation was necessary. He expressed:

I always have believed in restricting birth rates among the lower and most ignorant elements of the population. More intelligent classes voluntarily restrict their birth rates while the most vicious and ignorant reproduce themselves tremendously.⁵⁰

This perspective offers much clarity about the thinking behind the American administration on the island. But, Beverly, following an imperial agenda, understood that foreign thinking did not carry the same weight as the views of a native regarding the influence to convince women to use contraceptives. At this point, two of the great native allies joined the government to promote birth control demonstrating the complexity of oppression that women were confronting at that time.

One was Luis Muñoz Marín, a respected politician who is considered the “Father of modernity” in Puerto Rico and the architect of the Commonwealth. The second one was the teacher, doctor, poet, journalist, and member of the Communist Party of Puerto Rico, Afro-Puerto Rican, José Lanauze Rolón.⁵¹ The native politics of both the right and the left allied themselves with the U.S. government to promote birth control among Puerto Rican women, particularly black and poor women.

After multiples campaigns to promote the pill as the safest birth control for poor and racialized Puerto Rican women, sterilization became another path towards the solution of the overpopulation in the island. Storefronts started to distribute a film and handbills about

⁴⁸ Briggs, 83.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 84.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 91.

⁵¹ Ibid.

contraception and a film entitle: "*Los Tiempos Cambian.*" This film was distributed to all the movie houses on the island to promote a smaller family composition through contraceptive methods.⁵² At the same time (1950-1956), North American physicians and pharmaceuticals ran tests on Puerto Rican women with the hormonal birth control drug, Depro-Provera. One of the side effects of this medication was the possibility of "hormonal sterilization" due to the high hormonal doses.⁵³ This pill could also increase the risk of cancer, due to the excessive progesterone in Afro-Puerto Rican' women. By 1939, 34% of women were using birth control, and by 1956, 74% of women on the island were using birth control and spermicides.⁵⁴

Through these examples one can see how the bodies of black and poor women were used for the development of the imperialist agenda regardless of the health consequences for the women. We also see how the use of science and public policies of the state were directed towards the elimination and contamination of the cultural manifestations and values of the island, and also how local male politicians played an important part in the control population process that not only led women to take high doses of contraceptive, but also led them to sterilization.

Women's Reproduction: Sterilization

Sterilizing racialized women in Puerto Rico was the next step for the United States government in Puerto Rico, in order to take control of the "overpopulation." In 1934, the new American Governor, Blanton C. Winship, was responsible for the passing of a law that legalized birth control and sterilization in Puerto Rico as methods of population control. By 1953, a year after the Commonwealth act was created, 17% poor of Puerto Rican women were sterilized.⁵⁵

⁵² Briggs, 128.

⁵³ Ibid., 129.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 122.

⁵⁵ Ana María García. *La Operación*. Directed by Ana María García. Organización Puertorriqueña de la Mujer Trabajadora, 1982. YouTube version part 1 of 4 min. 6:53. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQN187lfm8I>, accessed on 7/7/17.

The sterilization of Afro-Puerto Rican women was a more abrupt phenomenon than the implementation of contraceptive pills. The quality of planned-parenthood education offered by institutions and doctors who operated on women was almost non-existent or deficient, at best. Ana María García's documentary "*La Operación*" or "The Operation," which includes testimonies from women who were sterilized, serves as an essential resource to see this process within a larger political and economic framework.

The interviewed women, through their nostalgia and regret, expressed the desire to have control over their bodies, and have as many children as they wanted. "The film opens with an interview of an Afro-Puerto Rican woman talking about how many of her siblings had "the operation."⁵⁶ The film has some critical moments when it shows how some of the women were not clear what had happened to them. Some regretted it; some feel that they did not have a choice when it came to sterilization.

With the passing of the time, abortion laws became widespread and the department of health, education and welfare sponsored the "recommendations" for compulsory birth control and sterilization.⁵⁷ Scientists such as the biologist, Paul Ehrlich, at Stanford University and physiologist, Melvin Ketchell at Tufts Medical School suggested putting sterilizing agents in the water and rice supplies heading to third world countries.⁵⁸ This example illustrates the intentionality and zealotry with which the U.S. government was working to control women's reproduction.

It is important to highlight that these laws and discourses received support from local feminist leaders, politicians, and other civic groups. One of these groups, the Puerto Rican

⁵⁶ F&H Film and History: An Interdisciplinary Journal

<http://www.filmandhistory.org/documentary/women/operacion.php>, accessed on 9/30/17.

⁵⁷ Briggs, 146.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 147.

Association Pro-Welfare of the Family, provided financial assistance to women who were encouraged to get sterilized. Private hospitals were an essential part of the mass sterilization process, as well. For example, the Presbyterian Hospital in San Juan would refuse to admit women for their fourth delivery, if they did not agree to submit to the operation.⁵⁹

Through this chapter I have explored how the control of women's behavior through the regulation of prostitution, and the control over women's reproduction through contraceptives and sterilizations were vital parts of the colonial project who produced a *disidentification* of moral, and cultural values present in Puerto Rico as a way to facilitate the colonialist reconceptualization of the women's body.⁶⁰ The reconceptualization took form through the reiteration of hegemonic norms, moral codes, and scientific data that over the time and through sexualization marked as indecent social and cultural notions joint order to bring a new and "modern" way of life to Puerto Rico.

Therefore, attention to medical victimization is one of the ways in which sexual citizenship can be discussed and also a way in which the voices of the racialized victims can be recovered and centralized within the narrative. We should also consider doing a reconceptualization of the present ideology of respectability of Afro- Puerto Rican women by examining the following paradigm. Prostitution in Puerto Rico during 1899 and 1956 was considered by the colonial apparatus as indecent and immoral. It was also related to venereal diseases, hypersexuality, non-reproductive sex, an excess of freedom, uncivilized behavior in need of surveillance, and related to bodies at the service of scientific investigations and military consumption.

The examination of this paradigm—having discussed the geopolitics of the Caribbean and Puerto Rican history of colonization, along with the "civilizing project"—briefly allow us to

⁵⁹ Ibid., 147.

⁶⁰ Butler, 4.

question what religious, social and political values have governed the conceptualization about our ideologies of respectability about the Afro-Puerto Rican female body until today? What if what we consider decent and indecent has been previously delineated by the colonial apparatus enforced on the island through the civilizing project? Who has had the political power to demoralize and othered the diasporic African values, which were also sexualized and considered as prostitute's behavior? Who has taken Christianity as a civil religion to implement oppressive policies in the name of God? We may discover that what we understand as immorality has been the result of the *disidentification* of our sense of agency and that of Afro-Puerto Rican women to create moral and ethical understandings of human rights and citizenship.

In the light of these questions it becomes necessary to understand how the different intersections of powers and oppressions have created de-identification of our agency of deliberate these categories individually and in community. The critical examination of these question and Puerto Rico's colonial history will allow us to centralize marginalized voices. These voices can offer relevant nuances for us to employ in our critical thinking, and can also offer new paradigms that can be used to reject the colonial value of decency while embracing new notions about the sacredness of the Afro-Puerto Rican women's embodiment.

Chapter III

Re-articulating the Body: Constructing Wholeness

“Diasporic subjectivity is always in movement, disrupting, re-creating, and mobile in its representation, covering the past with the present for a new future.”

– Emma Pérez

“The oppressor has permission, but the oppressor underestimates us”

-Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro

Up to this point, I have discussed the character of Puerto Rican sexual care which reflects the intersection of sexism, classism, racism, heterosexism, regulated sexuality through the imposition of a sexual citizenship, and a fractured identity and spirituality. I have also discussed concrete examples of how these intersections were manifested in the body of racialized women in Puerto Rico from 1899 to 1956. Additionally, I have traced how the process of long-term *disidentification* manages to change some social, cultural and religious notions in order to introduce new values within a conquered territory. This process also achieves in the long term the *disidentification* with cultural notions that together with the racist colonial ideology, achieves the possible rejection of African diasporic traditions on the island through the sexualization of and the cataloging of them as indecent.

Focusing on the present time, this chapter aims to explore how the use of certain strategies or tools can help the Afro-Puerto Rican women to continue their journey toward healing from the historical struggle of the past, while continuing to wrestle with the colonial legacy of the present. One of the objectives of this chapter is to present the idea of the everyday feeling of wholeness as a process that enables awakening and transformation. The process of wholeness is understood as a constant and daily search for integral well-being. This daily process of achieving wholeness can enable the healing process and the empowerment of women to thrive.

In the face of neocolonial reinventions that are especially crafted to preserve the in/moral value of 'decency,' and restrict ownership of women's bodies, Afro-Puerto Rican women have consistently been creative in seeking ways in which they can nourish their spirituality, in a manner that does not retain the millennial dualism between the spirit and the sexual

manifestation of the racialized flesh. As I stated before, the body is never a neutral entity in the face of oppression. Instead, the body becomes the site of manipulation, structural oppression, and commodification. Throughout this chapter, I employ a method towards an ethic of wholeness that, above all, integrates the embodied sexuality as a spiritual value of sacredness. This becomes the first steps in the development of a more complete sexual ethic of wholeness for Afro-Puerto Rican women.

Within this thesis wholeness is defined as a process of a live-giving awareness of agency. What is important is the process rather than the final purpose, for the Afro-Puerto Rican women to comprehend that, using their agency, they can start to free themselves from restrictive moral codes of decency that does not allow them to explore their spirituality, along with their free sexual performativity and control over their bodies. Through a reflection of Frantz Fanon's understanding of agency, I have come to understand and embrace that the demiurge that the Afro-Puerto Rican women "seek or need" resides in the magic they have within. "Magic that also lies in their bodies, and in their bodies alone."⁶¹ Because the personal is political, and the political personal, this process can lead to creative emancipatory practices for themselves and other women that are deprived of a educational space.

Pivotal to this *under construction* definition of wholeness is the realization that the focus of the journey is to learn and incorporate aspects of the African heritage within practices and socio-religious engagements. It is a way of shifting away from the white Eurocentric influence on the definition of spirituality, based in the binaries of spirit and the flesh, and to actually see spiritual manifestations in the exercising of human sexuality. Incorporating the heritage of the black inter-subjectivity can enable us to see the sacredness within us.

⁶¹ Fanon, 138.

As highlighted in a previous chapter, the control of sexuality has been a key strategy of both colonizing empires, especially that of the United States, that was used to manipulate and violate our bodies, ideologies, and spiritualities. As a consequence, these restrictive notions of sexuality, rooted within politics, religious beliefs, philosophical understandings, and policy-making, have led the way to the exclusion from the rights to citizenship of Afro-Puerto Rican women.

According to Mimi Sheller, to reflect critically about sex along with citizenship is to assert the insistent embodied *corporeality* in every political practice.⁶² It is crucial to be aware that beneath the history of heterosexual/modern families' formation, supported by the great empires, lies the reminiscences of the slave era, the myth of racial superiority and the capitalist mentality of power and consumption. On the other hand, in light of the experience of how the Afro-Puerto Rican body has been mis/used, the body is, then, at the center of the conversion on freedom, emancipation, identity formation, sexual education, and spiritual transformation.

Consequently, because the process of granting citizenship has been combined with restricted notions of decency within sexuality, a critical reflection of black female bodies must be part of any liberationist movement. As Mimi Sheller states, "the body must be used as an embodied counter-reality, as a site of daily remembrance, as a site of new connections with our Caribbean heterogeneity."⁶³ A further discussion of body-politics must pay attention to the interbodily relations that are fundamental to human dignity and freedom, not only within the political but also within the religious sphere.

⁶² See Mimi Sheller, *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012) 242.

⁶³ Sheller, 145.

I argue that the decolonial re-interpretation of the value of decency, engrained in the political ideology of sexual citizenship, needs to embrace diversity in genders and gender expressions. In the same way, the variations within sexual behavior must also reject heteronormative dualism that sustains gender roles and patriarchal behavior. My decolonial re-interpretation of sexual citizenship is aware that a further investigation of this topic will need an individual and the collective sense of empowerment that comes with the acknowledgement of the multiple manifestations of gender, especially in their manifestations of the erotic subjectivities that challenge normative culture and its values of imperialism, heterosexism, patriarchy, homophobia, and misogyny.

In light of this re-interpretation it is important to have a commitment to open educational and religious spaces to feminist/queer/decolonial reinterpretations of sexual citizenship so that these enable discussions on race, gender, and sexuality along with political, imperial power and control over free bodies. In the face of the neoliberal modes of imperialistic violence, we must stand for structures that promote individual and collective awareness of our historical account of colonialism.

Afro-Puerto Rican women have daily challenges to overcome. Every day offers the opportunity to continue, individually and collectively, fighting to be connected with our bodies, and to decolonize our minds, while the corrupted system is weakened. The spirituality we affirm with our bodies is strengthened when, in the midst of what can be called as 'indecent' acts, we rediscover that there is a more just way of life. With these thoughts in mind, I explore some strategies that will help us in our dialectical journey between denunciation and the daily experience of wholeness.

Restoring the sacredness of the Cultural Afro-Caribbean

One of the most important steps within the daily journey to experience wholeness, which rearticulates the body politics and the spirituality of Afro-Puerto Rican women, is the recovery and appropriation of the cultural Caribbean. It is necessary to continually transgress the division between what has been historically considered sacred and the secular geopolitical contradictions.

Doing so, the study of what we know today as “The Caribbean” becomes complex and contradictory, as one analyzes the different stages in the development of this territory. There are different ways in which we can begin understanding the different narratives about the Caribbean in order to counter the “official” narrative with our inter-subjectivities. Now, let’s discuss the ethnohistorical, the geopolitical and the cultural Caribbean, as a concrete example of the analysis I am proposing.

The ethnohistorical Caribbean is the narrative that gives importance to the general history of slavery and sugar plantations throughout the Caribbean, which includes the accounts of multiple slave revolts.⁶⁴ Even when this narrative incorporates the struggles for independence under the Spanish domination present in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico, it is clear that these struggles are not studied as tools that could have tangible implications in the present.

Since 1493, the Caribbean was proclaimed to be part of the "new world," and after 1898, and the Spanish-American War, the Caribbean, and particularly Puerto Rico, became part of what is known as the geopolitical Caribbean. The study of the geopolitical Caribbean refers to the significant imperial dynamics used after the Spanish-American War, especially after 1945.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Antonio Gaztambide, *La invención del Caribe a partir del 1898: Las definiciones del Caribe revisitadas* (Río Piedra, PR: Universidad de Puerto Rico, 2008) 8.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

Even though the geopolitical Caribbean, as a category of study, is generally used to point out the diplomacy and militarism in the Caribbean, the category often departs from an homogenization of the Latin America struggles and resistance, which then served as a link to discuss the Caribbean.⁶⁶

The last stage referenced by Caribbean scholars to describe the invention and development of the Caribbean is the cultural Caribbean. This facet of the Caribbean is the one that needs further exploration, as it will allow for the redirection of this peripheral narrative to the center, as an important aspect of the foundation of the ethics of wholeness for Afro-Puerto Rican women. The cultural Caribbean focus arises from the historical accounts from the plantations and slavery. These hegemonic accounts of imperialistic oppression and struggles focus on the voices of the Africans who were forcibly transplanted from their homeland to work in the Caribbean, the territory to which the most significant number of African slaves were brought.

This narrative shows how Caribbean societies, including Puerto Rican society, were transformed and developed by the inclusion of the African diaspora, enabling invasion, conflict, and oppression, disguised as progress and civilization. Due to the mixing between the African culture and the indigenous culture, with Spanish, counting with intra-migrations from other islands in the Caribbean, the African cultural aspects became a unique culture of their own.

The "civilizing" project was imposed in order to suppress this newly formed African culture that started to develop in the Caribbean. In other words, the "civilizing project" tried to remove what was left of the African culture in Puerto Rico after centuries of racial oppression carried out by the Spanish empire. In this sense, as I mentioned earlier, this project does not

⁶⁶ Ibid.

claim an original African identity or culture. Rather, this work promotes a critical engagement that analyzes, through decolonial and feminist lenses within Afro-Puerto Rican inter-subjectivities, the historical accounts that do not include the remaining, diverse African heritage.

The study of the cultural Caribbean transforms the limits of the Caribbean as territory into the notion of awareness of the Caribbean diaspora to the United States. It also recognizes the *mestiza/o/mulatez* ethno cultural identity in full, without leaving aside the black race and the diasporic African heritage on the island, and the Caribbean as a whole. Although this perspective acknowledges the European and indigenous heritages, it gives greater and intentional emphasis to the historical and cultural heritage of the Africans due to the centuries long stigma rejection and structural oppression attached to it. Nevertheless, the study of the cultural Caribbean that Dr. Gaztambides is proposing lack the discussion of how these examination address gender identities and the study of sexuality that I have been discussing.

This Afro-cultural vision of the Caribbean not only recognizes the geopolitical struggles of the Caribbean, but also puts greater emphasis on the stories of *cimarronaje*, *cabildos*, plantations revolts led by female slaves, their daily struggle, their spiritualities, and their cultural legacy throughout the Caribbean. This focus leads to the empowerment of Afro-Puerto Rican women, as part of the journey towards wholeness.

This interpretation of the cultural Caribbean is also reflected in contemporary, creative and artistic endeavors that describe the struggles of slave women, focusing on their rebelliousness, leadership and emancipation. An example of this can be found in the novel *Las Negras*, written by the essayist and the award-winning novelist Afro-Puerto Rican Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro. In this novel, Arroyo Pizarro includes four short stories—*Wanwe*, *Matronas*, *Saeta*, and *Los Amamantados*—through which she discusses, using feminist lenses, some of the

struggles and experiences of female enslaves in Puerto Rico during the XIX century.⁶⁷ While the "official" history of Puerto Rico has only preserved the narratives on slavery, as it pertains to the experience of the black male slave, throughout this work, Arroyo Pizarro intentionally denounces hierarchical powers by highlighting the intersection between race, sexism, and classism.

Within these stories, Arroyo Pizarro recaptures the agency, experiences and struggles of the black female slave and their essential protagonist roles within the emancipation process in Puerto Rico. This reinterpretation of enslaved women's stories represents one example of how the cultural Caribbean can be understood and rearticulated. Since this type of analysis emerges from the inter-subjectivity of an Afro-Puerto Rican, it offers us key points to continue our educational search while, at the same time, empowers our self.

Restoring the sacredness of the Afro-Puerto Rican women's body

Acknowledging that culture is not static but naturally changing as we evolve, while restoring the sacredness of the Afro-Puerto Rican women's body, it is imperative to recover the resilient and transformative spirit of the ancestral African legacy within our history. In carrying out this intentional and political exercise, the Afro-Puerto Rican women, as an ethical subject, will enact transformative and unapologetic moral agency with a creative discussion based in our much-needed inter-subjectivity. Changing the way in which we see and engage the past, through the revision of the narratives in which Afro-Puerto Rican women is claiming authority, transforms our blurred lenses for new critical perspectives. The lenses then enable the desire to share with others, the information that will re-educate and re-write historical accounts for future generations of Afro-Puerto Rican women.

⁶⁷ See more in Yolanda Pizarro Arroyo. *Las Negras* (Delaware: Boreales Press, 2013) .

These new lenses cause one to ask different questions, study the story with suspicion, and re-locate the narratives of displaced communities to the center. These process, tied with the culture, traditions, music, and legacy of the African diaspora, the Afro-Puerto Rican woman feels comfortable with her history, body and spirituality. In addition, we will be able to identify characters, images, or events within history that serve as example in the process of feeling the sacredness in our bodies.

An example of a character that can empower us in blending the sacred with the sexual is the Orisha *Oyá* from the African Yoruba spirituality, or *Santería* in the case of Puerto Rico. What does it mean for Afro-Puerto Rican women to look to the female Orisha *Oyá* as a resource for identity formation, spiritual nourishment, and sexual empowerment? This constitutes a powerful anti-hegemonic exercise for the reticulation of the sacredness of the Afro-Puerto Rican women's bodies.

As mentioned earlier, part of the strategic move from the U.S. empire "civilizing project" was to ban African cultural expressions and label them as indecent. They also began to relate and connect African culture and manifestations on the island, such as rituals, dances, music and food, with indecency and prostitution, making every African expression worthy of social, religious and political punishment.⁶⁸ Because of that, Afro-Puerto Rican women have struggled to find nurturing ways of performing their spiritual rituals without having feelings of fear, regret or shame. There is an embedded feeling of inadequacy that must be intentionally addressed by the Afro-Puerto Rican who wishes to reclaim that cultural heritage.

The Yoruba tradition and spirituality become relevant in this work because these were developed in the Caribbean diaspora. Also, the Yoruba tradition represents one of the

⁶⁸ Suarez Findlay, 119.

spiritualities that embraces blackness as sacred and divine. Like many African spiritual practices Yoruba spirituality offers a different epistemology that embraces the human being in a holistic way. In this sense the physical and the metaphysical are always imbued with the spirit of God.⁶⁹

While the Yoruba religion has survived, it has been marginalized and demonized. Some of its essential beliefs contrast with our Western notions of European Christianity, as there are no understandings of life in binary oppositions, for example, there is no difference between the sacred and secular. It provides images of strong female divinities that are charged with sensuality and sexual drive without the shame attached to any sexual expression within the Western understandings, and the metaphysical is as equally vital as the material world.

The Orisha Oyá becomes relevant to this work because she is a goddess with a strong sexuality who is not defined by the Eurocentric binary of sacred and secular. According to the Yoruba tradition, Oyá is confident, strong and aware of her capabilities and agency. She does not allow herself to be intimidated by cultural schemes that place men as stronger than women. Her own sense of security is not simply reflected in the way she sees herself, but also in the confidence of her followers.

While Oyá is considered stronger than other male Orishas, is also known by her fluidity within gender roles. She is identified as *obirin t' o t' ori ogun da rungon si* (woman that grows a beard to go war).⁷⁰ She transgresses gender roles by being a warrior, unafraid to fight and able protect her people while assuming characteristics delineated for females, males, separately or

⁶⁹ Vanessa K. Valdés, *Oshun' Dughters: The Search for Womanhood in the Americas* (New York: SUNY Press, 2014), 2.

⁷⁰ Mercedes Cos Sandoval, *Worldview, the Orishas, and Santería: África to Cuba and Beyond* (Florida: University of Florida Press, 2006) 245.

simultaneously. This fluidity is something that shows and thus promotes balance and interdependency.⁷¹

Oyá represents an alternative model of womanhood that can counter the Eurocentric influence that came with Christianity—the official/non-official religion in Puerto Rico— also counters the image of asexuality, traditionally countering the virgin asexual model, countering socio-religious restrictive constructions of gender and sexuality. Then, why Oyá is relevant as a source of empowerment, spiritual nourishment and expression of sexuality?

Interestingly, Puerto Rico is considered by the *santeros* and *santeras* as Oyá's land. She is the one that rules over the land. And because Oyá rules over our island, her daughters who also share her qualities are strong, powerful, fearless, and unashamed of their sexual expressions. I have also found a sense of practical wisdom within the Yoruba tradition, specifically with the role and characteristics of the female Orishas, who are grounded in spiritual and cultural understanding of the sacredness of blackness. Thus, a source of empowerment is found in this tradition for those seeking the traditions that portray black imagination, spirituality and identity formation in order to see our reflections in those elements that are able to empower us. This alternative way of womanhood incorporates the spiritual with the sexual embodiment. Ownership over Afro-Puerto Rican women's bodies make us/them rethink all of the Christian Eurocentric restrictive moral values of decency and envision a future full of possibilities. The use of black imagination and spirituality frees us from all the restrictions imposed on us regarding our sexuality.

⁷¹ Oyeronke Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere* (New York: SUNY Press 2003), 83.

Incorporating the sacred embodiment as one of the values of the ethics of wholeness will offer a non-binary understanding of how we can engage act in harmony with how we feel. Understanding that our body is sacred and that bodily manifestations, including sexual manifestations, are part of that sacredness, placed within us by God at the time of creation, we will be able to develop a counter discourse that has socio-religious impact. From the value of sacred embodiment, other values emerge that can strengthen us as individuals and as a community. Some of these values are acceptance, free expression of our sexuality, worth, and bravery. In addition, the understanding of the sacredness of our bodies pushes us to have a holistic spiritual development, that will lead to a deeper comprehension of concepts such as love, justice, empathy, care and solidarity. We will then put these at the service of ourselves, our families, and our communities.

The choice to love and feel our bodies in the same manner that will enable our spiritual growth is a political act, an exercise of radical spirituality within a structure of domination and colonial control. The reason why I insist on being connected with the African ancestral and diasporic heritage is due to the fact that we need to recognize, once for all, the sacredness in the whole self and the spiritual connection we have with God through our bodies. Acknowledging the sacredness within us, represents a fundamental key for an ethics of wholeness, experienced through our daily awakenings.

Conclusion

Through this short work I have been trying to do several things: (1) I have critically reviewed the colonial and geopolitical history of the Caribbean from the perspective of sexual citizenship imposed to Puerto Rico in 1917. Sexual citizenship is a concept I have utilized to discuss how the inter-relation between race, gender, and sex worked within the imposition of citizenship in Puerto Rico.

Sexual citizenship, being an implementation that seeks to sustain the moral values of the empire, is used to intentionally and systematically normalize and self-discipline colonized the Afro-Puerto Ricans. I assert that sexual citizenship regulates the collective processes that inform what or those who can be sexualized and disempowered within the most vulnerable sectors of society.⁷² Sexual citizenship is achieved through systemic violence against the racialized body that reproduced sexual hierarchies, restrictive moral codes, and the articulation of women's pursuit of "decency."⁷³

(2) Next I have reviewed three different historical instances that have functioned as examples of how that sexual citizenship worked in Puerto Rico. The implementation of a "civilizing project" that particularly impacted and continues to impact the Afro-Puerto Rican woman through the regulation of prostitution through the stigmatization of poor and black women, the control of overpopulation through the introduction of contraceptives (Depo-Provera) and the educational manipulation that led to more than 50% of poor and black women to be sterilized.

⁷² Sheller, 41.

⁷³ Ibid., 9.

(3) And finally, I discuss an example of a reticulation of the sacredness of Afro-Puerto Rican women's bodies centralizing our diasporic African subjectivity manifested in the Orisha Oyá. The feeling of wholeness always will be experienced through the personal and political act of appropriation of our own bodies and through the resistance to the colonial and neocolonial systems at play. For that reason, although my project reflects and discusses the Afro Puerto Rican woman in particular, at the same time, it offers an inter-subjectivity that can be used as a resource or model by other Caribbean women.

Recapitulating also the strategies that have been presented through this work, we can highlight the importance of knowing what aspect of the history of the Caribbean we are resisting. The claim of the Afro-cultural Caribbean is vital to having a base or understanding that looks to the past, offers possibilities to reflect on the present, or use our creativity to transform the future.

I know that this study cannot cover all the potential strategies that can create solidarity links between Puerto Rico and our neighboring islands. Nor can this work encompass all facets of the "civilizing project" in Puerto Rico, such as the implementation of sexual citizenship and the effects on men that were forced to fight for the United States in World War II, migration policies and on the moral codes of decency applied to marriage, motherhood and the female labor force between 1900 and the 1917. For these reasons, I have identified these issues as future topics to be investigated along with the emotional treatment of trauma as a healing tool for Afro-Puerto Rican women, promoting the inclusion of race, and sexual citizenship discussion within the feminist groups on the island, promote the documentation of Afro-Puerto Rican activism on the island. Personally, I have found a limitation within the resources drafted on the island on the subject of race, feminism, care and sexuality, particularly in religious spheres and in theological seminars.

Through my activism with the Pastoral of Women and Gender Justice of the Latin American Council of Churches and The Women Interreligious Network of Puerto Rico, I have shared this concerns and visions with women belonging to other groups that fight tirelessly for the rights of Puerto Rican women. The problem I see is that these groups or organizations are not document their work, achievements, struggles, values, and visions, thus limiting the references for students, like myself, to learn more about the efforts that are made in Puerto Rico.

To conclude this work, I would like to share some final thoughts that have inspired me towards a new understanding of myself and in relation to the historical accounts of colonization in Puerto Rico and its detrimental effects manifested in the society and in the cultural manifestations. Let me just start owning what Marta Moreno Vega has stated in her book *Women Warriors of the Afro-Latina Diaspora*: "To be an Afro-Boricua⁷⁴ is to be an activist and revolutionary by default."⁷⁵ This is a thought that has accompanied me since I have embraced historical, social and religious awareness in relation to Afro-Puerto Rican women. Since the process of self-naming for us is intersected by many streams that stop our flowering, we are determined warriors, lovers of justice, and historical healers.

To claim that identity as a warrior, I had to recognize that I am a daughter of the African diaspora and that it is part of the commitments I have with myself to nurture that part of my *mestiza* identity that has historically been denied. I have had to understand how my spirituality has formed under colonial Eurocentric canons of decency which have not allowed me to explore Afro-Caribbean diasporic spirituality, sacredness, and embodied sexual freedom. As an Afro-Puerto Rican women, and the fruit of many generations of African descendants, it is my duty to

⁷⁴ Another term to refer to the Puerto Rican people.

⁷⁵ Moreno Vega, 91.

internalize the issues of our communities as I create alliances and partnerships with my other Afro-Puerto Rican sisters on the island or in the diaspora.⁷⁶

I have heard the sound of the drums. I continue to hear them each day more closely as I keep freeing myself and, through a political education, experiencing in community the joy of seeing other sisters being awakened. I have learned that Culture is not static. Rather it evolves with our growth, and also that the kind of liberation that comes through the use of critical lenses is our best decolonizing method so that our racialized and still-colonized body will become a new epistemology that will enable us in our daily journey of experiencing wholeness.⁷⁷ Through the historical critical view, the intentional recovery of our autonomy, corporal and sexual identity, and the integration of our African diasporic spirituality and sacredness, we will be able to feel that each day offers us the opportunity to grow, to be empowered, to be reconciled, to be healed, and dream. For the Afro-Puerto Rican women, wholeness is the daily journey of still becoming and flourishing.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 95.

⁷⁷ Moreno Vega, 198.

Afterword

“The horizon is the icon of the utopias that we aspire to reach someday. It is the line in the distance toward which we move [...] the horizon just like utopias is always present and distant. Our gains are the steps on our paths and our footprints are our legacies, the path made of dreams”

-Ana Irma Rivera Lassén

“The horizon...in the distance toward which we move...”
Political and Spiritual Decolonial Vision

The intentional combination on restoring the sacredness of the Caribbean through a critical discussion of the Afro-cultural Caribbean, and the restoration the sacredness of the Afro-Puerto Rican woman's bodies produce awakening, excitement, hope, and empowerment in the present and for the future. We have discussed theoretically how it is necessary to incorporate aspects of our diasporic African heritage into our daily process of experiencing wholeness. With that in mind, I would like to offer practical examples of how to incorporate them into our own spiritual nourishment, integral growth, and sexual empowerment.

As explained briefly in chapter two, one of the expressions of cultural identity and resistance within the island has always been the use of native music. Also, I have explained how, within cultural musical expressions, colonial concepts of decency have also been amalgamated. This contradictive yet understandable entanglement, prevents the use of native music as a tool of resistance for the Afro-Puerto Rican woman in the island in many occasions.

For this reason—and as part of the restoration of the sacredness of the Afro-cultural Caribbean and the restoration of the Afro-Puerto Rican women's bodies—the next step with ethical repercussions will be the understanding of resistant within the sound of the drums.⁷⁸ The sound of the drum is vital within Puerto Rican classification of music. Generally, the drum, within the native music, is enjoyed traditionally in spaces of seasonal celebration like Christmas.

⁷⁸ Marta Moreno Vega, *Women Warrior of the Afro-Latina Diaspora*. (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2012), 187.

Within these celebration, the drum is not explicitly charged with the intention of celebrating our African heritage that has been so demonized by religious and conservative sectors of the country.

On the other hand, in the face of the sound and the rhythm of the drums, everybody moves, dances, and enjoys, because to the sound of the drums is attached an intrinsic feeling of playfulness, freedom and happiness. In an analogous way, I am proposing that, just as our bodies recognize the feelings of oppression that the coloniality brings, which that is embedded in our being it also recognizes with greater force, the sound of the drums that rumbles to our entrails.

Thus, the sound of the drums is a hermeneutical key that serves as a symbol and as a literal strategy. The sound of the drums as a hermeneutical key allows a discussion of the Afro-Puerto Rican women's bodies as something with rhythm and fluidity. Bodies that are free, and allowing spontaneous manifestations, including sexual encounters, and bodies for which the colonial influence does not matter. Rather these bodies acknowledge that there is something else inside of us that, like the rhythm, will always make us move, while experiencing happiness in our movements.

The sound of the drums as a hermeneutical key also allows a literal retrieving of the African diasporic cultural dances in Puerto Rico. As I noted earlier, something that the Spanish and the United States empire had in common within the process of colonization was to catalog the native dance linked more to the African heritage diasporic—*bomba*—as the dance of prostitutes, so as to stigmatize the female and black body, along with the African heritage in the island.

Being that this is a historical factor, one of the ways in which we can experimentally embodied cultural heritage is by learning to dance *bomba*, understanding that this cultural

expression was performed as one of the multiple signs of imperial resistance. It will also be the awareness that when the drums are used amidst celebratory events, the diasporic African heritage is being kept alive, both implicitly or explicitly.

Being able to have the experience of dancing *bomba* will also make the Afro-Puerto Rican woman feel that the rhythmic expressions or spontaneous nonrhythmic expression that are made to the sound of drums, also represent the freedom to experience embodied sacredness. The dance is not only about embodied freedom that can lead to sexual freedom, but also manifested in how comfortable we feel in our bodies and in that freedom, we can feel in every movement we make, which should not be regulated by the restrictive codes of decency.

The positive aspect of this hermeneutical key based on the sound of the drums, makes the communal element arise in a more organic way. To the sound of drums, people dance regardless of race, sex, gender or age. The sound of the drum, calls, unifies, enriches, guides us, connects us heals us, and gives us deeper roots through education.

One of the many reasons why we, the Afro-Puerto Rican women, wake up after an experience of a restrictive formative process is due to the lack of education on the racial issues within the educational system, particularly among feminist groups. This lack of presence of race as a topic of discussion, among other variables, is oriented by the Caribbean myth which assumes that as a result of being a *mestiza* race, racism should not exist in Puerto Rico.⁷⁹ And also, because the colonial heterogeneity mentioned earlier provokes intercultural conflicts among the racialized, it does not allow fruitful discussions about the topic of race.

We, the colonized scholars, have learned from Frantz Fanon and his discussion of racial dynamics that the necessary education to counter the hegemonic discourse will not come or be

⁷⁹ José F Buscaglia-Salgado, *Undoing Empire: Race and Nation in the Mulatto Caribbean* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xii, 183.

granted by the colonizing empire. Fanon has taught us that a political education is needed to overcome feelings generated by the racism of those who attempted to colonize and overtake the culture of the people.⁸⁰ By political education, he did not mean a political discourse. Rather he suggests that people have a safe space of critical education that enables us to open and awaken our minds to be introduced to the world once again.⁸¹ Through a political education, we and future generations, are going to be aware of their alternative history, their agency, and power to transform. This daily awakening that allows us to experience wholeness will not allow us to go back to our old ways of thinking, feeling, behaving, and experiencing the divinity.

Moreover, the sound of the drums as a hermeneutical key will awaken our desire to be politically educated regarding the multiple systems of oppression working concurrently to restrain us. I consider that the historical gap and the lack of political education in the educational system in Puerto Rico have limited us to reflect on the process of self-naming, along and beyond the process of empowerment against patriarchy and androcentrism.

Self-naming in the sense of probing our own self and what does it mean to be a colonized Afro-Puerto Rican woman in the twenty first Century? What does it mean to study the different feminist groups and organizations that have arisen amidst past and present colonial projects in different countries, and to discern how and why these groups may or may not help us

⁸⁰ While I am using Fanon's view of political education, I am also aware of some of the problematic issues that using Fanon's line of thought can bring. While we consider how a political education might look like, it is necessary to be aware of Fanon's gendered approach, mainly discussing colonialism by focusing primarily on the subjectivity of black maleness. Traci West helps us to consider how Fanon often condoned and valorized violence towards white women through his examination of the culpability and desires of some white women that were "longing" for colonial sexual violence by a black male. According to West, this androcentrism can be decentered by discourses of black women's [and women of color] scholarly agendas. Although it is beyond the scope of this iteration of this project, as a feminist project it is necessary to also analyze and further explore how anti-black racism and sexism operate with regard to white women as I suggest intercultural and interreligious engagements as a tool of empowerment needed in the broader freedom struggles of Afro-Puerto Rican women in relation to their context and beyond it. See more on Traci C. West, "Extending Black Feminist Sisterhood in the Face of Violence: Fanon, White Women, and Veiled Muslim Women," in *Convergences: Black feminism and Continental Philosophy*, ed. Maria Guadalupe Davidson, Kathryn T. Gines, and Donna-Dale I. Marcano (New York: SUNY Press, 2010), 157-181.

⁸¹ Fanon, 138.

define ourselves? or meaning proudly appreciate these groups—Feminists, Black feminists, Latina Feminists, Womanists, Third Word Feminists, Post-colonial feminists or De-colonial feminists—and their influence and, at the same time, creatively try to formulate new identity categories? Imagine the analytically expansive potential if one could locate discussions about Afro-Puerto Rican theologies or Afro-Puerto Rican ethics to help us further discuss our struggles, difficulties, rebellions, actions and hopes are insufficiently captured in other identity categories or theories.

Finally, I consider that the hermeneutic of the sound of the drums to be necessary as part of our intercultural engagement, since it allow us to enter a direct connection with other Caribbean groups that also share some elements of our heritage and that are also responding to the same sound of the drums. Thus, combating the colonial heterogeneity that creates intracultural and intercultural conflict, and while working in solidarity, exchanging academic knowledge and cultural wisdom with interreligious and interphilosophical dialogue, it becomes extremely vital to strengthen ourselves, as Afro-Puerto Rican women, who are thinking contextually while aspiring to work beyond our context and across the Caribbean.

Appealing to interreligious dialogue as a unifying tool is one of the most beautiful and fruitful efforts among Caribbean women. For this, the next step to achieve these connections will be to consider feminist groups or organizations with which we can unite and work together. Examples of feminist and queer organizations in the Caribbean are:

-**Code Red Women's Circles**. This organization, located in Barbados, is integrates a conversation about activism between Caribbean women, men and everyone else between or beyond the binary.⁸²

⁸² For more on Code Red, see <https://redforgender.wordpress.com/2014/02/19/photos-code-red-womens-circles/>, accessed on 10/19/17.

- **Jahajee Sisters.** This organization, led by Indo-Caribbean women, committed to creating a safe and equitable society. They are also interested in discussing how the lack of justice in the topic of reproduction for Indo-Caribbean women is not limited to maternity but to a discussion of the different manifestations of sexual assault, immigration hardships, and poor access to healthcare. "To address all of these intersecting issues, we began using the "Reproductive Justice" framework in our work to end gender-based oppression."⁸³

-**J-FLAG.** This organization founded in 2013 in Jamaica promotes values of equity, social justice, and social integration for the LGBT community in Jamaica which does not enjoy rights that protect the community. Currently, Jamaica penalizes same sex relations with ten year sentences in jail The charges are based on homosexual relationships in men as a violation of decency (section .78 of the Jamaican Constitution) and as crimes against nature (Section .76 of the Jamaican Constitution). Homosexuality in women is allowed. This organization, among many aspects, is recognized by the incorporation of the concept "All Sexual" which refers to the sexuality in continuous development for bisexuals, transgender and other minority communities. It is responsible for lobbying for legal reforms and provides space to facilitate socialization among groups and provides a space for spiritual nourishment.⁸⁴

- **The Pastoral of Women and Gender Justice of the Latin American Council of Churches.** This group of Puerto Rican women that aims to attack with community and ecclesial work all those social stigmas and aggressions towards women. This organization attends to others issues such as sexual assault and domestic violence. This

⁸³ For more on Jahajee Sisters, see <http://www.jahajeesisters.org/>, accessed on 10/19/17.

⁸⁴ For more on J-FLAG, see <http://jflag.org/>, accessed on 10/19/17.

organization creates ecumenical and interdisciplinary teams to help, from a gender perspective, to rethink "masculinity." The Pastoral Ministry of Women and Gender Justice works with the, which is made up of black women and indigenous peoples, who emphasize new ways of doing theology, counteract discrimination, racism, marginalization and sexism.

- **The Women's Interreligious Network of Puerto Rico:** This non-profit organization promotes the ideal of a better world. It is an ecumenical, interreligious and interphilosophical group that creates bridges of dialogue and concrete proposals for action to overcome the religious and racial stigmas that seek to divide a society by its differences. One of its objectives is to accompany women in their pilgrimages and to propose alternative paths that promote tolerance, justice and love. This project has been a collaborating axis for the implementation of education with a gender perspective in the Department of Education in Puerto Rico. In addition, the Interreligious Collective of Women in Puerto Rico, and many others, have organized dialogue events that promote the story of the challenges, the experiences of women from their communities of faith and their spiritualities.

My participation as an administrative member of the Women Interreligious Network of Puerto Rico, has definitely transformed the way I engage with other religions, philosophies and spiritualities. The WINPR is confirmed by women of different denominations within Christianity—Catholics, Protestants y Pentecostals— *Santeras*, Scientific Spiritism members, and Muslims who nourished my spirituality and strengthened my racial, feminist and decolonizing commitment in Puerto Rico. It has definitely been a transformative experience that

I have used as a liberating tool, not only for myself, but for those who have witnessed how different religious women can coexist in respect, love and solidarity.

Another critical task is to identify organizations in the United States that are also working hard to be in solidarity with the Caribbean diaspora in the U.S. much like the CCCCDI⁸⁵

- **Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute (CCCDI)**. This cultural institute was founded in 1976. The founder of the institute is an Afro-Puerto Rican woman named Dr. Marta Moreno, who is an activist, educator, and speaker desirous of preserving the different African cultural manifestations and, above all, to offer a political education which foments a political transformation.

I offer these alternatives as an example to propose one consideration. The differences between the Caribbean people are due to ignorance and lack of interest in knowing what is happening in the neighboring islands, and due to a limited colonial and individualistic vision by the Afro-Puerto Ricans. That is why we must unite in our emancipatory and liberation efforts in our context and beyond. Having this clear, it is also necessary to understand that this strategy comes with many limitations.

The limitations we may encounter will be that many feminist or religious organizations or groups do not have official pages through which communication can emerge. It could also happen that, to achieve communication, the connection must be worked out due to the mistrust and prejudice that has allowed that Puerto Rico as an unincorporated territory of the United States. Distrust or prejudice that we have encouraged directly or indirectly. Also, achieving ties of solidarity is an act of love, empathy and transformation that will help to restore the

⁸⁵ For more on the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute, see <http://www.cccadi.org/>, accessed on 10/19/17.

relationships of feminist / queer groups between Puerto Rico and our Caribbean brothers and sisters.

Finally, as I have already asserted, the sound of the drums as a hermeneutical key can give us spaces to establish ties of solidarity in a communal way, allowing us to connect with that aspect of our *mestizaje/mulatez* that is embedded in our being and to which we respond before its call. This approach will allow us to ally ourselves with other Afro-Puerto Ricans in order to share our struggles and hopes to transform future generations.

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