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Cultivating hope through creative resistance: Puerto Rican undergraduates surviving the disasters of climate and colonization

Regina Deil-Amen^a, Julio Cammarota^b, Yareliz Zayas Cruz^c, Gina Pérez^d

^aCenter for the Study of Higher Education, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, USA;

^bDepartment of Teaching, Learning, and Sociocultural Studies, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, USA;

^cUniversity of Puerto Rico, Cayey, Puerto Rico;

^dComparative American Studies, Oberlin College, Oberlin, OH, USA

Abstract

This article details what occurred during a youth participatory action research (YPAR) project involving Puerto Rican undergraduates who at first focused their analysis on how their experiences with Hurricane María could be framed as resiliency and then eventually adopted a framework of resistance to further capture their actions, stances, and practices in response to government neglect. The YPAR generative process facilitated this emergence of resistance by beginning with the presentation of a cultural artifact and then helping students to use creative and artistic means to critically reflect on their experiences and the ways that not just resiliency, but also resistance captured their analysis of the actions of the people and government actors both immediately after the hurricane and in the long recovery that followed.

Keywords

Latinx students; participatory action research; resistance; Puerto Rico; YPAR

[✉] CONTACT Regina Deil-Amen reginad1@arizona.edu Center for the Study of Higher Education, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, USA.

Notes on contributors

Regina Deil-Amen is a Professor and Director of the Center for the Study of Higher Education and Department Head of Educational Policy Studies & Practice in the College of Education at University of Arizona with expertise in qualitative methodologies, sociology, community colleges, culturally responsive practices, and postsecondary access and success.

Julio Cammarota is a professor of education at University of Arizona. His research focuses on participatory action research with Latinx youth, institutional factors in academic achievement, critical race theory and liberatory pedagogy. He publishes on family, work, and education among Latinxs and on the relationship between culture and academic achievement.

Yareliz Zayas Cruz attained a Bachelor's degree in Biology at the University of Puerto Rico, Cayey campus. She has learned much from documenting and analyzing injustices and looks forward to experiencing the Puerto Rico of the future and contributing to culture as a weapon of resistance.

Gina Pérez is a cultural anthropologist and professor of Comparative American Studies at Oberlin College. Her research interests include Latinas/os, youth, militarism, gender, migration, urban ethnography, and the role of faith-based communities in organizing in Latina/o communities, including sanctuary practices and intra-faith and cross-racial solidarity efforts.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Introduction

EL OJO

MARIPOSAS DE ODIO ACECHAN EL ESTÓMAGO LOS OJOS SE DILATAN
ANTE TAN CRUEL ESCENA DONDE LOS PUÑOS SE APRIETAN Y
LA RESPIRACIÓN SE ACELERA LOS CAPILARES EFERVESCEN EN
ARDIENTE ROJO EL CEÑO FRUNCIDO LO EXPRESA TODO DESDE
LA VENTANA VIENDO COMO LA MANO PEGA NO LATE RUGE EL
CORAZÓN DE IRA Y LUEGO,

CALMA

IMPOTENCIA.

(TRANSLATION)

THE EYE

BUTTERFLIES OF HATE LURK THE STOMACH THE EYES GET DILATED
IN SUCH CRUEL SCENE WHERE THE FISTS ARE TIGHTENED AND THE
BREATH ACCELERATES THE CAPILLARIES EFFERVESCE IN BURNING
RED THE FROWN EXPRESSES EVERYTHING FROM THE WINDOW
SEEING HOW THE FIST PUNCHES THE HEART DOESN'T BEAT BUT
ROARS FROM RAGE AND THEN,

CALM

IMPOTENCE.

Yareliz Zayas Cruz created this poem, *El Ojo* (The Eye) as her first class assignment for a critical art-informed Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project implemented by the authors of this article during June of the summer of 2019. Yareliz was an undergraduate who attended the University of Puerto Rico, Cayey where the YPAR project was located within a summer research class and then continued into the following fall semester. Essentially, students entered the YPAR process as an art-based inquiry drawing from the creativity of the humanities and the critical analysis of the social sciences. Therefore, the inquiry involved collecting “data” that might include creative and analytical artifacts, such as poetry, photos, artwork, songs, field note observations and qualitative interviews. The difference between standard research and YPAR is that young people are gathering and creating data that connect with their own lived experiences. Our generative approach to YPAR derives from Paulo Freire’s work on critical literacy in which the emphasis lies on “praxis” to address social problems by uncovering their root causes (Freire, 1970). To get to a more nuanced and complex understanding of such social issues, the YPAR based research class provided a calm, reflexive space—like the eye of the hurricane—for thinking about the experiences of surviving a major catastrophic event in the world. The class provided a space in which young people could perhaps develop narratives that are not dictated by hegemony to find alternative understandings of their world.

We began the YPAR project with a media/creative arts exercise to elicit college students’ experiences of resiliency after the devastation of Hurricane Maria. Resiliency was the main

generative theme of the project, and in the first week of class, we asked students to bring a “cultural artifact” to present in the form of an object or some type of media/creative artwork (i.e. a material object, video, music, drawing, poem, photo, etc.) that represented their responses post-Maria. Yareliz chose to present this poem she wrote. It was our intent that students would develop their own meanings and then, in their process of meaning-making, would generate additional themes that would represent or connect to underlying structures evoking resiliency.

By the end of the course, it was clear that a journey of “conscientization” took place. Paulo Freire’s notion of “conscientization” is the idea that education should help students develop a sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities (Friere, 1970). For example, initially *resilience* was the main generative theme of the YPAR project, due to the devastation of Hurricane Maria. However, with time, *resilience* was uncovered and exposed for its functioning role—to perpetuate complacency and evade the true fullness of the trauma—which was not only the Hurricane itself, but the aftermath experienced. For instance, the poem written by Yareliz ends with the powerful word “IMPOTENCIA,” effectively conveying her experience with inaction on the part of her government—a rescue and relief that did not come quickly as a result of what she interpreted to be incompetence. As a result of Yareliz and the other students gravitating toward this standpoint after beginning their journey in conscientization with their analyses of their own cultural artifacts; the main generative theme transitioned from *resilience* to *resistance*, which eventually led to organizing towards action/transformation.

This article discusses a particular YPAR project involving Puerto Rican undergraduates who at first focused their analysis on how their experiences with Hurricane Maria could be framed as resiliency. Eventually, they adopted a framework of resistance to capture their actions, stances, and practices in response to government neglect. The YPAR generative process facilitated this emergence of resistance by helping students critically reflect on their experiences. Resiliency and then resistance captured their analysis of the actions of the people and government actors both immediately after the hurricane and in the long recovery that followed.

Theorizing resilience

Yarimar Bonilla’s (2020) “The coloniality of disaster: Race, empire, and the temporal logics of emergency in Puerto Rico, USA,” questions narratives of “resilience” and “recovery” that follow catastrophic events like Hurricane María. Her concern is that “resilience” follows the logic of neoliberal governance in which less government responsibility and more individual accountability is lauded and embraced as a strategy of survival. In other words, government officials—from Puerto Rican Governor Ricardo Roselló to U.S. President Donald Trump—abdicate their responsibility and minimize their failure and inability to provide resources necessary for recovery and, instead, praise, invoke, and celebrate the resiliency of the people to meet the state’s shortcomings. Moreover, Bonilla argues that such events throw into sharp relief the pre-existing inequities embedded in the normal taken-for-granted state of affairs. Bonilla discusses how natural disasters don’t create, but simply exacerbate on a

massive scale, the ongoing suffering and normative state of perpetual disaster generated by hierarchies of race, class, gender, and the colonial relationship between Puerto Rico and the USA. Bonilla therefore chooses to focus “not on what Hurricane Maria has caused, but on what it has revealed: namely, how it has laid bare the forms of structural violence and racio-colonial governance that had been operating in Puerto Rico for centuries” (p. 2). The state of emergency facilitated by the hurricane turned into a state of endurance—an extended waiting game that dragged on for weeks, months, even years—waiting for an anticipated “recovery” that never came to fruition. “Emergency is not expected to be an enduring state,” (p. 3), but it became a slowly unfolding reality:

Everyone waited for the storm to pass, thinking foolishly that the winds and rain would be the worst of it. We didn’t realize that the true disaster was not the storm itself, but what was laid bare in its wake: the neglected infrastructure of an island in crisis, the economic cleavages of a society marked by profound disparity, the naked disdain of an imperial state, and the forms of structural neglect and social abandonment that had already come to characterize this bankrupt colony. (p. 3).

Cultural artifacts of resilience during the state of endurance

In analyzing the process that occurred over the course of this summer class, we used the recordings of the class meetings and the student field notes and other assignments as data. We find that the students at the UPR-Cayey were sharing powerful stories about how they navigated the state of endurance described by Bonilla (2020). In doing so, they put themselves at the center of the research process, which is a core feature of the YPAR approach. By the end of the first week of class, their assignment was to bring in a “cultural artifact” to share and discuss that represented their resiliency to endure the trauma they faced in their experience with Hurricane Maria and its aftermath.

Students chose to either bring in created objects as their artifacts or create new artifacts—art that reflected their challenges. Either way, they gravitated toward creative means to express their resilience. Students were extremely emotional. A few were silent for the first several days of class, unable to speak of their trauma. Some were crying about being separated from family while others lamented over their feelings of hopelessness, insecurity, and the fear of losing loved ones. As was the case with Yareliz’ cultural artifact—her poem, “El Ojo,” the artifacts reflected the students’ experiences with Hurricane Maria and feelings of trauma and loss. Eventually, however, as the YPAR process unfolded over the course of the summer term, it produced an example of the type of hope that can be generated by a people whose identities and willingness to struggle for self-determination have survived the disasters of climate and colonization.

At the start of the process of students presenting their cultural artifacts during the first week of class, the theme of waiting was one of the first to emerge prominently in how the students remembered that time. What they shared highlighted not just the trauma of the storm, but of the waiting as well, and the meaning that waiting held for them. It was a waiting marked by loss and uncertainty, two themes embedded within the way students conveyed the waiting process. Karelys, for example, shared her experience in her presentation to the class, as she

held the bottom halves of two colorfully decorated plastic soda bottles turned planters. “It felt like everything was gone,” she said, remembering how she had spent the first few weeks coming to terms with that reality, along with the reality that there was no evidence of how a recovery of what was lost and gone would happen. Students wrote of the initial waiting in poems, like Maria, who wrote about the loss of the ability to contact loved ones and the trauma of not knowing. She recited to the class how the hours of agony passed while she searched for food and water every day amidst the absence of what once was—a home that was now “nada” (nothing).

Buscando algo que comer y agua para beber.

Sin saber de la familia y amigos,

rogando que nada les haya sucedido.

Las horas pasaban sentados en la sala

De lo que era una casa que ahora es nada.

At the end of her poem, Maria broke down in tears, remembering the loss of the family members close to her who had not survived or who had left the island for the States and never returned.

Generally, the students presented images of the destruction, but their words and their stories spoke of the trauma of the waiting and their attempts to survive it, elaborating a theme of survival. One student had decided to pass the time by starting a journal, entering words and a picture of her thoughts, feelings, and observations every day. She expected the entries to stretch for days. Those days stretched into weeks and then into months. The class passed around what had accumulated into two thick books of her documentations, flipping through the pages, both solemnly impressed and delighted by the colorful drawings. Another student, Adriana, painted what she remembered of the lush trees that once surrounded her, and she also cried, remembering how she could not talk to her younger autistic brother, not knowing at first if he was alive, and knowing that if he was, he could not understand what had happened. Gabriel showed two photos of the joy of his friends and he, as they greeted another unsuspecting friend on his birthday, whom they had walked for miles to get to his home, not knowing if their friend had survived the hurricane, not knowing if they would discover that he was dead or alive. They had no cake to bring him, but they lit a candle, sang “¡Feliz cumpleaños!” and played Monopoly by candlelight in a house they were grateful was still standing.

Taken together, the students emphasized how it was the aftermath of the storm that was seared into their memory and that impacted them in a lasting way. Similar to what Bonilla (2020) describes, the students felt how the repetition of doing the same thing day after day without knowing when it would ever end became the disaster that they needed resilience to endure. As Karelys stated to the class in her presentation, “The crisis wasn’t the hurricane itself, but the aftermath,” the struggle to come to terms with having to do what she described as being forced out of necessity to “live the same day over and over again” for months upon months, with no apparent systematic help from their government and no end in sight. Such trauma reflects what Yarimar Bonilla and Marisol LeBrón refer to as “the aftershocks

of disaster. They argue that “aftershocks remind us that disasters are not singular events but ongoing processes” (Bonilla & LeBrón, 2019, p. 3). Indeed, the students narratives and projects reflect not only the aftershocks of the disaster of María, but also underscore “its foreshocks—the sociohistorical context of debt, crisis, migration, and coloniality in which the storm took place” (Bonilla & LeBrón, 2019).

Through the students’ descriptions of being compelled to endure in this way, their sense that they were abandoned, deprioritized, and viewed as disposable became clear. They used words and phrases like “fear,” “frustration,” being “torn apart,” “anxiety,” “shameful,” “dehumanization,” and “neglect,” which we compiled into the theme of feeling neglected.¹ However, students could not identify where the source of that sudden devaluing was located and how it was linked to their prior experiences as Puerto Ricans. What was clear was that, like Yareliz’s poem, the theme of impotence was prominent in terms of the government’s inability or unwillingness to act as advocates for Puerto Rican citizens, and students struggled to understand their place within that system and the types of action they could take to resist within it.

In these incipient moments of the project, resiliency also emerged as a recurring theme capturing the attitude many of the students shared about themselves and others as they described moving from paralysis, fear and despair to collective local action in the wake of Hurricane Maria. One student, Genesaret, presented two videos as her artifacts. One was a short 8-minute documentary film entitled, “Candlelight,” which traces one young woman’s journey through the storm’s aftermath, which highlights her lived experience of the waiting and neglect and how small local communities of people came together on a grass roots level on the island to help each other survive during four months of waiting for the delayed rescue and relief efforts. It is a film described as “a heartfelt tribute to the resilience of the Puerto Rican people.”

A shift toward researching resistance

Transforming that engagement with *resilience* into an engagement with the idea of *resistance* did not fully evolve until a pivotal experience occurred. That experience was their exposure to Casa Pueblo, which is a community-based and place-based organization in Adjuntas Puerto Rico devoted to a self-sufficient and self-sustaining existence that also extended to the preservation of the tropical rainforest in the surrounding regions. The Casa Pueblo visit marked a turning point in the mindset of most of the students. It was after visiting and learning about Casa Pueblo that the students shifted their perspective. They went from a mindset about survival and resilience in the face of this natural catastrophe, toward a more critical realization about the ongoing catastrophe engendered by Puerto Rico’s colonized economy and government. By learning how, decades earlier, this one community had developed an infrastructure to consistently serve their own needs, and even more so when faced with the devastation of Hurricane Maria, students were astounded. They learned the history behind Casa Pueblo’s ability to now sustain itself without being dependent, without waiting for anyone else to come and save them. They learned how the community had

¹The themes that emerged in the coding are bolded for emphasis throughout the article.

to come together to value and fight for that ability against corporate economic interests. Through witnessing the people and history behind this effort, they began to develop a deeper understanding of how creative and sociopolitical resistance can be realized and exactly what that might look like.

The field trip to Casa Pueblo revolved around a pedagogical/research assignment that combined both artistic expression and social science. As mentioned above, this trip solidified the importance of resistance for the students, given the apathy and little concern for the people and their land demonstrated by the colonial government. We instructed the students to conduct ethnographic observations at Casa Pueblo and then write up their field notes about what they observed there in the form of an “observation poem,” which is an example of our effort to integrate art with social scientific data collection. In class they shared their thoughts and poetry in which the students linked this theme of hope to a sense of self-reliance that was unmistakably collective rather than individualized. The students utilized the imagery of holding hands or joining hands to accomplish a state of self-sustaining independence from the stranglehold of a colonial U.S. government that doesn’t care about Puerto Ricans. The poem written by Yareliz Zayas Cruz, is an example of one of the observation poems and represented, for Yareliz, her effort to voice a sense of creative resistance.

De Puerto Rico el corazon
 En casa pueblo y Adjuntas
 Combaten con manos juntas
 Ruinas y demolicion
 Con cultura y educacion
 Gracias a un noble ingeniero
 Derrotan el agujero
 Cultivaron la esperanza
 Con musica y con danzas
 Cuidan la tierra que quiero
 Autogestion comunitaria
 Desde ninos hasta adultos
 Destruyen a los incultos
 Aunque al principio fue solitaria
 Sin ayuda monetaria
 De un gobierno embustero
 Con un mensaje sincero
 Café, libros y artesanos

Todo hecho con sus manos
 Cuidan la tierra que quiero
 (translation)
 From Puerto Rico the heart
 At home town and Adjuntas
 They fight with folded hands
 Ruins and demolition
 With culture and education
 Thanks to a noble engineer
 They defeat the hole
 They cultivated hope
 With music and dance
 They take care of the land I love
 Community self-management
 From children to adults
 They destroy the uneducated
 Although at first it was lonely
 Without monetary aid
 From a cheating government
 With a sincere message
 Coffee, books and artisans
 All done with your hands
 They take care of the land I love

This poem is an ideal example of art combined with social science research produced in the spirit of creative resistance. Yareliz invoked the Puerto Rican lyrical tradition of the “Decima” while creating poetic language similar to lyrics critical of a “cheating government” that provides little in the way of support to “take care of the land.” The people running Casa Pueblo, in contrast, are portrayed as excellent stewards of the land with projects that protect the biodiversity of the nearby tropical forest and promote the use of solar energy to maintain self sufficiency rather than dependence on US energy sources. Casa Pueblo itself represents an integrated approach of creative resistance, as the birth of this initiative used Puerto Rican cultural expressions such as the folkloric dances of Bomba and Plena to persuade the local community to buy into the idea of the project and then subsequently participate. The organization’s grassroots leaders realized that the science they were employing and the resistance against corporate mining and energy takeover of

the region would only be meaningful for Puerto Ricans if it was linked with creative elements of Puerto Rican culture and identity. Therefore, Casa Pueblo offers education on the biodiversity of the local tropical forest, the self-management potential of solar energy and the music, dance and cultural traditions of Puerto Rico. The integration of science, culture and education was and continues to be a way to build a resistance movement focused on promoting independence from the USA.

The field trip to Casa Pueblo influenced Yareliz and other students to include the theme of resistance along with resilience into their next assignment, which was to begin designing a research project. The students divided into four groups to come up with thematic topics all related to their experiences contending with the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, and they settled on the following four: *government negligence*, *psychological effects*, *political engagement*, and *resistance through the arts*. These thematic topics then became research topics for four different YPAR groups (each group had anywhere from 3 to 5 students). The process to arrive at these topics was painful because it required the students to dialogue about trauma imposed by the impact of Hurricane Maria, but as a result of the realizations that occurred during the Casa Pueblo field trip, the students now felt the drive toward hope and transformative action, similar to Freire's notion of critical hope (Freire, 1994).

As evidenced by the data presented above, during the generative process of this assignment, students had begun to realize that the trauma they experienced was not completely tied directly to the hurricane. Government inaction was another form of trauma, which left people waiting, sometimes months on end, for the help to obtain the basic necessities of food, water, electricity and shelter. The dialogue that had emerged from the media/creative arts exercise had also led to other emotions of anger and frustration about governments' (both the island and the federal government) apathy toward the people of Puerto Rico. It became apparent that resiliency was just one of several responses, and that actions after Hurricane Maria also included resistance to the substandard conditions resulting from government neglect. Resistance therefore emerged as another compelling project topic as the students realized that resiliency was just one path, maybe a path toward resistance. The definitions of resiliency and resistance that were then utilized and discussed during class involved the difference between "withstanding" (resiliency) oppressive, potentially devastating, conditions and systems, and "standing up" (resistance) to challenge these same conditions and systems (Yang, 2014).

As students learned in class to engage with the concept of root causes to design their research projects, they were better able to understand more deeply Yarimar Bonilla's analysis of how Puerto Ricans realized they had to give up on the government and be self-reliant, taking up the task of recovery themselves. According to Bonilla (2020), the popular slogan that emerged after Hurricane Maria "Puerto Rico se levanta," reflected the emerging belief that Puerto Ricans didn't need the government; they could do it on their own (p. 8). After the visit to Casa Pueblo, the students finally fully connected those dots. They realized that, in many ways, doing it on their own was what they had been doing all along and conveying through their artifacts. Casa Pueblo stood out to them as a beacon of hope for what could be accomplished if Puerto Ricans learned to rely on themselves rather than on

a neoliberal state apparatus that keeps Puerto Rico as a dependent colonized disempowered group of people.

Yareliz' group research project focused on the political engagement of UPR Cayey students post-Maria. To demonstrate how this evolution from resilience frameworks to resistance frameworks played out, we use Yareliz as an example once again. As students moved forward in their groups to design their research and devise their research questions and methods, the students participated in another pedagogical/research exercise of creating a personal memo reflecting on their own ongoing experiences related to their research topic. As the groups continued their projects into the fall 2019 semester, Yareliz wrote about starting off investigating resilience among her peers at the university:

In June 2019, I began a journey motivated by the interest of investigating issues that involved the university after the passage of María and how the students had been resilient to this natural phenomenon. At the beginning, I did not think that my own experience would be useful for the investigation, but I saw how all of us who participated in it had something in common, we were there, we were survivors, we had cried, and we had gotten up. I liked knowing how others had stories similar to mine, we had used all the resources at our disposal to get out of the storm that had arrived after this hurricane. We had all lost a lot, but we had gained the greatest strength. This same strength motivated me to feel part of everything. It made me an expert in what I was doing, even though this was my first research experience. I felt that I was fully familiar with all the topics that interested us, because we had experienced everything firsthand. This gave an interesting aspect to the experience, since it allows us to give an internal point of view of what we see and feel.

In this memo, Yareliz captures the effectiveness and importance of participatory action research as a self/reflexive and critical inquiry process. She recognizes how the bridge between the research subject and the researcher connects in ways that allow for a clearer understanding of her own experiences and how these experiences become vital knowledge for identifying the collective struggle to move forward. Participatory action research locates expert knowledge in the researched/researcher who then applies the findings from the self/reflexive and critical inquiry to contend with challenges within their own circumstances (Ayala et al., 2018).

Yareliz continues her memo writing about the emergence of resistance in her research, which was particularly visible during the July 2019 protest to remove corrupt Puerto Rican governor Ricardo Rosello from office. Yareliz participated in the demonstrations, observing the resistance expressed by the people through creative/artistic means. Notice from her description that Yareliz felt empowered by the protest and how Puerto Ricans stood up to the government corruption, bleeding the country of vital resources necessary for post María recovery.

My research focus was on politics. I wanted to know the root cause of the slow recovery that still affects us. I thought that politics, poorly managed democratic processes, corrupt government were the basis for poor management in the recovery of the country. So I wanted to investigate this aspect further. How had

politics affected the recovery of my university? How did other colleagues in my university community think? Did they know about our political history? Did this mismanagement cause people to demonstrate against the government? In the course of the investigation, I saw the frustration of the students by the government cuts to the University of Puerto Rico, which prolonged the recovery period of the campus. Frustration because people died and the government mocked. I lived, sweated and exited into the streets, I sang in chorus; “Ricky resigns and take the meeting”, “Fight yes, surrender no”, the revolutionary anthem “Wake up borinqueño, who have given the signal, wake up from that dream, that it is time to fight” and the song that was born of the movement “Sharpening the Knives” to overthrow a corrupt political leader. In the interviews I saw how people lost faith that the government will heal the people living out there in the near future. What I also saw was how a people united and could bring down a giant. I saw how our culture and identity united us, our revelry made those above uncomfortable and we knocked them down. After that, I have hope, that Puerto Rico woke up and is going to defend itself against the injustices of those who govern us, that we set the example and claim what we deserve, and we will continue to do so. Maria made us stronger, and the corruption opened our eyes.

Yareliz speaks of the frustration that she was feeling as well as her peers at the university. The “aftershocks” of Hurricane Maria were intensified by the failed economy instigated through the corrupt Puerto Rican government and US colonization. The University of Puerto Rico system was already experiencing massive budget cuts implemented by the US oversight board (a.k.a Junta) prior to Hurricane Maria. The hurricane then became an excuse to implement deeper neoliberal reforms that would drain the budgets of public universities. Students were also frustrated, according to Yareliz’ research, by the outright lies coming from the Trump administration around the death toll. One month after the hurricane hit Puerto Rico on 20 September 2017, Donald Trump pointed out the “great job” the U.S. government was doing in Puerto Rico and the significantly low, 16 deaths from the catastrophe. Although reports from Puerto Rico refuted this low number, Trump continued to deny these reports and insisted that Maria was not that severe in regards to deaths and that the US government was “successful” with recovery efforts. The final reports from Puerto Rico suggest that more than 3000 people died as a result of Maria, making it one of the worst hurricanes in U.S. history. This high number of deaths occurred from the effects of the hurricane and the failed government response to the medical needs of those injured or ill. Puerto Ricans were indeed frustrated from the diminishing educational opportunities, the lack of government transparency, and the negligence leading to the deaths of thousands.

In her memo, Yareliz references the importance of culture and identity for the mobilization as well as generating unity. She is referring to the rich musical tradition of Puerto Ricans that was born from resisting colonization. The song she mentions, “Wake Up Boriqueño” or in Spanish “Despierta Boriqueño” is a cry for Puerto Ricans to stand up and resist US colonial domination. This song and the others she mentions are prime examples of creative resistance such that creative/artistic expression is used to protest the circumstances of oppressive reality. In fact, “Sharpening the Knives” was created by famed Puerto Rican musicians, Bad Bunny, Residente, and iLe specifically for the movement to oust Governor

Rosello. These artistic, musical expressions function in at least two ways: first, to assert a Puerto Rican identity above and beyond the modes of assimilation attempting to force Puerto Ricans into becoming “Americans.” Second, as Yareliz points out, cultural traditions ground and unify Puerto Ricans around a common identity and community directed toward the goal of liberation.

Yareliz and her work are quoted at length because she poignantly expresses how the YPAR project began with a focus on resilience, yet the historical moment of mass mobilization and protest the students were living through encouraged somewhat of a pivot to think more specifically about resistance. Here are her words from a final reflection on her role and participation in the YPAR project. We will not engage in interpretation of her words since her reflection more than adequately conveys this pivot and creative resistance.

My name is Yareliz Zayas Cruz. I am attaining a Bachelor’s Degree in Biology at the University of Puerto Rico, Cayey campus. My interest in this project stems from the search for resilience in the face of the phenomenon that affected us in September 2017, Hurricane María. My perspective was expanded when I visited Casa Pueblo in Adjuntas in June 2019. In the beginning, they informed and educated people about politics, through our culture. They managed to rise up against the government and stop the mining that threatened their lands and communities. They are currently self-sustaining, without any dependence on government aid. They have managed to have income, electricity, water, research and many successful projects. I began to notice the political impact that culture can have, by significantly increasing the number of people who supported its cause, and how this also applied to current struggles. Seeing this Puerto Rican example fills me with hope that more people can do it. More Puerto Ricans will be able to rise up alone in the face of a new atmospheric phenomenon, and more Puerto Ricans will be able to raise our voice against corruption.

During the investigation, I was able to see how the Puerto Rican reaction changed, how we used the tools at our disposal and formed a resistance against the oppression of poor government management after Hurricane Maria. I remained in the project since my focus was how this atmospheric phenomenon had affected the political participation of the university community of the UPR in Cayey. I continued because even after spending months under blue awnings, houses without roofs, and thousands of deaths, the government continued to demonstrate incompetence in emergencies such as earthquakes and power failures at the island level, among many more. In the course of this project, I learned that Puerto Ricans, just as they did in the past, have woken up to injustices, and they will not remain silent when they are treated unworthily. That the people have already seen what they can achieve if they unite and demand their rights. In short, it was a pleasure for me to be able to document and experience the Puerto Rico of the future and to contribute to it that culture is one of our weapons of resistance.

The reference to hope appears three times in Yareliz’s poem and three more times in the excerpts from her project writings above. Each time, this hope was inspired by the idea of

Puerto Ricans taking collective action, and it was the trip to Casa Pueblo that exposed the students to a concrete example of such collective action.

Early on during that summer class, the students offered a metaphor about Puerto Rico's attempt "tapar una herida todavía abierta" (to cover a wound that is still open). They at first viewed that wound mainly as one created by Hurricane Maria, and they saw how any attempt at even a delayed recovery would be sabotaged by political corruption. They remained hopeful to some extent, but their hope was tempered by a realistic skepticism of both the government and the ability of the Puerto Rican people to rise above a range of deficiencies that they sometimes identified in class discussions—laziness, dependency, ignorance, and a limited and self-interested focus on getting ahead and simply providing for their own immediate families. However, as stated above, after the Casa Pueblo visit, the whole mood of the class shifted substantially. After the visit, students were asked to reflect by writing up their field notes in the form of observational poems, and then we engaged in a "sharing circle" to share and discuss. The sharing circle is an Indigenous methodological approach that foregrounds storytelling tied to the value of place and community and also prioritizes fluidity, trust, and vulnerability (Tachine et al., 2016). The analysis below presents the main coding and themes in the data generated by those field note/observation poems and the discussion in the sharing circle.

Like Yareliz, a new vision of hope had emerged in the minds of the rest of the students as well, as expressed through their sharing and in the observation poems they generated. Their mindset was now oriented toward the resistance that they now saw as possible through autonomy and the collective actions of even small groups of Puerto Ricans working together. Their ideas shifted, represented by words that conveyed a sense of pride, a renewed sense of hope for what can be realized through unity and working together to endure without giving up to build, produce, and create something so self-sufficient, sustainable, and transformative by fighting, by struggling for a common cause, despite the danger of it being suppressed or destroyed. As one student wrote, "Creo que la motivación de la gente me ancla, y me alza el pecho con mucha esperanza, ver un lugar tan autorrealizado ... Sabemos ahora que la autosuficiencia es certeza, que la unión de pueblo, ciencia, cultura es donde empieza. Que al final si nos juntamos, veremos el fruto de nuestras proezas." ("I think that the motivation of the people anchors me, and lifts my chest with great hope, to see such a self-fulfilling place ... We now know that self-sufficiency is certainty, that the union of people, science, culture is where it begins. That in the end if we get together, we will see the fruit of our exploits"). And put simply, Maria's choice to use the word, "Lucha" (Fight), repeated at the end of her poem in the phrase, "A luchar por nuestra isla," captures the spirit of resistance undergirding the students' poetry in a way that was not present in their first presentations of their cultural artifacts.

The students' observation poems also highlighted how they experienced this reality as one of happiness and love (often using the metaphor of the *heart*), and their poems also reinforced how they had experienced this new knowledge as something that had been hidden, or kept from them, something that was previously not known, or not spoken of prior to this eye-opening field trip. Janely wrote, "I believe this place should be more recognized." The

table below details several of these poems in full, capturing the sentiments noted above in bold.²

The students had earlier applied art-informed creativity to their first cultural artifact assignment in a way that reflected their desperate efforts at *resilience*. At this point in the process, they applied it with a different framing. Students now interpreted their visit to Casa Pueblo with an understanding of the potential to apply a combination of science and culture (music, art, etc.) to efforts aimed at *resistance* to oppression and control. In her observation poem, for instance, Celinette uses the metaphor of seeds that are watered to later “grow, transform, and bear fruit” when watered with “resistance.” As a result of their visit, students expressed a transformed view toward a utopian vision for what could be possible, using words like “Eden” used in Maria’s poem to describe this possibility. They framed their realizations following Casa Pueblo as an awakening of sorts about something that “little is said” about, some truth “that the government hides” from them about their own people. Julián goes a step further, using the metaphor of a shrike to convey the precariousness he sees in Casa Pueblo. A shrike is a small but particularly brutal predatory bird known to hunt and kill lizards and small mammals like mice by impaling their prey by the head or neck onto a piece of barbed wire, thorn, sharp branch, or other sharp object. For this reason, they are often referred to as “butcherbirds.” Julián uses this imagery to liken the government to the shrike’s behavior to illustrate the ever present threat of the government ending or “killing” this flourishing “social project” that could “die.” He considers this potential danger as inherent to a project that “danced the tightrope” in which the people of Puerto Rico chose to be self-sustaining rather than dependent on a self-interested and neglectful government - to “be brave and decide whose is Puerto Rico’s delights.”

Introducing the concept of creative resistance

The students used the language of resiliency to describe the admirable ways they themselves, as well as their families, friends and local communities persevered and responded. The evolution of the students’ framing of their experiences was marked by a shift away from resiliency and toward resistance, expanding the undergraduates capacity to analyze broader systemic relationships of economic repression and the consequences of a history of coloniality. This widened their scope of analysis and opened up a fertile space for critical hope to germinate where helplessness once dominated.

It is important to consider how a mindset that emphasizes resiliency fits rather seamlessly with neoliberal ideas about government disinvestment from public goods and services and was actively promoted by the Puerto Rican government. As many writers have noted, by advancing a framework that celebrated the resiliency of individual people, elected leaders abdicated responsibility for the systemic failures that predated the storm and were exacerbated in its aftermath. In other words, by praising Puerto Ricans’ self-reliance and ability to adapt to catastrophic events, the local government both obscured its failure and its complicity in, what Bonilla and LeBrón (2019) describe as “set[ting] the stage for what Puerto Ricans could and would come to expect after María” (p. 9). This

²-bold and italics added by the authors to highlight the relevant text in the table reflecting the themes developed in the coding process.

study, therefore, demonstrates how the students used creativity throughout their process of releasing themselves from the popular resiliency narrative, “Se Levanta Puerto Rico” (Get up Puerto Rico), to engage in meaning-making about resistance without losing the deep-seated salience that their resilience had for them. In fact, we witnessed an energy shift that was palpable when students were able to glimpse an empowering pathway out of the notion of helplessly enduring the circumstances of the aftermath and toward a recognition of their own agency to exert some degree of resistance to systemic injustices.

The YPAR pedagogy we employed in Puerto Rico was critical arts-based, which meant that the students’ creative expressions, drawn from their own cultural resources, became key artifacts for producing generative themes, data, and analysis. It provided a space for critical reflexivity to occur, facilitating a shift away from deficit thinking. Because the project transitioned toward the generative theme of resistance, we consider the students evolving cultural artifacts as representative of a phenomenon we label *creative resistance*. This form of resistance challenges oppressive conditions and realities through the creation of cultural artifacts (i.e. poems, songs, art, drawings, video, stories, photos, etc.) that critically examine oppression and propose alternative, more positive and just ways of being in the world. Creative resistance embodies visions of what we could be and how we could exist absent the oppression that dominates our lives. It is the creation of something beautiful and rare, a unique expression that is personal yet speaks against the intrusive and destructive power of structural domination.

Indeed, this creative resistance resonates with Andrea Nikteé Juárez Mendoza’s observations about the power of what she refers to as “testimonio art”—the combination of artistic production with storytelling—that serves an important catalyst for community hearing through collective memory (Juárez Mendoza, 2020). Creative resistance is a form of praxis because it facilitates reflection on a particular social problem and action through the imagination of creativity. The praxis of creative resistance in this instance was animated by cultural artifacts that revealed root causes to conditions that marginalize and oppress people while imagining new possibilities.

Conclusion

We end this article with the metaphor of the eye. From Yareliz’s depiction of the harm inflicted in the eye of the storm and the impotence that followed in its wake, to the eye-opening revelations offered by Casa Pueblo, the students appear to have moved their gaze from a short-sighted focus on resilience to wider engagement with resistance. To facilitate this shift, students turned the eye of the gaze inward through a YPAR process that opens up a space for self-reflexivity and critical thinking. This, indeed, is no easy task. As students’ creative work and research demonstrate, the political, economic and social conditions that shaped the Puerto Rican and U.S. federal government’s woefully inadequate response post-Hurricane María extended far beyond the hurricane’s aftermath. The waiting, rage, and frustration students conveyed, and the resiliency they summoned to address their most pressing needs, were fertile ground for cultivating the hope and empowered resistance that characterized the largest mobilization of protests in Puerto Rican history in July 2019.

This resistance resulted in not only the resignation of a Governor Ricardo Roselló, but it also highlighted the creative power to imagine and demand new political futures.

As we worked with students in the YPAR class at the UPR Cayey in June 2019, we never could have imagined the mass mobilizations that were to come the following month. In retrospect, however, we now see how students' creative resistance in the form of testimonies, reflections, research questions, and creative projects foreshadowed the rage and empowerment that mobilized the resistance reflected in the protests in July. We also recognize the ways that hope and a commitment to building a different future bind up students' classroom observations with broader examples of protest and resistance on the island and beyond. In this way, the eye of the hurricane, that brings both impending calm and feelings of impotence, is also a metaphor for a prefigurative politics of possibility that is engendered and cultivated in hopeful resistance.

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