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REIMAGINING RECOVERY: DEBT, MUTUAL AID, AND DISASTER GOVERNANCE IN  
PUERTO RICO

by

SARAH MOLINARI

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2021

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Reimagining Recovery: Debt, Mutual Aid, and Disaster Governance in Puerto Rico

by

Sarah Molinari

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## ABSTRACT

Reimagining Recovery: Debt, Mutual Aid, and Disaster Governance in Puerto Rico

by

Sarah Molinari

Advisor: Ida Susser

This study analyzes the politics and lived experiences of debt and climate disaster recovery in Puerto Rico. It examines mutual aid and debt resistance in relation to governance techniques and overlapping crises marked by the U.S. territory's bankruptcy, the aftermath of Hurricane Maria (2017), and culminating with popular mobilizations in the summer of 2019 that propelled the governor's resignation. Tracing the ways that the post-hurricane social disaster and debt crisis are mutually constitutive, I investigate a case of women-led grassroots mutual aid organizing in the east-central municipality of Caguas, Puerto Rico and a political movement calling for a citizen audit of Puerto Rico's \$124 billion public debt. The study argues that while discourses and practices of official disaster governance operate through categories and evaluations that promote individualized resilience, the mutual aid project offers an alternative, grassroots framework of recovery that subverts the effects of austerity, collectivizes social reproductive labors, and engages in a politics of spatial rescue/occupation. I demonstrate that climate disaster revealed urgent questions of debt and bankruptcy and analyze how the demand for a citizen debt audit transformed into a political tool of accountability and reckoning. This study shows how people across generational cohorts and diverse political and class experience strategically engage with the state, expand our understandings of the temporality of disaster, and work through multiple meanings and effects of debt.

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In 2010 I started an internship that became a job at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, Hunter College. At the time I had never taken an anthropology course, nor was I considering a doctoral degree. My work at *Centro* ended up sparking a passion, a political orientation, and a research commitment that led me to pursue graduate studies. This journey began at *Centro*.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

CADTM	Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt
CAM	Centro de Apoyo Mutuo (Mutual Aid Center)
CARICOM	Caribbean Community
CDBG	Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery Program
CDPEC	Centro para el Desarrollo Político, Educativo y Cultural (Center for Political, Educational, and Cultural Development)
CLT	Community Land Trust
CNA	Centro Nuevo Amanecer (Center for a New Dawn)
DTOP	Departamento de Transportación y Obras Públicas (Department of Transportation and Public Works)
ELA	Estado Libre Asociado (Free Associated State)
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
FMPR	Federación de Maestros de Puerto Rico (Puerto Rico Teachers' Federation)
HUD	U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
IHP	Individuals and Households Program (FEMA)
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
OMB	U.S. Office of Management and Budget
PIP	Partido Independentista Puertorriqueño (Puerto Rican Independence Party)
PNP	Partido Nuevo Progresista (New Progressive Party)
PPD	Partido Popular Democrático (Popular Democratic Party) PRDOH Puerto Rico Department of Housing
SPA	Social Programs Administration
UPR	University of Puerto Rico

*For Mom, for the unconditional love and support always*

*La gente antes que la deuda* (The people before the debt).  
-Puerto Rican activist slogan

## Introduction

Euphoria and expectation permeated the atmosphere around Old San Juan on August 2, 2019. Crowds gathered throughout the city to mark now ex-Governor Ricardo Rosselló's climactic departure during the *Verano Boricua* (Puerto Rican Summer),<sup>1</sup> also known as #RickyRenuncia. The mood was bittersweet—a celebration of a people's movement that began with the *Colectiva Feminista en Construcción's* (Feminist Collective in Construction, or *La Cole*) call to protest that overthrew the governor in just two weeks meshed with a sense of uncertainty.<sup>2</sup> People waved all kinds and colors of Puerto Rican flags in the air. Some demonstrators struck kitchen pots, chanted, and danced on and around the police-fortified barricades outside *La Fortaleza* (the governor's mansion), claiming public space that the police violently dispersed protestors from each night. Others periodically checked their phones for news about the legislative confirmation process deciding the next in line for the governor's seat. Demonstrators raised phone timers into the crowd, counting down the minutes and seconds before five o'clock when Rosselló officially stepped down from office and exited *La Fortaleza*.

The struggle for dignity that marked #RickyRenuncia did not begin or end with the governor's resignation. People had taken to the streets and plazas of Old San Juan that day to celebrate Rosselló's resignation, cautiously wait, and protest what they knew was coming, including Pedro Pierluisi's short-lived, unconstitutional term as governor (Dennis 2019).<sup>3</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> All translations into English, unless otherwise specified, are my own.

<sup>2</sup> *La Cole* has been a central protagonist of feminist and queer anti-debt resistance since its founding in 2014. Philosopher Rocío Zambrana argues that *La Cole's* tactics target the state and capital and seek to “trace, name, and address the impact of debt/austerity differentially,” especially among Black women in Puerto Rico (Zambrana 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Pedro Pierluisi was democratically elected governor in 2020. He is called the “vulture governor” because his professional trajectory as a lawyer and lobbyist is marked by conflicts of interest. For example, he previously served

initial social unrest mounted in July 2019 when Puerto Rico’s *Centro de Periodismo Investigativo* (Center for Investigative Journalism) leaked hundreds of pages of a Telegram app group chat between Ricardo Rosselló and his male confidants that shocked a population still reeling from the effects of Hurricane Maria and experiencing the everyday ruins of the debt crisis. But the mass mobilizations that ensued were not just a repudiation of the elite political class’s profanities, racism, misogyny, homophobia, and blatant disdain represented in the Telegram exchange. Rather, Puerto Ricans across class, racial, and political spectrums responded *en masse* to a deeper context of human devaluation, disaster recovery mismanagement, necropolitics, colonialism, racism, corruption, precaritization, and exploitation. The mobilizations were grounded in “infrastructures of resistance” that ranged from the transnational movement that ousted the U.S. Navy from Vieques in the early 2000s, to the student movements, feminist and queer organizing, and post-Maria mutual aid formations (Santiago-Ortiz and Meléndez-Badillo 2020). This study illuminates some of the immediate and long-term sources of the summer indignation and the forms of grassroots contestation that led up to the *Verano Boricua*.

The protests centered the concerns and participation of marginalized populations, including Black, feminist, queer, elderly, working class, and poor people who ranged from seasoned left activists to novice demonstrators across the political spectrum. The intersectional participation reveals how political organizing in Puerto Rico is moving beyond traditional political party lines and protest tactics, and how grassroots community organizing in the wake of the 2017 hurricanes galvanized new political subjects who ultimately catalyzed a mass movement. As a struggle over life and death, the summer mobilizations can be understood as a

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as counsel to the Oversight Board in bankruptcy proceedings and as a lobbyist to a private company with debt claims against with the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA).

broad demand to “*rendir cuentas*” (accountability, or a reckoning) that brought questions about the debt, climate catastrophe, recovery, social vulnerability, and survival to the forefront (LeBrón 2019).

This study is concerned with debt, disaster recovery processes, and activism in relation to governance techniques and overlapping crises in Puerto Rico. It analyzes the diverse ways that Puerto Ricans and state actors mobilize in response to a historic conjuncture marked by the U.S. territory’s bankruptcy and the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, culminating with the *Verano Boricua*.<sup>4</sup> I focus on official forms of disaster governance as juxtaposed to post-Maria grassroots mutual aid organizing in the east-central municipality of Caguas, Puerto Rico (the *Centro de Apoyo Mutuo* or Mutual Aid Center in Las Carolinas) and a political movement calling for a citizen audit of Puerto Rico’s \$124 billion debt.<sup>5</sup> Mutual aid organizers and debt activists grapple with the day-to-day degradations brought on by the debt crisis and reimagine the terms of post-hurricane “recovery.” I show how ordinary people collectively expand our understandings of the temporality of disaster and work through multiple meanings and effects of debt. The people I came to know bring questions of repair and recovery to the forefront, albeit in distinct ways, to challenge the hegemonic forms of debt and disaster governance and reimagine alternative, life-affirming futures for Puerto Rico.

I did not originally set out to examine the aftermath of climate disaster. I arrived to conduct the bulk of my fieldwork in early 2018, just five months after hurricanes Irma and Maria and encountered a completely altered landscape where Puerto Ricans were mostly preoccupied with survival, collective care, and daily task management. The San Juan-centered social

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<sup>4</sup> My use of the term “conjuncture” follows Stuart Hall, whose theorization implies “both a moment of danger and one of opportunity; it was something to intervene in, a configuration whose components were to be rearranged through practice. It was a call to action—intellectual, social, cultural, political” (Bennett 2016).

<sup>5</sup> This sum includes municipal bond debt and government pension liabilities.



mobilizations that I planned to examine in my research were unfeasible and disconnected from reality and priorities on the ground. Beyond the re-conceptualization of the scope of my project, I had to familiarize myself with unanticipated daily routines, tasks, and research disruptions. Some of these included living with unreliable electricity and without Wi-Fi, water purification with iodine drops, daily car transportation without functioning traffic or street lights, and constant preparation of battery devices and solar lamps in anticipation of prolonged blackouts. Nonetheless, these challenges were minute compared to what those around me experienced, especially considering my position as a North American researcher with funding, institutional support, and mobility access that shape the ways that I benefit from colonial, racial, and class hierarchies.

Nearly four years after the devastating 2017 hurricanes, the social disaster that followed Hurricane Maria has been further compounded by draconian austerity measures to accommodate debt adjustment plans. This study thus analyzes how unfolding, contingent, and incomplete processes bear down on people's lives and shape diverse modalities of governance and grassroots response. My initial research from 2016 to 2017 coincided with the declaration of Puerto Rico's debt as "unpayable," the historic passage of PROMESA (Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act) in U.S. Congress, the federal appointment of the unelected Financial Oversight and Management Board (Oversight Board) with deep ties to the financial sector, and the onset of the largest municipal debt restructuring in United States history.<sup>6</sup> The eight unelected members of the Oversight Board represent "both the criollo

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<sup>6</sup> President Obama signed PROMESA into effect in 2016. It provides a framework for unprecedented bankruptcy-like proceedings and establishes a seven-member Financial Oversight and Management Board (colloquially known as the *Junta*) appointed by U.S. Congress to oversee public debt negotiations, use veto power over territorial budgets, and return Puerto Rico to "fiscal stability" and the credit markets. Resembling indirect colonial rule, PROMESA and the *Junta* have been met with much resistance in Puerto Rico and the diaspora. Critics understand PROMESA and the *Junta* as the latest manifestation of the colonial arrangement because it reveals the stark

political elite and the U.S. colonial government, which together have created a deadly kleptocracy in Puerto Rico rooted in economies of extraction and dispossession” (LeBrón 2021, 41). Some of the Oversight Board members now negotiating the debt restructuring plans held revolving positions between the Puerto Rican government and the private banks set to profit from restructuring.

The crisis conjuncture both reveals and further erodes the parameters of local self-governance under Puerto Rico’s Commonwealth arrangement with the U.S. in effect since the 1952 Constitution. For example, a series of legal decisions unveiled right before the enactment of PROMESA demonstrates the malleable but continuous colonial relation. In the 2016 case of *Sánchez Valle v. Commonwealth of Puerto Rico*, the majority Supreme Court decision emphasized that Puerto Rico lacks the “inherent sovereignty” of states and is governed under the plenary powers of U.S. Congress. The Court opted not to overturn the legal precedent of the infamous Insular Cases decisions of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that established Puerto Rico as an “unincorporated territory.” In a “narrow and limited opinion that would neither open the door for potential claims of sovereignty nor explicitly reaffirm the pre- [*Estado Libre Asociado*], colonial nature of the island,” the Supreme Court argued that Puerto Rico is not a separate sovereign and therefore would violate the Constitution’s Double Jeopardy Clause if it prosecutes the same crimes as federal authorities (Jiménez 2020). In the contemporaneous case of *Puerto Rico v. Franklin California Tax-Free Trust*, the Supreme Court argued that Puerto Rico could not enact its own bankruptcy laws to restructure public debt for its public corporations, unlike U.S. states. Some argue that the cumulative effect of these events around Puerto Rico’s bankruptcy have demystified the Commonwealth arrangement and signal the “death of the ELA,” although other

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limitations of “sovereignty” and self-determination under the current Commonwealth or *Estado Libre Asociado* (Free Associated State) arrangement.

scholars maintain that the ELA had already been in crisis at least since the 1960s industrial development model failures (Ibid.).

This historic context fueled new waves of resistance. I initially focused on some notable mobilizations, including the University of Puerto Rico student strikes (2016-2017) and protests against the debt and the Oversight Board such as the *Campamento Contra la Junta*—a protest camp that occupied the streets in front of the U.S. federal court in San Juan for a few weeks in the summer of 2016. However, the events of 2017 marked a watershed moment for the archipelago and the Puerto Rican diaspora. On September 7, 2017, the Category 5 Hurricane Irma skirted over Puerto Rico’s north coast, causing widespread damage, flooding, and power outages. Less than two weeks later, Hurricane Maria cut through Puerto Rico on September 20 as a Category 4 cyclone with winds reaching 155 mph, the most intense hurricane registered in Puerto Rico since Hurricane San Felipe II in 1928.

Maria was one of ten cyclones recorded in the 2017 Atlantic hurricane season, reported to be the costliest season on record. On the frontlines of the climate crisis, the Caribbean is experiencing an increasing prevalence of intense hurricanes (Taylor et al. 2012). In Puerto Rico alone, hurricanes have occurred with less frequency but more intensity and damaging effects since the 1960s (López Marrero and Castro Rivera 2018). However, the 2017 hurricanes were not isolated, time bound events and their destruction was not necessarily inevitable. Their social effects must be understood in the context of “*otras Marías*” (other Marias), as one elderly person I came to know theorized.<sup>7</sup> Nor are the obligations of Puerto Rico’s public debt and the burden of

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<sup>7</sup> Throughout this study I purposefully engage the people I worked with as theorists—people that analyze and make sense of, reflect, and act upon the world. This follows Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s call for anthropologists to “undermine the stability of the Savage slot” and “face the native” (Trouillot 2003,133). Yarimar Bonilla extends this call as a “methodological practice at the two sites of ethnography: the field and the page” (Bonilla 2015, xvii). In the field, this means “standing alongside” people and collectively reflecting on mutual concerns (Ibid.). On the page, this means taking their arguments and analysis seriously.

repayment on ordinary people (the debtors) assumed to be always moral or legitimate, as activists claim.

## Overview

This study examines the intersecting politics of debt and disaster recovery on multiple registers. I attend to everyday life, the production of social vulnerability, and collective struggle among mutual aid organizers and debt activists through participant observation, interviews, and oral histories. I integrate institutional discourses, narratives, and media to illuminate techniques of disaster governance and bankruptcy management and how points of friction emerge through contestations around space and social reproduction, disaster aid applications, and various claims on public debt. The bulk of this study focuses on a project of mutual aid and *autogestión* (autonomous organizing, or self-management), which emerged after Hurricane Maria, called the *Centro de Apoyo Mutuo* (Mutual Aid Center, or CAM) in Las Carolinas, Caguas.<sup>8</sup> This project centers working-class women’s grassroots organizing and contributes to what I call the wider “geographies of mutual aid” in the archipelago—the diverse group of CAMs and other *autogestión* projects that have proliferated in times of economic and climate crisis.<sup>9</sup> In the

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<sup>8</sup> There are multiple meanings of *autogestión* that can reference actions by an individual self or a collective. In this study I primarily refer to *autogestión* as autonomous, collective organizing. Reflecting on the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Maria in a conference organized with Naomi Klein, scholar and activist Mariolga Reyes Cruz (2018) emphasizes the act of “*gestar*,” meaning to gestate or develop, in reference to what she calls “multiple sovereignties” and “*autoconvocatorias*” (self-convenings) such as the Mutual Aid Centers.

<sup>9</sup> Analyses of *autogestión* must take seriously the ways in which the term and practice can be coopted. Chantal Mouffe (2013) provides a foundation for thinking about how discourses of “self-management” or “autonomy” within radical politics can be appropriated or re-articulated as new forms of control in a way that “neutralizes their subversive potential” (Mouffe 2013, 165). For example, Puerto Rico’s corporate media has adopted *autogestión* as a flexible and instinctive individual solution to overlapping disaster. A March 2021 article in the “Women’s” section of the periodical *El Nuevo Día* suggests that women should assume entrepreneurial *autogestión* as a personal solution to navigate the pandemic “new normal.” The author provides a “how-to” list to cultivate *autogestión* and writes, “*Tenemos habilidades innatas que pueden ayudarnos a cambiar completamente hacia dónde nos lleva la brújula. La autogestión es una de ellas*” (We have innate abilities that can help us completely change where the compass takes us. Self-management is one of them) (Rivera 2021).

context of the uneven impacts of debt-driven austerity, environmental injustice, and layered forms of abandonment, Mutual Aid Centers politicize daily life, social vulnerability, and social reproduction to work towards collective care, repair, and local resource defense.

The mutual aid organizers I came to know do not necessarily talk about their activities or trajectories in terms of debt or debt resistance, but their actions reflect feminist concerns about debt—specifically how debt “lands” (*aterrizar*) in “diverse territories, economies, bodies, and conflicts” (Cavallero and Gago 2019, 13). For example, working-class women mutual aid protagonists at the CAM Las Carolinas did not necessarily share a direct interest in anti-debt activism based in the San Juan metropolitan area, nor did they necessarily concern themselves with federal bankruptcy proceedings, legal challenges to the debt, or the question of the citizen audit. However, the actions of grassroots organizers map onto a refusal of the spatial-temporal logics of debt that disproportionately impact women and manifest through selective austerity, the devaluation of life, and unequal access to services and infrastructures in working-class and poor communities on the urban margins. I found that expanding my project beyond the San Juan metro area made these dynamics more evident and complex.

Social reproductive spheres such as education, childcare, healthcare, household consumption, retirement, elder care, transportation and mobility, recreation, and the environment are doubly impacted by public debt and climate disruption. As Nancy Fraser reminds us, debt plays a central role in what she calls the “*dualized* organization of social reproduction, commodified for those who can pay for it and privatized for those who cannot” (Fraser 2017, 32). Public debt is thus the instrument through which environments are eroded and value is extracted from these spheres, where care is increasingly externalized onto individuals and communities with shrinking capacity to perform these tasks, especially in the wake of disaster.

I analyze the CAM Las Carolinas's occupation and repurposing of a public elementary school closed by the Puerto Rico Department of Education as a tactic of debt refusal in the realm of social reproduction. This school was closed during the 2017 austerity shutdowns with the stated purpose of generating central government savings to pay the unaudited public debt. In Chapter Four, I show how the school was a central site of long-standing community activism in Las Carolinas that shaped the post-Maria politicization of mothers, grandmothers, care givers, and other residents. After the storm, residents mobilized mutual aid practices from the occupied school to build what I call "infrastructures of care" that shift the terms of recovery to a collective, material, and affective process that transforms the lived environment in life-affirming ways. The practices and effects of these infrastructures of care are the topic of Chapter Five. This study demonstrates that mutual aid is a practice at the intersection of social reproduction, racial and class difference, generation, coloniality, and the environment that seeks to ameliorate public disinvestment, nurture ecological stewardship, reconstruct social bonds, and reimagine what it means to live at the intersections of overlapping crises.

Grassroots frameworks of recovery contrast with the hegemonic, top-down approach of disaster governance and privatized resilience that I analyze in Chapter Three. Here I show that colonial-neoliberal disaster governance—particularly around the evaluation and distribution of federal disaster aid and the role of property—privileges bureaucratic disciplinary techniques that organize disaster recovery as a private, individual responsibility with particular interventions in the home. The disaster aid discrimination that Puerto Ricans experienced in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria provides insight into the limits and failures of this approach and contrasts with the collective efforts emerging from the CAMs where the private/domestic sphere is made public as social reproductive activities emerge from occupied neighborhood spaces. Grassroots

recovery efforts examined alongside the government's botched disaster aid distribution and capitalization of the crisis to push certain political-economic agendas thus illuminate how struggles over disaster recovery are struggles over social reproduction. This study shows how alternative understandings and practices of recovery emerge to resist both colonial-neoliberal disaster governance and the logics of debt capture—a process whereby public resources are siphoned off and certain futures foreclosed in order to fulfill debt obligations.

In contrast to the geographically-grounded CAM project that I collaborated with, anti-debt struggles around the citizen debt audit took place in the multiple sites of Puerto Rico's bankruptcy—the streets, public squares, collaborative forums, online platforms, and in spheres of expert-knowledge such as the courts, the legislature, and appointed investigative commissions. Demands for a citizen debt audit date back to 2015 when the government established an official commission to investigate any regularities or illegalities in debt issuances. Once Governor Rosselló defunded and dismantled the commission in 2016, a coalition movement took shape to denounce the move and organize around a citizen audit. I argue that the citizen audit and the demand for debt cancellation took on a renewed significance at the intersection of the climate and political crises. In other words, the 2017 hurricanes gave a new urgency to the activist slogan “*la gente antes que la deuda*” (the people before debt) because the government's priorities to repay the public debt seemed impossible and immoral given the dire conditions after Hurricane Maria. Furthermore, the *Verano Boricua* mass mobilizations that led to Rosselló's resignation in August 2019 heightened public interest in a debt audit as part of a larger public reckoning. This context led to the emergence of what I call “counter-moralities of debt” that I examine in the Chapter Six.

Auditing, however, is not an agreed upon technical exercise. I found that claims for an “audit” vary based on one’s social and political location. For example, activists, politicians, and members of the Oversight Board all call for different versions of the “audit.” Others reject any type of audit based on the conviction that auditing by default legitimizes what some consider an odious debt (illegitimate debt incurred by a despotic regime) that should be fully cancelled or assumed by the U.S. government, and therefore U.S. taxpayers. I found that as a floating signifier, the “audit” has no agreed upon, coherent significance but is rather a contested tactic and process laden with political meaning.

Debt activists calling for the citizen audit attempt to relate how Puerto Rico’s public debt and the obligation to pay manifest in daily life and exacerbate the social disaster after Hurricane Maria. These relationships were especially difficult to pinpoint because undemocratic mechanisms, technicalities, and abstraction around the bankruptcy process often obscure the everyday material manifestations of public debt repayment. Furthermore, conventional narratives about Puerto Rico’s debt reproduce racialized notions of culpability and obligation. I provide a brief political economy of the debt crisis in Chapter One to situate the relationships between debt and disaster that shape activists’ political claims. For instance, the main protagonists for the citizen audit centered within certain professional, organized, and metropolitan circles, although participation widened around key events such as the *Asambleas de Pueblo* (People’s Assemblies) that emerged during the *Verano Boricua*. Chapter Six examines how the struggle over a debt audit is part of an ongoing accountability process that unities debt incredulity with the essential questions of what debt is and who is owed. Debt incredulity is a concept I employ to refer to the subversive possibility rendered by scrutiny, investigation, and multiple interpretations of Puerto Rico’s debt. Here I integrate critical vocabularies of debt that insert Puerto Rico in a broader



Caribbean and internationalist-Global South conversation. I argue that the question of debt and debt repudiation is central to the possibility of a just recovery.

### **Emergence of the CAMs across Puerto Rico**

On November 6, 2017, an intergenerational group of residents of Las Carolinas, a sector in the municipality of Caguas, Puerto Rico, “broke through the locks” of the María Montañez Gómez elementary school. The Puerto Rico Department of Education had closed the sector’s only elementary school in May 2017 to generate government savings for public debt service, but residents envisioned new and urgent use values for the abandoned space. The women and elderly protagonists of this occupation were motivated by the emergence of community-based initiatives known as *Centros de Apoyo Mutuo* spreading across the archipelago in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. The initial purpose of residents’ unauthorized school occupation was to open a CAM with a community kitchen. Echoing the popular post-Maria rallying cry “*solo el pueblo salva al pueblo*” (“only the people save the people”),<sup>10</sup> the original vision of the project was about ensuring Las Carolinas residents’ survival—cooking and distributing hot meals, providing clean water, channeling aid, and facilitating a space to congregate, share vital information, and charge personal electronic devices. However, after the designated “emergency” phase of the disaster concluded with power and water restoration throughout Puerto Rico, the CAM Las Carolinas maintained and expanded its mutual aid practices, social reproduction work, and elder care activities. Unsettling the conventional temporality of disaster, CAM organizers responded to the multiple and intersecting disasters that had long impacted the community and reimagined recovery from the grassroots.

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<sup>10</sup> As Isa Rodríguez Soto notes, this saying “comes not from mere benevolence, but from a place of exhaustion and survival” in the face of state neglect, prolonged waiting, colonialism, and inequality (Rodríguez Soto 2020, 208).

Hurricanes Irma and Maria set the immediate conditions of possibility for new solidarities to materialize or deepen from existing networks and fill the gaps of government negligence. The CAM Las Carolinas emerged as part of a larger movement of grassroots organizing in what I call Puerto Rico's "geographies of mutual aid." More than a dozen CAMs emerged in the archipelago after Hurricane Maria to imagine and practice alternative forms of recovery (Garriga-López 2019; Roberto 2019; Rodríguez Soto 2020; Vélez-Vélez and Villarrubia-Mendoza 2018). Building on and reshaping traditions of mutual aid, these CAMs reimagine the terms and temporality of recovery and subvert hegemonic modes of disaster governance and dept capture. The political-social disaster after the storms thus became a new point of politicization for long-time activists *and* people without activist experience alike.

A brief overview of the CAMs as an archipelago-wide phenomenon demonstrates the significant scope and reach of this movement. Nine days after Hurricane Maria, the first CAM was established in downtown Caguas. The initial model and orientation of what came to be called the CAM Caguas Pueblo was influenced by the *Comedores Sociales de Puerto Rico* (Community Kitchens of Puerto Rico) project, which activists established across different University of Puerto Rico campuses since 2013. Young veteran activists of the student and the anti-austerity movements initiated the *Comedores Sociales* as a grassroots response to the economic crisis to address student hunger, growing precarity, and the domination of corporate fast food on campus. The project became part of a non-profit organization called the *Centro para el Desarrollo Político, Educativo y Cultural* (Center for Political, Educational, and Cultural Development, or CDPEC). The *Comedores Sociales* function with a solidarity exchange model: a healthful lunch in exchange for a small monetary donation, volunteer labor, or another type of donation such as canned beans or rice. The food serving stations at strategic campus locations are

technically unauthorized and university authorities have at times forcibly removed them. This orientation of *autogestión*, spatial occupation, and solidarity guided the emergence of the CAM Caguas Pueblo and the rapid spread of other CAMs that adopted the name and “the same anti-systemic political narrative” (Villarrubia-Mendoza and Vélez-Vélez 2020, 98).

Each CAM operates independently and is organized around specific dynamics, ethos, recovery goals, and visions about how to relate to “the state.” Some CAMs initiated networking efforts, including the *Red de Apoyo Mutuo* (Mutual Aid Network), which facilitated group gatherings and a website, and the *Red Regional de Apoyo Mutuo* (Regional Mutual Aid Network).<sup>11</sup> This second initiative received grant funding in 2020 to host a series of brigades, workshops, and media campaigns to support the ongoing CAMs in rural areas. On the whole, CAMs shared common features such as food and supplies distribution in the immediate aftermath of the storms, information exchange, efforts to develop communal housing and/or emergency sheltering, innovations in solar energy and water collection systems, and orientations such as *autogestión*, solidarity exchange, agroecology, horizontalism, and community autonomy.

Sociologists Jacqueline Villarrubia-Mendoza and Roberto Vélez-Vélez (2020) conduct research on the archipelago-wide CAM movement and identify three points that characterize the CAMs as a product of solidarities mobilized through disaster experiences. First, CAMs are concentrated in the central-rural areas of Puerto Rico. This spatialization is significant because economic, service, and infrastructural resources, media attention, and well-known activist groups are often focused on the metropolitan centers, while rural and mountainous areas in the central region experienced the most severe hurricane impacts and the longest delays in aid. Second, each CAM tailors its efforts based on community-specific priorities. And third, the CAMs do not form

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<sup>11</sup> The *Red de Apoyo Mutuo* was active in 2018-2019. I collaborate in an advisory capacity with the *Red Regional de Apoyo Mutuo*, established in 2020.

a homogeneous group, but rather articulate particular strategies determined by the resources at their disposition. Adding to these identified characteristics, I emphasize the importance of alternative space-making practices that orient the CAMs and especially the CAM Las Carolinas.

An immediate impact of the CAMs on a national scale was to challenge racist and colonialist media representations of post-Maria Puerto Rico as a “war zone” and Puerto Ricans as incompetent, disorganized, and in need of a benevolent savior. Some media portrayals of trauma and suffering relied on familiar hyperbolic tropes that construct “disaster myths” around affected populations that have historically bolstered support for militarized responses (Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski 2006). Reflecting on Hurricane Maria media narratives, anthropologist Hilda Lloréns notes that “The accumulated visual narrative depicted a helpless Brown and Black populace at the mercy of external aid that did not arrive fast enough” (Lloréns 2018, 140). For example, in a *Bloomberg News* article titled “This is chaos,” published five days after Hurricane Maria made landfall, the authors describe “children wearing nothing but diapers camped out on balconies to stay cool” (Levin and Malik 2017). A *Vox* article published three weeks after the storm, titled “The unrelenting crisis in Puerto Rico is forcing people to drink dirty water,” discusses Puerto Ricans bathing in contaminated rivers and securing drinking water from Environmental Protection Agency designated Superfund sites. The article includes an image of armed security forces with large rifles in hand standing on the roof of a residential home to “keep watch” over residents of San Isidro as they wait in line to receive food and water from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) (Belluz 2018). In the face of government neglect and mismanagement, media sensationalism, and the celebratory “*Puerto Rico Se Levanta*” campaign, Puerto Ricans were saving each other and developing longer-term care

relations, networks, forms of social reproduction, and political critique that would scale up during the historic summer 2019 mobilizations.<sup>12</sup>

Each CAM has a unique immediate “origin story.” In the case of the CAM Las Carolinas as described above, a group of women who had been volunteering at the CAM Caguas Pueblo took inspiration from the project and planned the initial school occupation in their sector. The founders understood that an accessible CAM located in a well-known space in the community would reach Las Carolinas residents with limited mobility because of age, disability, or lack of transportation. CAM Caguas Pueblo organizers helped to launch the CAM Las Carolinas, sharing knowledge, materials, monetary donations, and resistance strategies to orient the Las Carolinas school occupation. The CAM Las Carolinas quickly became a vital social hub and served meals to local residents directly from the school *comedor* (cafeteria) during the blackout between November 2017 and March 2018. Organizers calculate that they served 10,000 meals between November 2017 and January 2018. They began the second, more expansive phase of the project in March 2018 with two lunch delivery routes that served upwards of 100 meals per week in the community. I explore the CAM’s diverse initiatives and their effects in Chapters Four and Five.

CAM origin stories draw upon social relations not necessarily referred to as “mutual aid.” In Chapters Two and Four, I relate the mutual aid practices that emerged in Las Carolinas after Hurricane Maria with long-standing everyday inequalities in the sector and earlier community initiatives led by mothers and caregivers to defend the school. This wider temporal lens situates post-Maria actions within the daily degradations of the debt crisis. Similarly, Hilda

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<sup>12</sup> *Puerto Rico Se Levanta* (Puerto Rico Rises Up) became a recovery branding slogan widely used among the government, businesses, and survivors after Hurricane Maria. The slogan was displayed on buildings, posted on billboards or storefront placards, and mobilized in official communications. However, the cynically optimistic slogan contrasted with lived realities on the ground.

Lloréns and attorney Ruth Santiago remind us that the women-led post-Maria initiatives activated in Afro-descendent communities in southeastern Puerto Rico came out of a long tradition of mutual aid as survival amid harsh circumstances, racism, and environmental degradation (Lloréns and Santiago 2018).

My initial collaboration with the CAM Las Carolinas was facilitated by the CAM Caguas Pueblo organizers, most of whom I had already gotten to know during earlier research on the student movement and protests against PROMESA. As I was reorganizing my research in light of Hurricane Maria, I began to volunteer at various CDPEC initiatives. At the CAM Caguas Pueblo I washed dishes in the kitchen and attended the community healing circles, where I received acupuncture for the first time. I also volunteered serving food at the *Comedores Sociales* on the University of Puerto Rico Río Piedras campus. In April 2018, friends at the CAM Caguas Pueblo introduced me to the CAM Las Carolinas and from there I began to engage as a researcher and volunteer. I spent on average two to three days per week at the CAM assisting with food preparation and distribution, clean-up, organization, errands, bureaucratic duties, social media, and interpretation. I conducted participant observation, interviews with organizers, residents impacted by the CAM's services, and municipal officials, as well as oral histories with elderly CAM participants.

Importantly, women, often framed as the victims of disaster through the lens of social vulnerability, are protagonists in the CAM Las Carolinas and indeed prominent groundbreakers in mutual aid formations across the archipelago (Dolores Fernós et al. 2018; Lloréns and Santiago 2018; Vélez-Vélez and Villarrubia-Mendoza 2018).<sup>13</sup> Highlighting the groundbreaking

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<sup>13</sup> María Dolores Fernós and her colleagues note that the scholarship on disaster vulnerability and gender has largely concentrated on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, while institutional reports from organizations such as the United Nations have focused on disaster phenomena in Latin America since the late 1990s. The authors underscore the importance of a gendered analysis of disaster and suggest that this literature has not been developed in Puerto Rico

role of women in grassroots responses gives insight into the gendered aspects of disaster vulnerability and more generally women's prominent historical roles as first responders to local environmental, economic, and health harms in Puerto Rico (Dietrich 2013; Dolores Fernós et al. 2018; Susser 1992). Beyond demonstrating their leadership capacity within communities, women's post-disaster actions make visible the crucial role of social reproductive labor in transforming public spaces and recovery processes.

I argue that the CAM Las Carolinas and its persistence through 2021 is best understood as responding to long-standing local conditions, the failures of disaster governance, social vulnerabilities, and residents' experiences of everyday inequalities that the storm did not create, but rather *exacerbated*. I explore everyday inequalities and common material conditions that shaped why and how the CAM emerged in Chapter Two. Moreover, I show that the mobilization of alternative space-making practices rearticulates social support relations through spatial rescue, care relations, self-determination, and dignity. I argue that mutual aid organizing is therefore not just about survival and addressing immediate needs, but also about thriving through repair, life-affirming practices, and daily resistance to the effects of public debt. The significance of framing mutual aid *beyond* an act of survival is echoed by the people I worked with especially in relation to media portrayals of the CAM Las Carolinas that I explore in Chapter Five. As Isa Rodríguez Soto argues in her reflection on sustained mutual aid community organizing in southwestern Puerto Rico, "mutual aid fills some gaps in order to keep people and hope alive, and to create a social foundation to continue to rally together and send the message: 'We are still here; we are not defeated. We are still alive.'" (Rodríguez Soto 2020, 306).

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perhaps due to the stretch of time that the archipelago has gone without experiencing a disaster event the magnitude of Hurricane Maria (Dolores Fernós et al. 2018, 133).

## **Theoretical Threads**

### *Catastrophe, Vulnerability, Social Reproduction, and Disaster: Anthropological Perspectives*

This research builds on interdisciplinary scholarship that analyzes disasters as socially, economically, politically, environmentally, and culturally produced processes. The sub-field known as disaster anthropology took root in the 1970s with an interest in the effects of disaster on various realms of “culture,” meaning-making, and social organization. The field is expanding especially in light of anthropogenic climate change and its adoption within applied anthropology. Two widely influential early anthropological studies of disaster include Anthony Wallace’s 1956 *The Tornado in Worcester: An Exploratory Study of Individual and Community Behavior in an Extreme Situation* and Raymond Firth’s 1959 *Social Change in Tikopia*. Wallace posited a psycho-cultural model of how disaster victims process unfolding events, and Firth’s functionalist study of Tikopian responses to cyclones and famine examined shifts in ritual and exchange practices. These early studies largely omitted questions of power relations and the social production of disaster risk and vulnerability that animated later debates.

From the 1970s ethnographic contributions onward, anthropologists have complicated the meaning of disaster in conversation with broader social science research on risk and vulnerability. According to social anthropologist and historian Virginia García-Acosta, anthropologists have developed a working framework that understands risk and disaster as “multidimensional processes that result from the association between natural or technological hazards and a population in conditions of social and economic vulnerability” (García-Acosta 2018, 3). A key contention of this framework derives from political ecology and political economy approaches that challenge the assumption that disasters are “natural.” Scholars have thus turned to examine disasters beyond the “trigger event” of a natural hazard (a hurricane,



drought, tornado, etc.), and instead show how disasters are products of social, political, technological, and economic relations and policies that can simultaneously exacerbate their effects (Adams 2013; Davis 2017; Fortun 2001; Hartman and Squires 2006; Klinenberg 1999; Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 1999; Schuller 2012; Susser and Schneider 2003; Wisner et al. 2004).

Similarly, scholars have used the concept of “vulnerability” as a lens to understand the differential impact of disaster through various axes of marginalization (race, class, gender, ability, age, spatial location) that influence the capacity to cope with, resist, and recover from a natural hazard (Wisner et al. 2004). This perspective departs from problematic notions of vulnerability as an innate characteristic of certain populations. Vulnerability is also a category and discourse used in international humanitarian law to designate populations for certain protections, including children, victims of gender violence, the elderly, and disabled people (O’Donnell 2019). However, scholars note the lack of consensus around who counts within “vulnerable populations” categories and how the category itself does not necessarily help address particular needs in disaster recovery processes (Padilla-Elías et al. 2016).

Studies on differential vulnerability in the Caribbean are particularly insightful for understanding the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico. For example, Tania López-Marrero and Ben Wisner argue that Caribbean people’s vulnerability to natural hazards is shaped by common “dynamic pressures.” These include a common histories of slavery and colonialism, economic liberalization and globalization processes, structural adjustment, austerity, and high debt levels that have resulted in “cuts to social services like education and health programs, and little budget left for public investment in countries’ physical infrastructures” (López-Marrero and Wisner 2012, 146-147). However, recently anthropologists have been debating the continued usefulness of the concept. Some express concern that vulnerability is “not a site of promise” and

can in fact do conceptual work to deepen marginalization (Marino and Faas 2020, 10). Elizabeth Marino and A.J. Faas argue that disaster anthropology's use of "vulnerability" and "vulnerable" to describe people, communities, and geographies "acts to flatten and simplify diverse communities, as well as discursively nullify the everywhere-visible 'resilience,' roughness, and genius that exists in communities" (Ibid., 1). I differ from this argument because I do not see examining the social production of vulnerability (central to conceptualizing disaster as *unnatural*) as mutually exclusive from attending to "sites of emancipatory action" and contestation (Ibid., 10). I use vulnerability throughout this research as a lens to tease out the uneven production and effects of disaster and to understand the specific responses, priorities, and alternative recoveries that emerge in impacted communities.<sup>14</sup>

Anthropologists have argued that disaster provides a lens into society and its contradictions, acting as what Jacqueline Solway (1994), drawing on Marshall Sahlins (1972), calls a "revelatory crisis." But, as a caution to avoid distraction from the normalized practices that lead to catastrophe, Roberto Barrios posits that a key question is: what does the crisis reveal and for whom? (Barrios 2017b).<sup>15</sup> For example, recent ethnographies have shed light on how disaster recovery processes guided by capital interests, neoliberal governance, humanitarian aid actors, and expert knowledge often reproduce or exacerbate inequality, producing what Vincanne Adams calls "second-order disasters" (Adams 2013; see also Arena 2012; Barrios 2017a; Browne 2015).

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<sup>14</sup> I acknowledge useful insight provided by Joyce Rivera González during the Society for Applied Anthropology's virtual keynote panel, "Fighting White Supremacy and Racism to Build an Inclusive Community" on March 26, 2021. Rivera González noted that while the framing of vulnerability is problematic when considered an essential, innate characteristic, the verb in Spanish "*vulnerabilizar*" points to the more active process where vulnerability is produced.

<sup>15</sup> Following Barrios (2017b) and other scholars, I use the terms disaster and catastrophe interchangeably.

My research builds on and advances these discussions in a number of ways. In demonstrating how recovery processes are sites of contestation among alternative visions of the future—from the sites of disaster governance, grassroots mutual aid projects, and debt resistance—I examine different understandings and ways of grappling with the temporality of disaster. Building on Anthony Carrigan’s observation that “there is virtually no sustained analysis of the relationship between colonialism and disaster” (Carrigan 2015, 122), I show how colonial power and unnatural disaster are mutually constitutive in Puerto Rico. For instance, the latest iteration of the colonial arrangement between Puerto Rico and the United States vis-à-vis an unelected Oversight Board and bankruptcy has exacerbated the degradation of daily life and Puerto Rico’s vulnerability to climate change by prioritizing austerity and debt repayment over social and infrastructural investments. Furthermore, colonial-neoliberal disaster governance and resilience frameworks shape technical, ableist, and individualizing solutions that aim to return society to a pre-disaster norm or promote privatized resilience among subjects of recovery imagined as autonomous, able-bodied, race-neutral, and financially secure individuals or nuclear families. In contrast, other grassroots frameworks, such as those offered by the CAM Las Carolinas, emerge through the practice of mutual aid that disrupts the boundedness of disaster in time and space and the assumptions of disaster governance.

Elderly people in Puerto Rico experienced particular life disruptions after the hurricanes around mobility, food access, mental health, loneliness, and medical care. However, they also participated in solidarity building, public care, locally transformative projects, and the *Verano Boricua*. While anthropological scholarship has focused on aging and elderly people mostly within institutional care settings, the complex everyday spaces where seniors craft intricate lifeworlds and subjectivities are equally insightful sites of inquiry (Alley 2009). For instance,

scholarship on the relation between age and disaster argues that elderly people draw on a “repertoire of comparative life traumas or challenges” to adjust to loss and cope with long-term effects on housing and health (Adams et al. 2009, 9). I advance discussions on the relations between disaster recovery, gender, solidarity, and affect by emphasizing the agency of elderly people who have often been framed through the lens of social vulnerability or cultural scripts of elderly dependency. Attending to spaces of protest and politics, creativity, exchange, and neighborhood socialization, I show how elderly people negotiate immediate and long-standing social harms in complex ways and often blur the boundaries between care giving and care receiving. Along these lines, I emphasize the role of intergenerational care relations in disaster recovery, which are central to how women and elderly people recast, rescue, and give new meaning and value to socially significant neighborhood public spaces. Through the case of a *Centro de Apoyo Mutuo*, I demonstrate that mutual aid mobilizes what I call “infrastructures of care” that do not represent a mode of survival, but rather shape life-affirming practices, social reproduction, care networks, and forms of socialization that confront the harms of abandonment in the age of climate disruption. This study thus highlights the relevance of generation and age for further theorization within intersectional analysis on the experience of crisis, disaster, and recovery processes.

These lines of inquiry draw from the extensive literature on the political economy of care and social reproduction, which I attempt to put in conversation with scholarship on disaster recovery. Social reproduction refers to the daily paid or unpaid reproductive labor that occurs in multiple sites and falls most heavily on women and people of color to sustain intergenerational life, diverse productive relations, labor power, and capital accumulation processes. Feminist scholars have troubled the production/reproduction dichotomy, demonstrated the interlocking

race and gender construction of reproductive labor, and broadened our understanding of the spheres of social reproduction to include not just the domestic home, but also schools, recreation spaces, the built environment, and medical facilities, for example (Battacharya 2017; Benería 1979; Bookman and Morgan 1988; Federici 2004; Glenn 1992; Maurer 2020). Black feminist scholars have advanced debates on racialization and anti-Blackness as foundational to capitalism, arguing that these processes are central to understanding how capitalism transformed the relationship between economically productive and socially reproductive labor. These insights help us understand how socially reproductive labor has “not always been a signifier of dispossessed and devalued labor” (Mullings 2021, 156). Rather, what geographer Beverley Mullings calls “life-work”—“the work involved in producing people, communities, and economies”—is both productive and reproductive labor that has mobilized agency and solidarities among unfree, maroon, and precarious Caribbean populations across time (Ibid., 152). Thus, social reproduction is a site of creativity in everyday life “where worlds are made and can be made otherwise” (Maurer 2020, 719; see also Gibson-Graham 1996).

Recent scholarship on labor geographies invites us to engage with post-disaster Caribbean societies as sites to think about the future of labor and value in light of economic and climate disruption.<sup>16</sup> For example, geographer Joaquín Villanueva draws on Beverley Mullings to argue that recovery work as “life-work” in Puerto Rico, often led by women, not only blurs the boundaries of production and social reproduction, but also charts new labor arrangements with “a renewed conviction that labor can be organized differently, that it can meet the needs of those who perform it and their communities” (Villanueva 2021, 108). However, he also cautions that “living in Puerto Rico constitutes a form of extraction” (Ibid., 109). Finance capital responds

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<sup>16</sup> I thank Joaquín Villanueva for our exchanges about mutual aid and for pointing me to this debate.

to new post-disaster labor arrangements that fall outside formal/waged/unionized arrangements, for example through debt restructuring deals that extract value from everyday commodity sales taxes to fulfill bondholder repayments agreements. Following these discussions, I situate mutual aid in Puerto Rico at the intersections of social reproduction, disaster recovery work, and debt resistance. In response to life disruptions brought by the overlapping climate, colonial, and debt crises, women and elderly people engage with space to reshape social landscapes in material and affective ways that support intergenerational livelihoods and contest forms of abandonment and disaster governance.

*Mutual Aid: Scholarly and Activist Perspectives*



Figure 1 - Map of Puerto Rico with red stars marking the CAMs as of 2018. The blue circle marks the CAM Las Carolinas. This map excludes the island municipalities of Culebra and Vieques, where the CAM Vieques emerged. An important point to note is that the majority of CAMs are located outside of Puerto Rico's central urban areas (San Juan, Mayagüez, and Ponce). A number of factors may explain this, including how rural, mountainous, and urban periphery areas experienced Hurricane Maria's aftermath and the pace of recovery differently than the urban centers. Source: <https://redapoyomutuo.com>.

Mutual aid—historically and context specific social relations of survival, care, and self-provisioning—has long been practiced in diverse social contexts before its theorization as such, especially among Black, indigenous, and poor populations (Grubacic and O’Hearn 2016; Nowell

2020). This section explores mutual aid as a political and intellectual concept. Scholars and activists often point to Russian geographer Peter Kropotkin's (1902) theorization of mutual aid as a "factor in evolution" in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as providing a (limited) conceptual scaffolding that helps to situate mutual aid's activist, anarchist, and academic adoption. As an anarchist revolutionary and disowned aristocrat in exile, Kropotkin's theorization of mutual aid in evolutionary history and human social relations was a critical response to prevailing Darwinist and social Darwinist views. For instance, Kropotkin argued that cooperation was as influential as competition in the evolution of biological species. He theorized that "struggles for existence were carried out not by individuals, but by groups of individuals cooperating with one another" (Breitbart 1981, 137) and suggested mutual aid as an "explanatory mechanism" and "an inspiration for ethical living in solidarity with one another with a goal of holistic flourishing rather than individual advantage" (Gammage 2021). Kropotkin's concerns with mutual aid thus reflected both his interest in evolutionary theory and human models beyond hierarchical social control.

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, social scientists became interested in understanding "spontaneous organization" in the wake of catastrophic events. The field of U.S. social science disaster research emerged in the late 1940s as an imperial Cold War concern about how individuals and collectives would react in a potential nuclear event and whether social breakdown would occur (Quarantelli 1987, Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski 2006). But people are not just passive victims of disaster events. Sociological studies beginning in the 1960s suggested that community response is shaped by pre-existing forms of social ties and organization, pointing to the tendency for people to demonstrate pro-social, altruistic behavior immediately after a "natural" or man-made disaster (Barton 1969; Drabek 1986; Dynes and Quarantelli 1980; Fritz

1961; Miller 2007). Social arrangements theorized as “therapeutic” communities or “emergent response groups” (Drabek and McEntire 2003) were considered spontaneous but *temporary* efforts shaped by the specific characteristics of the disaster, the kinds of pre-existing social bonds and exclusions in disaster-affected communities, and the organized forms of aid available or absent after a disaster (Barton 1969; Fritz 1961; Klinenburg 2003). Other scholarship identifies spontaneous organizations and behaviors that respond to shifting post-disaster conditions and/or the failure of existing public structures as “emergent phenomena” (Drabek and McEntire 2003; Oliver-Smith 1994; Stallings and Quarantelli 1985; Wenger 1992). While not directly invoking the term “mutual aid,” planning theorists Ihnji Jon and Mark Purcell (2018) suggest the concept of “radical resilience” to account for post-disaster bottom-up initiatives characterized by autonomous self-management over top-down technical solutions, the collectivization of resources, and participatory organization.

The concept of mutual aid thus relates to how earlier scholarship analyzed temporary “therapeutic communities” and “emergent phenomena” in post-disaster processes. Understanding these theoretical threads provides a foundation upon which to think about mutual aid and the role of CAMs after Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico (Villarrubia-Mendoza and Vélez Vélez 2020). A central contention of my work is that mutual aid often moves beyond the frame of temporary organization for immediate survival. As I show in the following chapters, long term mutual aid organizing can build alternative relations of care and social reproduction that challenge technical recovery fixes and mainstream privatized resilience calls for individuals and communities to return to pre-disaster conditions or endure further harm.

Drawing from these political and intellectual insights, trans activist and legal scholar Dean Spade argues that mutual aid can be understood as “collective coordination to meet each



other's needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them" (Spade 2020, 8). As opposed to paternalistic and donor-driven modes of charity explored in Chapter Five, mutual aid is understood as centering survival needs, mutuality, horizontalism, and participation. However, these practices are not just organized in the wake of extraordinary events to meet the needs of the moment (Solnit 2009), but also in response to entrenched, everyday structural violence. For example, mutual aid practices have been vital to marginalized groups' everyday collective survival. Diverse forms of radical self-help in African American communities have historically pooled resources to address "Black exclusion from white infrastructures by creating Black alternatives" (Spade 2020, 12). Mutual aid societies in northern U.S. cities such as the Free African Society and the New York Committee of Vigilance were essential to the survival of self-emancipated African Americans and their defense against anti-Black violence in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. African American "clubs," often using churches as gathering spaces, were organized as a counterpart to white "elite civic activists" and to self-organize "ways to ameliorate working-class [African American] women's daily experiences within and between home and work" (Gilmore 2007, 188). Furthermore, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mutual aid emerged around the U.S. to provide economic, social, and health support systems and advocacy for new arrivals facing various forms of discrimination.

As a tactic of social movements, activists practice mutual aid to build solidarity and a shared analysis about the structures of power that produce the conditions under which mutual aid becomes necessary in the first place. Notable examples come from the 1960s and 1970s Black liberation and racial justice movements. For example, the Black Panther Party's (BPP) survival programs organized around meeting people's basic needs as part of the empowerment and politicization process. These programs included the free Breakfast for School Children Program,

the free ambulance program, carpooling for elderly people, legal aid, liberation schools, and free medical clinics with patient advocates to combat medical discrimination (see Nelson 2011). Eldridge Cleaver referred to these survival programs as “liberation in practice” (quoted in Foner 2014, 167). The BPP envisioned the implementation of the Breakfast Program on a national scale, but its mutual aid initiatives were surveilled, criminalized, and derailed as part of U.S. government repression efforts to “neutralize” the BPP. For example, J. Edgar Hoover famously wrote in a Federal Bureau of Investigations memo that the Breakfast for Children Program was “potentially the greatest threat” to neutralizing the BPP (quoted in Spade 2020, 136). The targeted racist repression and government adaptation of the free breakfast program—evidenced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s subsequent implementation of a federal free breakfast program in public schools after the BPP and the Young Lords’ success—attests to the significance, oppositional resistance, and political urgency of mutual aid and its deeply embedded history within liberation struggles.<sup>17</sup>

The relation between social movements and mutual aid also reveals its limitations. After Superstorm Sandy devastated the New York City metro region in 2012, the massive mutual aid relief efforts known as “Occupy Sandy” emerged with roots in Occupy Wall Street. Activists set up distribution and recovery hubs and smaller networked centers around the metro area that reached a larger volunteer and resource capacity than the Red Cross at its peak (Homeland Security Studies and Analysis Institute 2013). As Ashley Dawson argues, “the orientation of Occupy [Wall Street] towards issues of inequality meant that activists knew that disaster would

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<sup>17</sup> Ariel Aberg-Riger (2020) provides a useful general timeline of mutual aid throughout U.S. history. She highlights 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century mutual aid among African Americans and abolitionists and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century immigrant organizations. She notes a lull in mutual aid organizing after the Great Depression and the rise of McCarthyism and its reemergence in racial justice movements of the 1960s-1970s. Another resurgence took place in the 1980s-1990s led by LGBTQ activists during height of AIDS epidemic through organizations such as the Chicken Soup Brigade.

not affect the city equally” (Dawson 2017, 240; see also Feuer 2012). Activists mobilized their networks, social media skills, and knowledge of “improvising communal provision of food and other needs” from the occupation at Zuccotti Park to canvas marginalized neighborhoods, distribute resources, pressure the city government, and assist residents in navigating disaster aid bureaucracies (Dawson 2018, 241). Dawson calls these “communal solidarities forged in the teeth of calamity” “disaster communism” (Dawson 2017, 236) and emphasizes how mutual aid formations can offer a glimpse of how to organize society differently.

However, the case of Occupy Sandy also reveals certain limitations of mutual aid in relation to scale, cooptation, and the neoliberal state. Dawson shows how localized disaster communism does not necessarily pose a threat to the established social order because the neoliberal state welcomes efforts that outsource risk and the work of recovery onto individuals and communities. This is why, for example, the Department of Homeland Security published a complimentary study of Occupy Sandy noting that citizen-organized relief efforts set an important precedent for future climate disasters and proposing to “deepen bridges between hierarchical institutions and emergent response groups” (Homeland Security Studies and Analysis Institute 2013, 11). Furthermore, even though Occupy Sandy was composed of Occupy Wall Street activist networks, Occupy Sandy was not criminally targeted or repressed by the state to nearly the same extent because it was in essence filling official and privately outsourced recovery gaps. Elite capture of mutual aid also manifests in the larger cooptation by professional relief organizations that built from Occupy Sandy’s networks and data infrastructures to compete for grants, silo relief efforts, and depoliticize the issues that Occupy Sandy attempted to uplift (Dawson 2017). Others have provided cautionary analysis about the recent disconnection of mutual aid from organized labor and note the convergence between progressives and

conservatives in celebratory evaluations of mutual aid that “converge on critiques of the government’s capacity to provide for the many” (Wuest 2020). While the political urgency of autonomous collective sharing of resources cannot be diminished, these limitations are important to consider in order to go beyond surviving single disasters.

Mutual aid has been widely taken up in theory and practice during the global coronavirus pandemic. Some of the pandemic’s immediate effects manifest as a crisis of care, which ordinary people have attended to through solidarity pantries, grocery delivery systems, childcare and virtual schooling pods, homemade personal protective gear, unemployed councils, and crowdsourced bail and rent funds, to name a few. A growing left popular and academic literature on mutual aid situates these widespread care practices as defiant acts in response to inadequate state guarantees and as a “scaffolding” to building political change, greater autonomy, and locally rooted solidarity economies (Adler-Bell 2020; Roman-Alcalá 2020). Some of this literature seeks to both contextualize contemporary mutual aid within grassroots histories and serve as a “how-to” educational guide for novice participants and organizers through question-and-answer primers and appealing comic illustrations (Ad Astra Comix 2020; Climate Justice Alliance 2020).

## **Chapter Roadmap**

Chapter One summarizes the political economy of the debt crisis and austerity in Puerto Rico. I problematize the notion of “unpayable” debt and argue that Puerto Rico’s current bankruptcy must be analyzed in relation to history and coloniality. The chapter highlights how concerns emerge around the politics of debt incredulity and argues that debt, disaster, coloniality, and social vulnerability are mutually constitutive processes.

Chapter Two illuminates the making of uneven disaster and situates the research site of Las Carolinas, Caguas in time and space. I discuss hurricanes and mutual aid arrangements as historically contingent phenomena in Puerto Rico and examine the historical, spatial, environmental, and infrastructural particularities of Las Carolinas in order to unpack the impact of Hurricane Maria on this sector and its residents. I argue that these particularities illuminate patterns of inequality, debt-driven degradation, and environmental racism that in turn shaped the experience of disaster, disaster aid discrimination, and the forms of resistance that residents have engaged in before and after Hurricane Maria.

Chapter Three analyzes how disaster, recovery, and emergency management processes are governed in Puerto Rico through various state interventions. Using the framework of colonial-neoliberal disaster governance, I focus on the mobilization and effects of government agency discourses and practices. I analyze how disaster governance is oriented towards a resilience imperative and interventions in the home through bureaucratic expectations of ownership, technologies of self-management, and domestic consumerism. The chapter shows how federal disaster aid programs' exclusionary homeownership criteria come up against how property and ownership are locally recognized, understood, and lived. I argue that climate and disaster resilience is reinforced as a private task where the burden of responsibility falls on individual and household consumers. This institutional, top-down recovery framework contrasts with collective-oriented mutual aid recovery frameworks that I explore in the following two chapters.

Chapters Four and Five focus on the CAM Las Carolinas. I examine the everyday activities, space-making practices, and care relations that both critically recast official narratives and expectations of disaster recovery and resist the slow degradation and forms of abandonment

brought on by the debt crisis. Chapter Four explores the emergence of the CAM through the spatial occupation and rescue of the María Montañez Gómez School. The chapter centers around the school before and after the Puerto Rico Department of Education shut it down in May 2017. I show how the school rescue and its conversion into a CAM were not spontaneous, but rather actions shaped by the effects of uneven disaster, austerity education reform, and the trajectory of mothers' and other caregivers' longstanding struggles to defend the school and other community resources and public/social infrastructures. I argue that the school is as a socially significant site that crystalizes the colonial politics of disposability and debt capture as a social spatial process. School rescue and the materialization of alternative recovery practices and public forms of care through the CAM builds upon a historical politics of occupation/rescue in Puerto Rico. These practices refuse the logics of debt capture, repurpose long-standing forms of abandonment, and resist colonial-neoliberal disaster governance discussed in Chapter Three. Tactics of grassroots spatial rescue and occupation also resonate with the wider production of insurgent geographies of mutual aid emerging across the archipelago and disrupt the time bound temporality of disaster.

Chapter Five examines the specific ways that mutual aid is mobilized at the CAM Las Carolinas to shape what I term “infrastructures of care”—social relations that are vital to reimagining recovery otherwise. My framework departs from the tendency to understand mutual aid formations as short-term, static survival solutions and illustrates how mutual aid modes of care take shape through concrete relations. Drawing on a charitable aid group's visit to the CAM, I illustrate the tensions between mutual aid as practiced by CAM organizers and paternalistic charitable modes of care. I show how infrastructures of care are mobilized through accompaniment, self-organized material improvisations, locally created and administered assessment tools, enrichment activities for elders, food exchange, and intergenerational circuits

of care giving and receiving. I argue that infrastructures of care are central to reimagining recovery from the grassroots, supporting, and partially collectivizing social reproduction of the elderly and/or disabled people and their caregivers in material and affective ways.

Shifting from a grassroots mutual aid politics to an international politics of debt and anti-debt movements, Chapter Six brings in distinct ethnographic spaces, sources, and people to rescale the question of Puerto Rico's recovery in terms of debt resistance activism. It centers around the coalition movement for a citizen debt audit led by the *Frente Ciudadano por la Auditoría de la Deuda* (Citizen Front for the Debt Audit, or *Frente*). The chapter moves backwards and forwards in time, again revisiting the 2019 *Verano Boricua* and public grievances that led up to the mobilizations. I argue that debt auditing is a contested tactic and process that for some represents a *rendición de cuentas* (a reckoning or accountability). I show how the struggle over the audit builds upon internationalist vocabularies of debt repudiation that reinterpret the obligation between debtor and creditor through counter-moralities of debt. The chapter attempts to scale up the reimagining of recovery and contribute to discussions that “internationalize” Puerto Ricans’ engagements with debt resistance and visions of reckoning and repair in the age of climate disruption.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **A Brief Political Economy of Puerto Rico's Debt Crisis**

#### **“Unpayable” Debt, Bankruptcy, and Austerity**

In June 2015, former Governor Alejandro García-Padilla declared to the *New York Times* that Puerto Rico's public debt was “unpayable.” In the wake of a credit downgrading, this declaration prompted discussions about Puerto Rico as the “Greece of the Caribbean.”<sup>1</sup> However, these conversations often obscured the historical context around Puerto Rico's now over decade long economic crisis and the colonial and structural forces that resulted in a so-called “debt spiral” and the largest municipal debt bankruptcy in U.S. history. Public debt, climate disaster, coloniality, and social vulnerability are mutually constitutive processes in Puerto Rico. In the context of bankruptcy, Puerto Ricans are in fact debtors, but the manifestations of “unpayable” public debt in everyday life are often obscured. This chapter provides a brief introduction to the making of Puerto Rico's historic bankruptcy, the politics of debt incredulity, and how the debt crisis shaped the social disaster and parameters of recovery after Hurricane Maria. It situates the more grounded analysis in the following chapters that shows how the debt crisis manifests in everyday life, impacts the possibility of recovery, and shapes how people organize in the wake of disaster.

The framing around “unpayable” reifies the notion of debt culpability—Puerto Rico's “broken promise, a failure to meet [itself] in the future” (Zambrana 2021a, 15). Conventional economic accounts uphold the culpability narrative by portraying Puerto Rico's unpayable debt as the inevitable result of fiscal irresponsibility, government excess, and resistance to

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion on the complexities of the comparison between Puerto Rico and Greece, see Jahn and Molinari 2015.



“sacrifice” across sectors. In contrast, perspectives that draw on racial capitalism and coloniality demonstrate how public debt has historically been integral to the reproduction of Puerto Rico’s political-economic arrangement, now in its latest iteration with the Oversight Board setting much of the territory’s future directions. As philosopher Rocío Zambrana argues, *debt is a form of coloniality* that “actualizes, adapts, reinscribes race/gender/class posited by the history of colonial violence that produced the modern capitalist world” (Zambrana 2021a, 11). The coloniality of debt is made evident in the “unequal distribution of precariousness, dispossession, and violence in the territory” (Ibid.; see also Grosfoguel 2003; Quijano 2000). In other words, it is made evident in everyday life.

I argue that Puerto Rico’s debt crisis laid the groundwork for the making of *unnatural* disaster and exacerbated its aftermath. Indeed, the 2017 hurricanes caused widespread devastation in part due to uncompromising public disinvestment and the structural production of social and climate vulnerability. Second, Hurricane Maria and ongoing debt restructuring deals sharpened the crisis and the visible manifestations of debt in everyday life. This heightened visibility and the bankruptcy court’s “injunction to repay” (Zambrana 2021a, 15) facilitated new political spaces for “denaturalizing” and contesting Puerto Rico’s public debt. Zambrana calls this contestation “subversive interruption”—a historical reckoning practice that moves from financial debts to historical debts in order to address colonial debts (Ibid. 15). Zambrana and others remind us of the “ambivalence of debt” and its capacity as a relation of social power to “set in motion logics of capture, punishment, and debasement, but it can also generate a space and time of reckoning with material and historical debts” (Zambrana 2021a, 86; see also Godreau-Aubert 2018; Graeber 2011). As this study demonstrates, Puerto Ricans challenge the relations and effects of debt through different political modalities that indirectly subvert the

effects of the debt in daily life or directly make political claims on debt. Some of these modalities include mutual aid, alternative space-making practices of rescue/occupation, and a politics of debt incredulity, auditing, cancellation, and internationalist reparations. In Chapter Six I draw on decolonial and internationalist perspectives to discuss the political demand to audit Puerto Rico's debt as part of a public reckoning necessary to reimagining the terms of recovery.

Mainstream tendencies situate the debt crisis within the first two decades of the 2000s, but the origins date back farther in time with roots in Puerto Rico's postwar transition from an agricultural to an industrial economy. The Puerto Rican government borrowed heavily from U.S. financial markets to modernize infrastructures to support industrialization-by-invitation mid-century development. However, the "industrial enclave" economic model dominated by multinational subsidiaries lacked integration in the local economy. Both the economic model and *Estado Libre Asociado* political arrangement showed signs of decline by the 1960s, as public debt increased by about 90 percent between 1969 and 1973 (Quiñones-Pérez and Seda-Irizarry 2016, 93). By the 1970s in the midst of the oil shocks, Puerto Rico lost some of its competitive advantage to an increasingly globalizing market. In response, Congress created Section 936 of the U.S. Tax Code in 1976 to attract capital-intensive industries to the territories through federal tax exemptions. As the collapse of Bretton Woods opened up the global flow of financial capital, Puerto Rico also "became a focal point for investors' global financial strategy" through Section 936 (Quiñones-Pérez and Seda-Irizarry 2016, 94). Many foreign and U.S. banks opened subsidiaries in Puerto Rico to use Section 936 "to launder their profits from the mainland through an accounting game that transferred their profits to the Puerto Rican subsidiaries" (Grosfoguel 2003, 59).

As labor-intensive industries closed and moved elsewhere in the Global South, Puerto Rico's public utility corporations lost their biggest customers and main source of revenue, thus becoming more heavily dependent on central government funding. During the initial period of deindustrialization and the territory's 1974 fiscal crisis, the commissioned "Tobin Report" examined public finances and recommended an austerity program of budget cuts, minimum wage reductions, and public worker freezes (Tobin 1976). Despite these recommendations and the new tax incentives, growth slowed by the 1990s as the U.S. began to phase out Section 936 from 1996-2006. Under Governor Pedro Rosselló (*Partido Nuevo Progresista*, or PNP), the 1990s marked a privatization period targeting public services including medical facilities, the Puerto Rico Aqueduct and Sewer Authority, and the public telephone company. Economists José Caraballo-Cueto and Juan Lara argue that contrary to conventional explanations locating Puerto Rico's unsustainable public debt as a result of excess government employment, a bloated welfare state, and inherent corruption, a "dependent industrialization (and dependent deindustrialization, when incentives were removed)" more accurately explains the indebteding process (2018, 3). As they show, Puerto Rico's local industrial policy was consistently subordinated to U.S. policy decisions.

Puerto Ricans resisted, intervened in, and shaped these (de)industrialization and neoliberalization processes through environmental, feminist, anticolonial, and demilitarization struggles, labor activism, and student movements (Abraham Childs 2015; Casey 2002; Dietrich 2013; McCaffrey 2002; Rosa 2016; Susser 1985). Without an alternative development model in place after the Section 936 elimination, the territorial government issued more debt to cover deficits throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, leading to stagnation, austerity, and a severe

economic downturn (Bernabe 2018; Caraballo Cueto and Lara 2018; Dietz 1982; Quiñones-Pérez and Seda-Irizarry 2016).

The emergence of the current crisis also coincided with Puerto Rico's shifting geopolitical symbolic and military importance for U.S. empire after the fall of the Soviet Union. This shift was perhaps most notably marked in 2003 by the transnational struggle that achieved the shutdown of the U.S. Naval Training Base that occupied, enclosed, and contaminated the island municipality of Vieques for over six decades.<sup>2</sup> The colonial relation, however, is not a unidirectional explanation for the current crisis. As Argeo Quiñones-Pérez and Ian Seda-Irizarry point out, part of the crisis is indeed "self-inflicted" because Puerto Rico's ruling elites from the territory's two major political parties poorly managed public funds and the territory's limited fiscal autonomy by consistently expanding tax exemption laws, using public debt to finance expenditures, and creating "extra constitutional" kinds of debt to work around existing constitutional limits.

The municipal bond market reveals and reproduces racial geographies of debt across the U.S. imperial formation. Drawing on theories of racial capitalism that underscore value production as a racialized process, scholars have shown that the U.S. municipal bond market facilitates extractive flows of debt from marginalized locations to investment institutions, underwriters, and financiers, directly shaping patterns of inequality over the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Jenkins 2021; Ponder 2021; Robinson 2000; Roy 2018). For example, Puerto Rico's municipal bonds are triple tax-exempt because of a structure that Congress set up in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to facilitate infrastructure programs in U.S. unincorporated territories. Ultimately, this debt structure made

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<sup>2</sup> Despite the end of active naval practices, Vieques is still experiencing the environmental, health, and political consequences of military occupation. Furthermore, Viequenses have not gotten their land returned or restored. The U.S. Navy transferred the lands used for arms storage and testing to U.S. Fish and Wildlife, understood by many as an extension of the occupation under a different federal agency.

Puerto Rico's municipal bonds attractive and profitable for hedge fund investors targeting distressed debt after Puerto Rico's debt was downgraded to "junk" status in 2014 (Fusté 2017). Furthermore, nearly half of Puerto Rico's \$74 billion bond debt is not principal, but rather interest from capital appreciation bonds (CABs) and underwriters' fees (Bhatti and Sloan 2016).<sup>3</sup> Before Puerto Rico's record-breaking bankruptcy, six out of the nine largest municipal bankruptcies in U.S. history had taken place in cities with majority Black or Latinx populations (Ponder 2021, 15). Puerto Rico's "unpayable" public debt is thus a reflection of the colonial arrangement, larger patterns of racialized predatory finance, and the complicity of the local ruling class.

Austerity makes the violence of debt palpable and traceable. The early 2000s and the 2008 global crisis marked a period of deepening austerity and what some have called "the lost decade" (Godreau Aubert 2018, 44). Austerity measures have included new sales taxes, mass government layoffs, cuts to public education and pensions, rollbacks in labor rights, public sector employment reduction through attrition resulting in 90,000 jobs eliminated since 2006, and the privatization of public goods and services such as the airport, highways, education (via school closures and charter school subsidies), and electricity generation and distribution. The quotidian burdens of debt-induced austerity become tangible particularly through household consumption. For example, since the private North American company Luma Energy LLC took over Puerto Rico's public electric authority in June 2021, a 7.6 percent increase in household energy consumption rates has already taken effect.

These austerity measures contributed to the growing precarity of Puerto Rican workers and middle classes, women, and Puerto Ricans racialized as nonwhite, leading to mass expulsion

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<sup>3</sup> Public Law 7 of 2009 exacerbated predatory debt practices in Puerto Rico by eliminating protections around how the government could use refunding bonds (Bhatti and Sloan 2016).

through emigration to the continental U.S. Between 2020-2014, over 50,000 people left Puerto Rico each year, surpassing the record numbers of the mid-century “Great Migration” (Quiñones-Pérez and Seda-Irizarry 2016, 91). At the same time, new tax break policies created in 2012 lure millionaire and billionaire foreign investors to Puerto Rico. During this period of selective austerity and tax benefits for new investors, Puerto Rico’s total public debt increased by 64 percent between 2006 and 2014 (Bernabe 2018). As Zambrana notes, debt and debt restructuring in the federal bankruptcy court “*trade with life itself*, not only undermining the most basic material conditions for populations in the territory, but continuing modalities of dispossession and expulsion that renew the work of race, gender, and class in the territory” (Zambrana 2021b, 126, my emphasis).

The contemporary case of Puerto Rico is not exceptional but rather invites engagement with other histories. For instance, Wall Street banking and North American financial interests have been central to the production and operationalization of racial hierarchies and U.S. imperial interventions in the Caribbean since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Puerto Rico, the local business class, nationalists led by Pedro Albizu Campos, and labor militants all rallied against U.S. banks during the 1930s banking and economic crises. Like the transnational anti-imperialist uprisings across Latin America in the previous decade that challenged U.S. financial and military power, critics in Puerto Rico associated U.S. control of the banking sector as a symptom of colonialism (Hudson 2017; Rosenberg 1999). Furthermore, the patterns of fiscal discipline and structural adjustment playing out in Puerto Rico today are informed by the structural adjustment orientations of international institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Kruger, Teja and Wolfe 2015). Puerto Rico’s debt crisis and popular uprisings also draw parallels to the

1980s debt crises in Latin America and demands for the cancellation of illegitimate debts (Edelman 1999; Walton 2001).

### **On the Intersections of Debt and Disaster**

Both the debt crisis managed in federal courts under the direction of an unelected, U.S.-appointed Oversight Board and the “aftershocks” of the hurricanes laid bare Puerto Rico’s political subordination to the U.S. and exacerbated deep societal fractures (Bonilla and LeBrón 2019). Nonetheless, overlapping crises also open new grassroots and political possibilities. As the political and social disaster unfolded, the embeddedness of my original questions about debt and debt resistance became more theoretically and politically evident in unexpected empirical places. The aftermath of the hurricanes and the disaster recovery processes became a methodological lens to analyze the often-inconspicuous traces of the debt crisis, how people negotiate, politicize, and contest the effects of debt, and how governance techniques articulate in light of bankruptcy and climate disaster.

Scholars have argued that debt capture operationalizes the coloniality of power and racial capitalism in the age of financialized capitalism (Obregón 2018; Zambrana 2018). I maintain that environmental injustice, climate change vulnerability, and the making of unnatural disasters are also sustained by and reproduced through debt capture. Zambrana’s work is insightful for understanding debt capture in Puerto Rico. Drawing on Maurizio Lazzarato, Zambrana argues that debt is an apparatus for the extraction of value that involves “expulsion, dispossession, and precaritization through which race/gender/class hierarchies are deepened, intensified, posited anew” (Zambrana 2021a, 10). Zambrana specifies that taxation and austerity are key mechanisms of debt capture in Puerto Rico: regressive taxation for the general

population and tax exemptions for bondholders, elites, and corporations coupled with rollbacks in essential services. I add that debt capture articulates through climate disaster and recovery processes. This study thus advances conversations that have typically been separated by threading together questions of debt, environmental disaster, and recovery—specifically how governance techniques adapt to the crisis conjuncture and how everyday people in Puerto Rico negotiate and contest these intersecting processes.

On a macro level, Puerto Rico’s debt payment obligations shape the limits and possibilities of what Puerto Ricans and those in solidarity call a “just recovery.” As a counter-hegemonic framework distinct from the colonial-neoliberal disaster governance that I describe in Chapter Three, just recovery centers environmental stewardship, social justice, and the needs of people over capital (Yeampierre and Klein 2017). As Marisol LeBrón writes, “after María many Puerto Ricans saw first-hand that debt equals death” (Lebrón 2021, 42). In other words, Puerto Rico’s public debt obligations and austerity’s toll on infrastructure and social reproduction directly impacted whether people would live, die, or flee in the wake of the hurricanes. Even before Hurricane Maria, a 2016 study on vulnerable populations and disaster response argued that, considering the fiscal crisis, it would be “utopic” to think that Puerto Rico could achieve an effective national disaster response that centered the wellbeing of the most vulnerable, including nearly half the population living under the poverty line and nearly 20 percent of the population living with a disability (Padilla et al. 2016, 162).

A brief overview of recent debt negotiations and fiscal discipline plans helps to illustrate the urgent stakes. In March 2021, the Oversight Board filed its plan of adjustment to restructure the central government’s debt, which includes some \$50 billion in pension obligations and \$35 billion in general obligations bonds (GO)—the debt stream most heavily



invested by Wall Street hedge funds, popularly known as “vulture funds.”<sup>4</sup> GO bonds most clearly demonstrate debt bondage as integral to colonial capitalism as it took shape in the 1940s onwards. As José Laguarta Ramírez argues, colonial capitalism “is characterized less by the direct coercion and extraction of raw materials typical of classical colonialism than by accumulation through dependent development, with a legitimizing measure of local autonomy” (2018, 7). The 1952 Constitution of Puerto Rico (ratified by a popular referendum in Puerto Rico but unilaterally amended by U.S. Congress) establishes GO bonds as the *first claim* on available Commonwealth resources.<sup>5</sup> The plan of adjustment—which still requires court analysis, legislative action, and creditor approval—includes a \$7 billion cash payout for hedge funds and reduces the \$50 billion central government debt (GO and Public Buildings Authority) by only 23 percent when the cash payout is factored in (Dennis 2021). Despite the Oversight Board’s claim that the adjustment plan reflects the effects of the pandemic, the recession, and a series of natural disasters, this cut is nearly the same as what was proposed in the first 2019 debt adjustment plan. It is also significantly lower than liberal economists’ suggestion that “debt sustainability” can only be restored with 60-73 percent debt relief plus full cancellation of unpaid interest, based on calculations before the 2017 hurricanes (Gluzmann, Guzman, and Stiglitz 2018).<sup>6</sup>

The debt adjustment plan directly impacts Puerto Ricans’ household finances. For example, it imposes a controversial 8.5 percent pension cut for public sector retirees receiving more than \$1,500/month and eliminates Christmas, summer, and medical bonuses and pension cost-of-living adjustments for retirees across the board. Furthermore, the plan omits the question

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<sup>4</sup> Leading hedge funds seeking repayment in Puerto Rico’s bankruptcy include Oppenheimer, Franklin, and Aurelius Capital Management, which also profited from Argentina’s debt crisis.

<sup>5</sup> See Centro para una Nueva Economía’s (2015) analysis on Puerto Rico’s debt structure and bondholder claims.

<sup>6</sup> In contrast to activists’ understandings of debt relief, the authors’ debt sustainability calculations do not include considerations about the legitimacy or legality of Puerto Rico’s public debt, in other words, the conditions and assumptions under which the debt was contracted and to whose benefit.

of debt incredulity and drops debt illegality discussions, despite the Oversight Board’s own 2019 legal challenge to \$6 billion of GO debt (Dennis 2021). Debt incredulity—exercised by citizens, legal professionals, independent evaluators, and even bondholder groups—destabilizes the expected obligation to pay by scrutinizing the legitimacy, legality, constitutionality, morality, and coloniality of Puerto Rico’s public debt in an effort to both shape public opinion and intervene in debt renegotiation and cancellation. Debt incredulity mobilizes what David Graeber (2011) called the “flexibility” of the concept of debt to a broader politics of debt resistance against profit-based debtor-creditor relations. International networks such as the Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt and U.S. movements such as Strike Debt represent a politics of debt incredulity that draw on precedents of debt resistance networks. Some of these precedents include Jubilee 2000/Jubilee South, the World Social Forum coalitions, and anti-globalization transnational networks such as Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions to Aid Citizens (ATTAC), all of which brought various demands to “forgive” or cancel Third World external debts in the 1990s and 2000s (Ancelovici 2002; Caffentzis 2013; Ross 2014).

The Oversight Board is charged with drawing up Puerto Rico’s fiscal plans that guide the annual budget, debt restructuring, and future investor projections.<sup>7</sup> In these documents, officials treat disasters as “shocks” or resolvable problems to be addressed with technical fixes and updated projections about macroeconomic trends, population, and the impact of structural reforms (Financial Oversight and Management Board 2018). According to this view, the overlapping disasters in Puerto Rico (hurricanes, earthquakes, and pandemic) are thus both measurable glitches on Puerto Rico’s path out of bankruptcy *and* opportunities for economic

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<sup>7</sup> Creditors with claims on Puerto Rico’s debt are divided into 66 “classes” for bankruptcy proceedings according to the type of claim they have. Creditors range from Wall Street hedge funds to small mutual fund investors and retired pensioners in Puerto Rico.

growth via federal funds and thus increased debt service capacity. Growth projections are based on making a come-back from rock bottom and assumptions about federal stimulus allocations. For example, in the first revised fiscal plan after the 2017 hurricanes, the Oversight Board suggested that initial macroeconomic volatility would be followed by positive growth based on post-disaster gross domestic product (GDP) data from disparate (and arguably incomparable) jurisdictions such as New Orleans, Grenada, and Haiti. Positive growth predictions in Puerto Rico are based on deeply racio-colonial assumptions—namely that the federal government will guarantee disaster recovery funds and timely stimulus and that Puerto Rico will approve the necessary legislative measures to implement draconian structural reform and fiscal discipline.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the Oversight Board projects that Puerto Rico will receive \$110 billion in federal disaster relief funds over the next decade (Financial Oversight and Management Board 2021). However, the federal government recycled the racio-colonial logics that first subjected Puerto Rico to federal oversight and a bankruptcy process out of their control—i.e., explanations of fiscal irresponsibility, backwardness, debt addiction, and inherent corruption—to place onerous and discriminatory restrictions and delays on major streams of disaster and mitigation aid, parts of which I explore in Chapter Three (Office of Inspector General 2021). Analysts argue that the two-year delay of \$8.3 billion for mitigation activities was a racist and punitive political maneuver disguised as neutral “oversight” (Center for a New Economy 2021).

In the midst of a global pandemic, the April 2021 fiscal plan paints a similarly positive trajectory and estimates a \$10 billion surplus during FY 2022-2026 due to federal stimulus and structural reforms. A large portion of this surplus, of course, is expected to go towards debt service obligations (Financial Oversight and Management Board 2021). Despite the optimistic

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<sup>8</sup> These structural reforms include welfare, education, energy, infrastructure, and “ease of doing business reform,” which guts environmental assessments for construction and new development permits.

initial projections, the Oversight Board projects that Puerto Rico will return to deficits as early as 2029, possibly triggering another bankruptcy (Santamaría 2021). From the Oversight Board’s perspective, overlapping disasters are not cause for reconsidering structural reform or debt cancellation, but rather understood as “shock” events that explain “an extended restructuring process” expected to cost Puerto Ricans \$1.6 billion from FY 2018-2026 (Financial Oversight and Management Board 2021, 57).<sup>9</sup> The fiscal plans and budgets oriented toward austerity and repayment of an unaudited public debt foreclose the possibility of preparing Puerto Rico for climate change. For example, the Oversight Board rejected a number of proposals in PNP Governor Pedro Pierluisi’s first budget draft, including \$18 million to bolster climate emergency initiatives within the Department of Natural and Environmental Resources (DRNA) (Serrano 2021). In short, Puerto Rico is on a path to encounter mutually constitutive future climate disasters and a possible second bankruptcy.

These concerns go beyond economic abstractions. The structural conditions that produce environmental and climate change vulnerability among colonized and racialized populations in the Caribbean (and small island states elsewhere) and transform environmental hazard *events* such as Hurricane Maria into *unnatural* social disasters—what Mimi Sheller, drawing on Sylvia Wynter, calls the “coloniality of climate”—are also part of the story of Puerto Rico’s “unpayable” debt (Sheller 2020). I found that debt is a challenging object of analysis because it is simultaneously ubiquitous and enigmatic. In the chapters that follow, I attempt to show how Puerto Rico’s public debt intersects daily life experiences in not so obvious ways (through infrastructures and patterns of government abandonment, disaster governance, life disruptions, national education reform and its local impacts, and alternative space-making

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<sup>9</sup> This sum includes restructuring-related expenditures such as legal and consultant fees accrued during the PROMESA Title III bankruptcy proceedings as well as the operating costs for the Oversight Board.

practices) and in more explicit ways such as political organizing that mobilizes a language of debt and anti-debt.

## CHAPTER TWO

### History, Hurricanes, and the Making of Uneven Disaster

*Temporal, temporal, allá viene el temporal.  
¿Que será de mi Borinquén, cuando llegue el temporal?*

Hurricane, hurricane, here comes the hurricane.  
What will become of my Borinquén when the hurricane arrives?<sup>1</sup>  
-Manuel Jiménez

On September 13, 1928, Don Taso went about his daily routine until the winds picked up. In the absence of predictive meteorological technologies to warn the population, Don Taso—the protagonist in Sidney Mintz’s *Worker in the Cane* (1974)—cut his workday short once the storm worsened. He watched Hurricane San Felipe II unfold from the Moras’ store while keeping an eye on his home swaying in the winds (Mintz 1974, 111-113). He describes the surroundings after the Category 5 hurricane passed: “One would find his flat on the ground; another’s would be spread about in a thousand pieces; and so it went” (Ibid., 113). After some time of self-provisioned recovery among neighbors, Don Taso describes taking a trip to the municipality of Coamo, where an organization was “beginning to distribute some food” from a bus (Ibid., 114).

Like San Felipe II, Hurricane Maria was not unique in its untimely arrival nor in its effect in compounding crisis. Hurricanes throughout Puerto Rico’s history have coincided with periods of political and economic transformation *and* have played an active role in shaping these transformations. Furthermore, disaster events, like climate change, have uneven impacts across

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<sup>1</sup> “*Temporal*” (Storm) *Plena* lyrics written by Manuel Jiménez in 1929 about Hurricane San Felipe II (1928). The lyrics show how hurricanes intersect popular culture and the popular imagination. *Plena* is a traditional Puerto Rican musical genre often written with satirical lyrics. Today, it is common to hear *Plena* music at popular protests. Borinquén is the indigenous Taíno name for Puerto Rico.

society. This chapter moves from broad, historical themes around hurricanes and mutual aid in early to mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century Puerto Rico to the specific historical formation of one of my primary research sites—Las Carolinas, Caguas. I aim to make a dual argument. First, I argue that the aftermath of storms and mutual aid arrangements are historically specific and contingent phenomena. Second, the historical, spatial, and infrastructural particularities of Las Carolinas illuminate the unequal distribution of services and the forms of environmental racism the sector's residents experience. These dynamics are central to understanding the effects of the debt crisis, the María Montañez Gómez School closure, and the local and uneven impacts of the 2017 hurricanes. Situating Las Carolinas in time and space provides a foundation to understand the struggles over resources that residents engaged in before and after Hurricane Maria and the mutual aid formation that emerged, which was just as much about confronting the violence of debt as it was about post-disaster response and recovery.

First, I provide an overview of select 20<sup>th</sup>-century hurricanes in Puerto Rico to show that major storms play a role in reshaping the socio-political landscape. I draw on scholars whose work emphasizes how environmental history articulates through relations of power. As we will see, Hurricane Maria, its aftermath, and the (mis)management of the response did not unfold in a historical vacuum; indeed, questions about the organization of response and recovery resonate over time. I then highlight historical mutual aid arrangements within Puerto Rico's mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century social reform programs that took place in conjunction with agrarian reform. This brief overview is not meant to trace mutual aid arrangements comprehensively in Puerto Rico, but rather to underscore that mutual aid arrangements are historically specific and contingent. I then situate Las Carolinas within Puerto Rico's mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century agrarian reform and examine how everyday inequalities shaped an uneven disaster. For instance, inequalities manifest through

spatial location, basic services, and infrastructures illuminate the unequal effects of disaster events and the layered experiences that shaped the community's post-Maria actions and how disaster was put to "political use" (Barrios 2017b, 152). This context is key for the following chapters because I argue that mutual aid organizing in Las Carolinas emerged from these layered experiences and common material conditions. Through this lens we see how survivors' post-Maria politicization is more complex than the time bound spontaneous survival mode it is often framed in.

### **Hurricanes, Politics, and Society: Historical Perspectives**

Hurricanes tend to highlight the contours of Puerto Rico's colonial relationship with the United States. For instance, the Category 5 Hurricane San Felipe II that Don Taso recounted for Sidney Mintz—and for which the epigraph *Plena* song was composed—dealt a destructive blow to Puerto Rico's coffee industry. The storm hit one year before the 1929 stock market crash and the onset of the Great Depression, catalyzing an economic downturn and one of the first major colonial migration waves of Puerto Ricans to the continental U.S. (Rivera 2020; Schwartz 2005). Just four years later, the Category 4 Hurricane San Ciprián made landfall during the Great Depression. San Ciprián devastated the archipelago's tobacco production and stalled the coffee production recovery. Historian Geoff Burrows writes that "the hurricanes also compounded the economic contraction of the global Depression and influenced local political life for the rest of the 1930s" (Burrows 2014, 2). Thus, the ensuing transformative New Deal programs in Puerto Rico such as the Puerto Rican Emergency Relief Administration, which later became the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration, were directly implemented in response to the 1928 and 1932 hurricanes and signified major shifts in colonial policy (Burrows 2014). Shifting away from



a model that relied on individual action, charities, and private relief organizations such as the Red Cross, the New Deal marked a period of the federal government assuming a more direct role in disaster relief in both the states and the territories (Schwartz 2015). Disaster recovery at this 20<sup>th</sup>-century conjuncture, as we see today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, was a process marked by environmental, political, colonial, and economic forces.

As natural phenomena at the intersections of the environment, history, and power, hurricanes have long been understood in relation to culture, society, and politics. While storms have differential impacts across Caribbean societies, historian Stuart Schwartz argues that hurricanes demonstrate “an underlying environmental unity that also provides a central thread or means to understand a Caribbean region too often viewed in terms of its insularity and cultural differences” (Schwartz 2007, 2). Scholars have analyzed hurricanes as central to shaping the Caribbean and the Atlantic world, influencing diverse forms of cultural production, religious belief, mythology, and social transformation (Carrero Morales 2013; Ortiz 2005; Schwartz 2015; Vidal 2008). Historian Teodoro Vidal studied forms of “traditional ecological knowledge” and beliefs that Puerto Ricans used to predict and prepare for oncoming weather events in the absence of meteorological technologies. For instance, an abundant avocado harvest was thought to be an ecological indicator that at least one hurricane would hit Puerto Rico in a given season (Vidal 2008).<sup>2</sup>

Scholars analyze how hurricanes articulate with relations of power, especially around questions about how aid is distributed and how recovery is defined. Some draw parallels between

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<sup>2</sup> There is debate about the etymology of “hurricane.” Some point to “*juracán*” as the phenetic name 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish colonizers gave to the natural weather phenomena that Taíno mythology attributed to the deity called Guabancex. On the other hand, the Oxford English Dictionary notes that “*huracán*” was introduced by Spanish colonizer Oviedo in his chronicle *Historia General de las Indias* based on the Carib indigenous peoples’ words for cyclones, *furacana* or *haurachana* (Oxford English Dictionary 2021).

Hurricane Maria and Hurricane San Felipe II in terms of the federal government's slow response and the discrepancies between how federal relief was mobilized in Puerto Rico versus the continental U.S. during the same hurricane season (Cabán 2017; Rivera 2020; Schwartz 2005). Building on these comparisons through environmental history, urban planning scholar Danielle Rivera examines disaster planning and response in Puerto Rico over time and proposes the framework of "disaster colonialism" to describe "the specific procedural mechanisms used to leverage disaster for the purpose of deepening colonization and coloniality" (Rivera 2020, 4). The institutional (mis)management evident in both Hurricane San Felipe II and Hurricane Maria, she argues, demonstrates how disaster colonialism operates "through institutional inaction or poor response" (Ibid.). Approaching the 2017 hurricanes through an environmental historical lens shows that disaster is co-constituted by power, colonialism, and particular political visions. Similarly, longstanding questions about how recovery is organized can often turn "hurricanes into tools for structuring society as well as lenses through which society and polity could be observed" (Schwartz 2005, 401).

The question of recovery often leads to mutual aid, which took on both "urgent and slow" forms after Hurricane Maria (Rosario and Ponder 2020). As a shifting and contextually specific set of practices and values, mutual aid relates to how people negotiate their relationship with land, the built environment, and the state in an effort to survive, thrive, and sustain social wellbeing. The following section briefly examines the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century *ayuda mutua* (aided self-help) programs in Puerto Rico.

### **Mutual Aid Arrangements in Historical Perspective: *Ayuda Mutua y Esfuerzo Propio***

Government social programs between the 1940s and the 1960s shed light on mutual aid

as a historically specific arrangement and set of social relations that take on political orientations among diverse social actors.<sup>3</sup> In the midst of Puerto Rico's agrarian reform described below, a number of community planning, educational, and housing programs emerged to address living conditions for landless *agregados* (sharecroppers), families who had recently acquired a *parcela* (land parcel), and agricultural workers who had been displaced to urban centers and lived in *arrabales* (urban slums). This section takes up the *Ayuda Mutua y Esfuerzo Propio* (Mutual Aid and Self-Help) housing program as a historical model in Puerto Rico oriented around mutual aid as a tool for colonial state formation (García-Colón 2009). I am not the first to link contemporary forms of mutual aid to this program. In a limited attempt to think about genealogies of mutual aid in Puerto Rico, I thus follow María Dolores Fernós and her colleagues who argue that community-led mutual aid after Hurricane Maria resonates with historical experiences in Puerto Rico such as the *Ayuda Mutua y Esfuerzo Propio* program (Dolores Fernós et al. 2018, 136-137).

Puerto Rico's Social Programs Administration (SPA), a special division of the Land Authority that became part of the Department of Agriculture and Commerce in 1950, was established in 1948 to oversee several initiatives. Government literature of the time presents the SPA as driven by an "ideology of community development" that urged citizens to "resolve their problems by using mutual aid," which ultimately "modified the whole concept of land distribution and resettlement" (Garcia Colon 2009, 82). The SPA promoted their development programs and community activism among rural populations through a publication called *La Junta*, whose name recalled "the peasant tradition of organizing mutual aid teams to bring in the harvest or accomplish any other enterprise" (Garcia Colon 2009, 82). One SPA program—the

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<sup>3</sup> While not detailed here, practices of social struggle throughout Puerto Rico's history can be understood as part of the longer genealogy of mutual aid. For example, land occupations and rescues during the 1960s-1970s, known as the *rescate* movement, would be essential to consider here (see Cotto 1990).

*Ayuda Mutua y Esfuerzo Propio* low-cost housing program—was piloted in 1941, formalized in 1949, and became part of larger trends to institutionalize self-help housing models and local government initiatives including youth programs, cooperatives, and hygiene programs that aimed to forge a habitus of democratic citizenship in the wake of the Second World War. The program was briefly revived in the 1970s, and then eliminated in 1996. Despite its short peak duration, 28,390 homes were constructed by 1966 in rural planned communities where landless agricultural workers had acquired *parcelas* in usufruct and in new urbanizations in San Juan (Fontáñez Torres et al. 2019).<sup>4</sup> This program situated housing access as a social issue requiring government intervention rather than an individual concern to be resolved by the free market. Also known as “aided self-help” or a “system of community action,” the housing model was based on collaborative community organization, government support, and communities’ identification of their own needs (Vásquez Calcerrada 1960). The program operated in conjunction with the government-organized elimination of San Juan slums that had expanded during the 1930s and 1940s in the wake of the Great Depression, Hurricane San Felipe II (1928), and Hurricane San Ciprián (1932). Scholars argue that the *Ayuda Mutua y Esfuerzo Propio* program was the government “betting on the reduction or even the neutralization of slum growth, as the acquisition of suitable homes for recently emigrated families to urban areas was made possible” (Rodríguez 2012, 15).<sup>5</sup>

The program combined government support with self-provisioning. Working groups of (male) “heads of households” organized the construction labor so that each participant would

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<sup>4</sup> Vásquez Calcerrada (1960) discusses the adoption of the *Ayuda Mutua y Esfuerzo Propio* model to relocate residents as part of the slum eradication politics in San Juan starting in 1956 with the clearance of the Hoare *arrabal*. The *Ayuda Mutua y Esfuerzo Propio* program was a relocation alternative for urban slum dwellers, along with the public housing projects, or *caseríos*.

<sup>5</sup> Here I am using the English translation of this chapter and the corresponding page numbers from this translation.

spend one working day on the house per week.<sup>6</sup> The government provided technical support, supervision, materials, machinery, and equipment. Participants enrolled in an application process, organized into working groups, established a timeline, and began construction with a small initial fee. Once the home was constructed, the participant entered into an interest-free payment plan with the government to cover the cost of materials and equipment use, which amounted to about \$300-\$350 (Fontáñez Torres et al. 2019; Ware 1953).

Mutual aid and self-help housing programs in Puerto Rico borrowed from and influenced global trends in housing policy at the time. Aided self-help housing models have been understood as ideologically flexible and thus adaptable to distinct political and historical contexts. These models were initially adopted after the First World War in the Soviet Union and European cities and more widely in North America after the Second World War (Harris 1999). In the 1940s, “Puerto Rico became the first jurisdiction in the world where aided self-help was made central to housing policy” (Harris 1998, 166).<sup>7</sup> After the Second World War, the U.S. promoted Puerto Rico as a showcase or laboratory of liberal democracy and capitalist development. In the words of former North American Governor Rexford Tugwell, Puerto Rico was “a good testing ground for American intentions” (Tugwell 1947, 10), which influenced geopolitical interests repackaged to international aid agencies and national governments in the developing world during the 1950s and 1960s. For instance, then Executive Director of the SPA, P.B. Vázquez Calcerrada, showcased Puerto Rico’s aided self-help housing models to an

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<sup>6</sup> This program worked through traditional, hetero-patriarchal gender roles. In Vázquez Calcerrada’s account, for example, women are represented in photos decorating newly constructed homes with “guidance by a home improvement agent” and accompanying husbands to the ceremonial inaugurations where participants signed their promissory notes with the government (Vázquez Calcerrada 1960, 25).

<sup>7</sup> Jacob Crane, who was Assistant Director of the U.S. Public Housing Administration and later served at the Housing and Home Finance Agency from 1947-1953, was a key figure in the theorization and promotion of aided self-help housing policy in the developing world and is said to have coined the term around 1945 (Harris 1998).

audience of international government officials at the 1960 World Planning and Housing Congress held in San Juan.

The *Ayuda Mutua y Esfuerzo Propio* program's organizing principles were oriented towards a certain nostalgia for the past and to restoring the "old traditions of cooperation and help to neighbors" (Vázquez Calcerrada 1960, 10). Government officials of the modernizing colonial state promoted the program as exemplifying individual initiative rather than government dependence, a framing that resonates with contemporary debates around whether *autogestión* (autonomous organizing) may reconfigure or challenge the limitations of *asistencialismo* (government assistance) (Villarubia-Mendoza and Vélez-Vélez 2020). Vázquez Calcerrada notes that the program was meant to create "a sense of responsibility and social dignity among the families which impels them to refuse a donation" (Vázquez Calcerrada 1960, 25). Government help, therefore, was supposed to be understood as a "loan," and repayment through labor, sweat equity, and personal initiative was a "moral credit" to absolve this debt (Vázquez Calcerrada 1960, 26). Of course, the official blueprint was not always executed as planned or as smoothly the government sources suggest (García-Colón 2009). People themselves navigated the complexities of the programs and shaped their elaborations on their ground.

This mutual aid arrangement thus reflects Puerto Rico's mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century political formation and the moral and gendered disciplining of modern colonial subjects during industrialization, urbanization, and political consolidation under the Commonwealth, or "Free Associated State" status (Suárez Findlay 2014). Urban planner Lucilla Fuller Marvel (2008) has called the program a model of collaborative community development. While this mutual aid arrangement was premised on limited government support and self-provisioning, contemporary mutual aid and *autogestión* arrangements position themselves in multiple ways in relation to "the

state,” which I examine in Chapter Four. These dynamics range from antagonistic to strategically collaborative relations. I now zoom in on Las Carolinas, Caguas, to situate the sector in space and time. The sector’s historical formation and marginalization give insight into the making of uneven disaster, disaster aid discrimination, and the forms of resistance that residents engage in.



Figure 2 - Map of Puerto Rico and municipalities, excluding the island municipalities of Vieques and Culebra. Source: ontheworldmap.com.

### **Agricultural History and Land Resettlements: Situating Las Carolinas in Space and Time**

This section provides a brief account of the historical formation of Las Carolinas in relation to Caguas and Puerto Rico more generally. It is by no means a comprehensive history, but rather meant to provide a basis to understand the sector’s development before and after agrarian reform.<sup>8</sup> This historical basis becomes significant for my discussion in Chapter Three on how diverse property arrangements in Las Carolinas shaped disaster aid exclusions, and for my later discussion on CAM elderly participants’ personal histories and generational experience.

<sup>8</sup> This narrative is limited by gaps in my data that I was unable to fill in part due to pandemic-related research interruptions.

Las Carolinas is a sector of Barrio Bairoa in the east-central municipality of Caguas.<sup>9</sup> The sector includes various spatial divisions, including Las Parcelas Viejas, Villa Cachucha, El Fanguito, Villa Chiringa, Los Reyes, and Los Ramos. Las Carolinas-Urbanización Las Carolinas is classified as its own subsector of Las Carolinas. The sector is bordered by Río Bairoa to the north, a gated residential urbanization called Hacienda San José to the south, the sector of Arbolada to the east, and the municipal line of Aguas Buenas to the west.<sup>10</sup>

After the U.S. invaded Puerto Rico in 1898 and Hurricane San Ciriaco devastated the coffee industry in 1899, export crop cultivation began to expand in the east-central region. By the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Caguas was the largest tobacco growing municipality in Puerto Rico (Ayala and Bergad 2001, 83), and small- to medium-scale sugar cultivation grew after the sugar processing *Central Santa Juana* opened in 1906 in Caguas (Solá 2011, 353). By 1910, the largest employers in Caguas were the locally owned tobacco factories, and tobacco crops accounted for 47 percent of the land cultivated in the municipality (Solá 2011, 356-357). Sugar cultivation expanded in the 1920s through the *colono* system where large and small landowners supplied the sugar mills (Solá 2011).

*Colonos* were not just from Puerto Rican-born families. For example, Antonio Longo González arrived in 1894 from Galicia, Spain, and ascended the ranks of the Caguas landed elite to become one of the municipality's largest landowners. By 1930, Longo González owned 26 farms in rural Caguas *barrios* totaling 2,702 *cuerdas* for sugar, tobacco, and subsistence crop cultivation as well as livestock grazing (Solá 2011, 366). Most of his farms were in Bairoa and

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<sup>9</sup> Municipalities in Puerto Rico are divided into Barrios (i.e., Barrio Bairoa), which are further sub-divided into sectors (i.e., Las Carolinas sector).

<sup>10</sup> Anecdotally, residents of Las Carolinas told me that the urbanization *Hacienda San José* was built on an archeological site and the former lands of one of the three major sugar processing *haciendas* in Caguas in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the same name (Solá 2011). This connection requires further corroboration.



“his properties had forty lodgings in which his two hundred ten resident laborers lived” (Ibid.). In other words, Longo González controlled “47 percent of the total resident working population in Bairoa” at the time (Ibid.). I mention this specific *colono* because Las Carolinas elder and self-described “founding” member of the sector, Justo, casually mentioned his name during our oral history as the “owner” of the lands comprising the Las Carolinas sector prior to the agrarian reform. The name seemed unremarkable at the time until I encountered Longo González again in historian José Solá’s analysis of the agrarian economy in Caguas. This brief historical context points to elite land concentration in the municipality in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Agrarian life and the livelihoods of Caguas landless workers drastically changed beginning the in 1940s.

On the cusp of the Great Depression and two devastating hurricanes, the rise of the *Partido Popular Democrático* (Popular Democratic Party, or PPD), Nationalist movement militancy, labor strikes of the 1930s, and the Second World War, Puerto Rico underwent significant transformation through development policies designed to reshape agriculture and rural life.<sup>11</sup> During the 1940s and early 1950s, Puerto Rico experienced a transformation into “a modern colony” (García-Colón 2020, 12). Through Law 26 of 1941, known as the Land Law, progressive New Deal Governor Rexford G. Tugwell (the last U.S.-appointed North American governor) and Puerto Rico’s PPD passed legislation to address the corporate *latifundios*’ concentration of land for sugar production and the conditions of landless workers. As anthropologist Ismael García-Colón notes, although land reform was a top-down process, rural subalterns played an active role in shaping the implementation and outcomes of these programs (García-Colón 2006). Title V of the Land Law aimed to resettle landless *agregados* on *parcelas* in line with the party’s promise to “make everyone a landholder” (Edel 1962, 40). In other

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<sup>11</sup> Major anthropological works documenting the transformations during this period include *The People of Puerto Rico* (Steward 1956) and Sidney Mintz’s *Worker in the Cane* (1974).

words, the intention of Title V was to “‘democratize’ land tenure through land distributions, eliminate social relations of servitude, and settle Puerto Rico’s highly mobile landless workers” (García-Colón 2006, 44). PPD leader Luis Muñoz Marín—then President of Puerto Rico’s Senate—was a key architect of this legislation that would help catapult him politically to become Puerto Rico’s first elected governor in 1948. The Land Authority acquired land from private owners and allotted *agregado* (male) heads of household “a parcel of up to three *cuerdas* for its house and for a small garden to augment the wage-earner’s salary” (Edel 1962, 40). Historian Eileen Suárez Findlay has studied the gendered dynamics of the *parcela* distribution and argues that the increasing availability of homes for Puerto Ricans and the government’s embrace of industrialization during the 1940s demonstrated “the centrality of domesticity to the construction of a modern society” (Suárez Findlay 2014, 60). She notes that even though the original definition of *agregado* was not explicitly gendered, the *parcela* eligibility requirement of being an agricultural wage laborer ensured that most recipients were men. At the time, the majority of rural women earned income from domestic labor and occasional agricultural work, essentially excluding them from *parcela* ownership (Findlay 2014, 62).

Las Carolinas was developed as a residential resettlement sector through this mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century agrarian reform and *parcela* distribution program. A number of the elderly people I came to know had acquired the initial *parcelas* and consider themselves “founding” members of the sector where they still reside. After acquiring their *parcelas*, some became employed in manufacturing, the service sector, or public works. In addition to *parcela* settlements, people described the sector’s historical formation through “*asaltando terreno*” (unauthorized occupation and self-provisioned residential establishment, sometimes referred to as land “rescues”) and more recent residential urbanizations.

In the post-war period, political and economic orientation was shifting from agriculture to industry to attract outside manufacturers and capital. Entrenched U.S. corporate sugar interest groups called into question key components of the Land Law. For example, Matthew Edel notes that “*Parceleros* were said to be wasting scarce resources, and the Title V program was claimed to waste needed funds on the creation of new rural slums” (Edel 1962, 57). In this context, under the last U.S.-appointed governorship of Jesús Piñero, the PPD-majority legislature voted in 1948 to restructure the *parcela* program and shift it to the SPA. Las Carolinas elders consistently pinpointed 1955 as the year that the *parcela* resettlements began in the sector, which coincides with the program’s restructuring and expansion under the SPA.

This restructuring also marked an ideological shift. An emphasis was placed on *parcelas* as “rural communities,” not “as before, on the simple act of freeing [*agregados*] from landlords and *mayordomos*” (Edel 1963, 28). Public services were introduced, and new programs of mutual aid housing development were advanced with the intention to “urbanize the countryside” (García-Colón 2006, 46). However, studies show that these programs largely failed in their intention to thwart mass movement to urban areas and emigration to the continental U.S. (Edel 1963; García-Colón 2006).

Another major shift in resettlement communities occurred with the 1968 election of Luis A. Ferré of the opposition party, the PNP. Originally, *agregados* received the *parcelas* in usufruct because PPD architects of the agrarian reform were concerned that ownership title might lead recipients “to resell the land to the original owners at the first sign of economic hardship” (Edel 1962, 40). Despite this arrangement, Elena Padilla demonstrated that *parcela* holders frequently exchanged their plots informally without government authorization (Padilla 1956, 271). In order to undermine PPD support among *parcela* holders, the PNP-led government

began to grant ownership titles in 1969, allowing *parcela* holders to buy and sell their *parcelas* (García-Colón 2006). *Parcela* title granting proceeded unevenly throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, resulting in resettlement communities such as Las Carolinas with diverse property and ownership arrangements. These arrangements played a significant role in disaster aid discrimination after Hurricane Maria.

The political and social impact of Puerto Rico's agrarian reform and the *parcela* resettlement project cannot be overstated. By 1959, over 52,000 families had been resettled in 304 rural communities, and over 30,000 of these resettlements took place between 1948-1959 (Edel 1963, 32). Ismael García-Colón (2009) argues that the *parcela* land distributions and other components of the agrarian reform served as an instrument by which the state and subalterns produced a particular form of spatial organization that helped to consolidate the local hegemony of the PPD backed by U.S. colonial rule.

### **Unequal Disaster, and “*Otras Marías*”**

Drawing on Nancy Tuana's “ecologically informed intersectional” approach (Tuana 2019), this section provides a brief overview of the everyday inequalities in Las Carolinas produced through spatial location, environmental harm, racism, class difference, and colonial power. I emphasize inequality through spatial location, the environment, and infrastructure because the social organization of space helps to illuminate the particular effects of the debt crisis, Hurricane Maria, and how residents responded. I argue that attention to the local manifestations of these intersections, embedded in everyday infrastructural and mobility precarities, offers insight into the uneven geography of disaster alongside the spatiality of debt (Harker 2020). I highlight entanglements between government neglect exacerbated by Puerto

Rico's debt crisis, limited access to services and mobility, citizen demands on the state, and residents' own understandings of these processes. Attention to these entanglements demonstrates the uneven effects of Hurricane Maria. As CAM Las Carolinas co-founder, Adriana said as she reflected on the storm's one-year anniversary, "Before living through María, we experienced *otras Marías* (other Marias). Because for people with less resources, we're the ones who are always at the bottom." In other words, the devaluation of life and increased vulnerability to environmental and economic harms is a cumulative process of "slow violence" (Nixon 2011) exacerbated by, rather than produced by, a hurricane.

Sixty to 70 percent of Las Carolinas's 2,500 residents are over 55 years old—a demographic characteristic reflective of Puerto Rico's aging population—and one in three households lives below the poverty line (Bureau of the U.S. Census 2017). According to the Residents' Association, Las Carolinas has lost an estimated 20 percent of its population since 2013, and residents have left for other towns or the continental U.S. at accelerated rates since 2017, when the Puerto Rico Department of Education shut down the María Montañez Gómez elementary school four months before Hurricanes Irma and Maria.

Las Carolinas is segregated from surrounding gated, wealthier areas of Caguas in terms of services, infrastructure, and environmental hazards, including flooding, mudslides, and groundwater contamination.<sup>12</sup> Las Carolinas is only accessed through *Avenida Las Carolinas*—a

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<sup>12</sup> The El Fanguito section of Las Carolinas highlights patterns of environmental racism and government abandonment that particularly vulnerabilize residents here. El Fanguito lies low in a valley where rains exacerbate sewage flooding and groundwater contamination, leading to its designation as a flood zone after Hurricane Georges (1998). Anecdotally, people described El Fanguito historically as "*terreno asaltado*," or residences established through unauthorized occupation. They also referred to a government-sponsored relocation program for El Fanguito residents after Hurricane Georges, which offered monetary compensation and relocation to an urbanization outside of Las Carolinas. Some residents accepted the relocation offer while others refused it and remained in their homes, making them ineligible for certain types of disaster aid. In conversations with El Fanguito residents who opted to stay, the government relocation program was described as discriminatory coercion to displace residents rather than invest in mitigation efforts to allow people to stay in their homes. I was told that the relocation package offered income-based low-interest mortgages for the new home, which would bring a new form of homeowner indebtedness

two-lane roadway that turns off the main Route 156 and passes a bridge over Río Cagüitas. Residents understand the limited access to enter and exit the sector as form of spatial segregation that at times has been a matter of life and death.<sup>13</sup> For example, before the bridge over Río Cagüitas was reconstructed in 1998 after Hurricane Georges (a project that lasted two years), the old bridge would flood with just a heavy rainstorm, essentially trapping residents on either side. The flooding made it impossible for people or emergency personnel to enter or exit by car. Some people recall having to leave their cars parked on the shoulder of Route 156 and wade across the flooded old bridge to get home after storms. Hurricane Georges marked the breaking point when the bridge was totally submerged under water and blocked by a fallen tree, leaving Las Carolinas “*incomunicado*,” or out of communication. Residents managed to make a path in the mud for cars to cross the river and exit (Rosario Lozada 2018).

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that some residents did not see as beneficial. I had planned to more thoroughly discuss this topic, but my follow-up research plans were disrupted by the 2020 global pandemic. This will be further explored in future research.

<sup>13</sup> Residents face a new struggle over access, environmental hazards, and mobility. As of the summer 2021, forested land just outside the sector’s entrance was bulldozed and part of the Río Caguitas was filled for a new gated residential urbanization called Vistas de San José. The urbanization is slated to use the same single entrance to Las Carolinas leading to its gated division just after the electric sub-station. Construction has already caused harm, and residents worry about the traffic and the long-term flooding impacts from filling a section of the river. Construction has also destroyed the habitat of a number of species, including invasive iguanas that have been flocking into Las Carolinas since the deforestation and destroying home gardens. Homes in the gated development will start at \$179,000.



Figure 3 - Google Earth map of Las Carolinas marked with significant spatial designations.

This entrance bridge is not the only one in Las Carolinas that draws attention to access and mobility inequalities. On the northwestern end of Las Carolinas, the single lane Los Ramos bridge crossing Río Bairoa has a decades-long history of flooding and deterioration exacerbated by the 2017 hurricanes. Water marks from Maria are still visible on the exterior of the homes in the valley below this bridge, where water entered from both the river and the mudslides that came down the hills, leaving this section of Las Carolinas “*incomunicado*.” In March 2021, Caguas Mayor William Miranda Torres announced in a socially distanced press event in Las Carolinas that his administration had secured \$1.6 million from FEMA to reconstruct the bridge (Municipio Autónomo de Caguas 2021).

The San José electric substation is located on *Avenida Las Carolinas*, right before the Río Caguaitas bridge. The Puerto Rico Electric Energy Authority (AEE) manages this substation, which was functioning six days after Hurricane Maria. Despite its location within Las Carolinas, it energizes the gated residential urbanization Hacienda San José on the south side of Route 156 and the Los Prados commercial shopping center, located a few kilometers east in the direction of downtown Caguas. Up until eight to ten years ago, the substation energized Las Carolinas through a converter that reduced the electric voltage to safely deliver energy to the sector. However, this essential converter broke and the AEE failed to repair it despite residents' petitions and protests. Since then, the sector's energy has been provided by a substation farther away in the Las Catalinas commercial center, which was out of service for months after the hurricane. In short, Las Carolinas receives unstable electricity and experienced a prolonged post-Maria blackout in part because of the broken converter.

Four months after the María Montañez Gómez School closure, Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico. Las Carolinas residents were without water service for three months, without electricity for seven months, and without municipal storm debris pickup for eighty days. I quote former President of the Residents' Association and CAM collaborator, Miguel Ángel Rosario-Lozada<sup>14</sup> from his memoir *Crónicas de un barrio sin luz* (2018) (*Chronicles of a neighborhood without light*) on his first impressions of Las Carolinas from his balcony as the eye of Hurricane Maria was passing on September 20, 2017:

The neighborhood lost all its splendor. The tree leaves completely disappeared. The homes that the green thick usually hides were now all visible from my balcony. The giant mountain behind my home looks like it was cut with scissors. All the trees lost their green. Total desolation...silence (Rosario Lozada 2018, 45).

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<sup>14</sup> All names are pseudonyms except identifiable public figures such as Miguel, for whom I use full names.



Miguel is a lifelong resident of Las Carolinas in his late twenties and a distant relative of Adriana and Rosa, two CAM leaders. He graduated from the María Montañez Gómez School and is currently a doctoral student in History at the *Centro de Estudios Avanzados de Puerto Rico y el Caribe* and a Professor of History, Humanities, and Social Sciences at National University. As the youngest elected President of the Las Carolinas Residents' Association, Miguel navigated the enormous task of community response and coordination with the municipality in the wake of Hurricane Maria. Miguel began working with the CAM when he signed a collaborative agreement in 2018 with Lucía, one of the founding members. His role at the Residents' Association provided community support for the school occupation and facilitated communications with the municipality.

During the post-Maria wait for debris collection, some residents made a monthly ritual out of acknowledging the debris' "birthday" by decorating the piles lining the streets with Christmas ornaments. This ritual created both a striking spectacle and a visual, cynical critique of the conditions of neglect. Trucks from the privately contracted company EC Waste finally appeared in early December 2017 after Miguel published a critical op-ed in the newspaper *El Nuevo Día*. Miguel claimed that the Caguas mayor and "the absent municipal state" were responsible for the unfolding disaster (Rosario Lozada 2017). Among other things, the municipality delayed debris pickup, barely circulated information, and originally scheduled Las Carolinas *last* among all the municipality's sectors for power restoration. After pressure from the *El Nuevo Día* column and a community protest at the San José electric substation, the municipality reprioritized Las Carolinas in the power restoration schedule. Power was restored in March 2018, but the sector still experiences frequent, blackouts and water service disruptions, in addition to the ongoing wait for the electric converter repair.



Figure 4 - Decorated debris in Las Carolinas after Hurricane Maria. Photo provided by Miguel Rosario Lozada.



Figure 5 - Tweet from Miguel Rosario Lozada on November 14, 2017. Translation: "First photo album with debris in the sector of Las Carolinas, Caguas. @caguasgovpr has constantly changed the removal dates."



Figure 6 - Tweet from Miguel Rosario Lozada on December 8, 2017. Translation: "80 days after Maria and almost 100 days after Irma, today they collect the debris in the street surrounding my house in the Las Carolinas sector in @caguasgovpr."

In a March 2018 *Noticel* video report on the prolonged post-Maria blackout in Las Carolinas, Miguel notes that the increased use of gas-powered electric generators exacerbated symptoms for residents with respiratory conditions (Torres Ayala 2018). "At night, the noise of the generators invades." Miguel continues:

It is a fundamental part of the complaints we have taken to the authorities—the excessive emission of generator gases produces health damages especially for those of us who have respiratory illnesses like me. And we have explained this issue in countless forums where we've had the opportunity to address problems in the community. But we are waiting for the AEE to resolve the problem.

The gated residential urbanization Hacienda San José figures significantly in Las Carolinas residents' understandings of spatial boundaries and discrimination, especially juxtaposed to the *parcelas* of Las Carolinas.<sup>15</sup> Miguel describes how residents have long drawn

<sup>15</sup> Representations of *parcelas* and *parceleras/os* (people that reside in the *parcelas*) have been both used historically to signal common identification and stigma. Among the people I came to know, I found that these descriptive terms were mobilized in multiple ways, including as a form of affective identification and commonality, as a referent to give meaning to lived spatial, economic, and racial inequality, and as a form of othering or differentiating spatial

attention to what he calls the “ironic” arrangement in which Las Carolinas hosts an electric substation whose energy is extracted out to a wealthier gated residential area and consumer spaces. Furthermore, the increased risk burden of adverse health impacts from living in close proximity to an electric substation is placed on Las Carolinas residents. Miguel laughs sarcastically as he says in the *Noticel* interview that Hacienda San José is an urbanization “*de clase alta*” (upper class) while Las Carolinas is “*una comunidad de mediana [clase] y pobre*” (a middle-class and poor community). The AEE’s “constant excuse” for failing to repair the converter is the high cost estimated at \$400,000. As sociologist Zaire Dinzey Flores (2013) shows, gates and gated spaces (both urbanizations and public housing) in Puerto Rico serve as boundary markers to maintain and police racial and class hierarchies, which are bound up with health and environmental vulnerabilities. Furthermore, in the project “*Tenencia y Propiedad en Puerto Rico*” (Tenure and Property in Puerto Rico), legal scholar Érika Fontáñez Torres and her colleagues note that the designation of *urbanización* is associated with the middle class in Puerto Rico (Fontáñez Torres et al. 2020).

In a conversation reflecting on the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Maria, CAM leader Carina expressed frustration with the electric energy restoration process:

Even now, no one from the AEE has been here to fix [the details]. The people who they contracted from the United States were the ones who came into this neighborhood to put the lights on... They come here just to get paid. Nothing more.

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location between *parcelas* and economically privileged spaces such as gated urbanizations. One notable source on the popular and historical representations of *parceleros* as “rural slum” dwellers is the sensationalist pulp fiction author Wenzell Brown’s book, *Dynamite on our Doorstep: Puerto Rican Paradox* (1945). The book is an account of Brown’s time in Puerto Rico as an English teacher and observer of Puerto Rican society. Brown has been critiqued for his racist caricature presentation of Puerto Ricans as hyper-sexual, lazy, and violent. In the account, Brown mocks *parceleros* in the southern municipality of Ponce who “cut down trees which should have been used for lumber, sold them for charcoal, and having done so let the community become a slum” (Edel 1962, 57). Another relevant source is controversial *El Nuevo Día* column by Eduardo Lalo called “Keleher la ‘parcelera’” (Lalo 2017).

Carina was referring to stateside utility crews activated through a mutual assistance program to help with power restoration in Puerto Rico after a botched contract with Whitefish LLC.<sup>16</sup> As a mother of three, grandmother of one, and primary caretaker for her own grandmother in her early forties, the electricity instability particularly impacted Carina and her extended family. Carina has lived in Las Carolinas her whole life, aside from one year in Massachusetts after she finished eleventh grade. After returning to Puerto Rico, she had her first child and was not able to finish school. Carina describes herself as a homemaker and an active defender of the school and her community, even after two of her children had graduated. She was particularly involved in actions challenging the education system’s evaluative reliance on standardized exams. Carina got involved with the CAM through her daughter, who was participating in the CAM Caguas Pueblo for school-required community service hours and joined the founders’ efforts to open a CAM in Las Carolinas. In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Maria, Carina’s family financially struggled because her husband’s plumbing work came to a halt for over a month. Her involvement in the CAM *comedor* both helped to feed her family during those difficult months and provided an outlet to manage her stress and anxiety. Furthermore, due to new restrictions for federal food assistance in Puerto Rico, Carina’s care labor at the CAM counts towards the monthly “community service hours” required for recipients of the *Programa de Asistencia Nutricional* (Nutritional Assistance Program, or PAN) who are not in the formal labor market.

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<sup>16</sup> In October 2017, the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA, or AEE)—a public corporation—awarded a \$300 million no-bid contract for power grid restoration with Whitefish Energy Holdings, LLC, a small Montana based company with no experience at the scale of post-disaster power restoration. Controversy around the contract and the cost erupted, prompting an FBI investigation. The Whitefish contract was cancelled at the end of October 2017.

Various entities such as the state of New York used the essential infrastructure restoration as a tool to build political capital. New York Power Authority crews arrived in Las Carolinas to work on the infrastructural side of power restoration (i.e., replacing electric posts). In a promotional video documenting the restoration work in Las Carolinas posted to the New York Power Authority's official YouTube channel, a North American line crew member describes in English being "basically up in the middle of the mountains" (New York Power Authority 2018). This spatial description from a U.S., English-speaking gaze renders Las Carolinas a remote, out of touch area detached from wider spatial, economic, and infrastructural processes that co-constitute the sector in relation to the Caguas urban center, the spatial organization of the urban periphery, and the archipelago. The video description also signals that this perceived remoteness may explain the prolonged blackout that stateside line workers were called upon to repair. However, the near decade-long story behind the broken electric converter reveals that geographic isolation does not explain why Las Carolinas remained without electricity until March 2018 and still experiences frequent power outages. Rather, government abandonment, inequalities in service access, and maintenance refusal on the part of the AEE help to paint a more complex picture. As extractive sites for finance capital, infrastructures such as the power grid provide insight into patterns of inequality and racial capitalism (Ponder 2021). As the AEE undergoes a controversial privatization and a bankruptcy process to restructure its \$9 billion unaudited debt, the streams of debt service and public support for privatization are secured through household utility bill hikes and selective infrastructural deterioration.

Even after debris removal and power restoration, Las Carolinas residents self-provisioned services. They organized cleaning brigades to do basic vegetation maintenance such as tree trimming and mowing around the public streets and the entranceway. The hollowing-out

of these municipal services certainly contributed to the post-hurricane infrastructure collapse that was part of a longer process of public disinvestment and “organized abandonment” (Gilmore 2011). Residents experienced the degradation of public disinvestment first-hand through the failures of everyday public infrastructures such as electricity, water, bridges, and the school. For example, the municipality of Caguas cut back on maintenance with a 14 percent total budget cut from 2016 to 2018, exacerbated by a \$350 million cut to the Puerto Rican central government’s contributions to all municipalities in fiscal year 2017–2018 (Municipio Autónomo de Caguas 2017). These budgets were approved and imposed by the unelected Oversight Board instated through PROMESA to secure the servicing of an unaudited debt.

Community organizing in Las Carolinas—through self-provisioning in the early years of resettlement, autonomous actions and rituals, protests, petitions, media strategies, and publications—has a history behind Hurricane Maria that shapes why and how the storms politicized residents to mobilize tactics of occupation, rescue, and mutual aid. In turn, this case challenges the tendency to view Hurricane Maria and mutual aid as a singular, time bound event. Rather, residents recognize that the disaster existed *before* Maria; as Adriana said, Las Carolinas has experienced “*otras Marías.*” Understanding “*otras Marías*” as the local articulations of colonialism, environmental racism, spatial segregation, and debt-driven austerity echoes scholars who have called attention to the production of *unnatural* rather than “natural disasters” (Bonilla and LeBrón 2019; Hartman and Squires 2006; Klinenberg 2015; Lloréns 2018; Watts 1983; Woods 2010; Woods 2017). The following chapter moves to examine techniques of post-Maria disaster governance and how survivors navigated various exclusionary processes and understood themselves as disaster subjects. The top-down, exclusionary, and individualizing framework that

I describe drastically contrasts with the collective grassroots recovery approach implemented at the CAM.



## CHAPTER THREE

### Disaster Governance, Resilience, and the Home

Mickey: Don't hang up!

Marisa [FEMA call center]: Have a good day. (*Hangs up. Answers.*) Hello, FEMA.

José Eugenio: Hello. Look, I have a problem, it's raining and I'm getting wet.

Marisa: Well, go inside your house!

José Eugenio: I am inside my house! But my roof is like a colander. I need a tarp.

Marisa: Yes, there are lots of people asking for tarps, but we don't have any left. The problem is that María came too late... You'll have to go to Home Depot.

-Excerpt from *¡Ay María!*<sup>1</sup>

At an October 2019 event in the southern coastal municipality of Santa Isabel, Puerto Rico, then-Secretary of the Puerto Rico Department of Housing (PRDOH), Fernando Gil-Enseñat and Governor Wanda Vásquez granted property titles to 141 “untitled” homeowners, some of whom had lived on government-owned land for decades.<sup>2</sup> The event inaugurated the Title Clearance Program, a \$40 million initiative funded by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) program.<sup>3</sup> Gil-Enseñat asserted that formal property titles are part of an effort to “provide justice to the people so that in case of another atmospheric event, we can be more *resilient* and obtain aid quickly and without any problems” (Administración de Vivienda Pública 2019, my emphasis). Implying that home property titles can even empower women, Governor

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<sup>1</sup> *¡Ay María!* is a short tragicomic play about a group of actors' experiences before, during, and after Hurricane Maria. The play was performed throughout the archipelago and the text is published in the volume *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm* (2019). This excerpt mimics a FEMA call center conversation after Hurricane Maria.

<sup>2</sup> Fernando Gil-Enseñat served as Puerto Rico's Secretary of Housing from 2017 through January 2019 when Governor Wanda Vásquez fired him. Wanda Vásquez assumed the governorship in August 2019 after summer mobilizations ousted Governor Ricardo Rosselló and the Supreme Court declared the subsequent governorship of Pedro Pierluisi unconstitutional after only five days.

<sup>3</sup> The Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery Program is the primary federal long-term recovery program administered by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and provides recovery funding to declared U.S. disaster zones for “unmet needs.” The estimated CDBG-DR funds designated for Puerto Rico is about \$20 billion.

Vásquez emphasized that sixty-one of the title grantees were women heads of household and that the titles were a sign of “independence” and “autonomy.” These official remarks bring into relief questions of power, agency, resilience, morality, and ownership.

This chapter analyzes disaster recovery through the mobilization and effects of government agency discourses and practices. I focus on specific programs directed by the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA). Drawing on government documents, media, legal advocacy sources, and survivors’ experiences, I argue that the home—both the physical structure and the unit of domestic relations—is a key site of disaster governance intervention and contestation where ideas around “resilience” are mobilized and brought into the recovery efforts in different ways. The home is the private sphere where individuals and families encounter state bureaucracy in the wake of disaster and the locus from which they are called upon to be resilient, anticipate and prepare for environmental and disaster risk, and self-manage disaster vulnerability and recovery. Housing security and reconstruction has been a central concern to scholarship on disaster vulnerability, governance, and recovery (Adams 2013; Arena 2012; Browne 2015; Algoed and Hernández Torrales 2019). I aim to expand these conversations by highlighting how disaster governance in Puerto Rico relies upon and intervenes in the home through certain bureaucratic expectations of homeownership and technologies of self-management. The governance techniques and privatizing frameworks examined here contrast with the grassroots recovery efforts addressed in the following two chapters.

I examine FEMA’s administration of federal disaster aid for individuals and households, which I argue relies upon exclusionary homeownership criteria that come up against how property and ownership are locally recognized, understood, and lived. Indeed, the effort to formalize, regularize, or clear property titles for Puerto Ricans living with historically diverse

property relations is a central priority for disaster recovery and national “resilience” building. I focus on how the U.S. government scrutinized homeownership during individual disaster aid application procedures that at times contradicted federal guidelines and local recognitions of ownership in Puerto Rico. I argue that categories of property and ownership, and specifically the strict requirements to prove homeownership with a formal property title, were used to enact punitive eligibility exclusions for various recovery programs. At the same time, these exclusions presented an opportunity for controversial national recovery interventions. I illustrate a case example of two households’ struggle to legitimize their ownership claims to secure federal disaster aid and repair their home in Caguas. I show how divergent lived property relations, ambiguities in people’s notions of “ownership,” and tensions with how the state deploys categories and valuations demonstrate property as a legitimizing, and sometimes arbitrarily mobilized, relation of disaster governance.

As a targeted site of domestic resilience building and biopolitical management of resilient subjects in Puerto Rico, the realm of homeownership reveals how climate and disaster resilience is reinforced as a private task where the burden of responsibility falls on individual and household consumers. I argue that this approach deflects from government responsibility to secure public wellbeing before, during, and after disaster events in order to shore up neoliberal disaster citizen-subjects. This institutional, top-down recovery framework contrasts with collective-oriented mutual aid recovery frameworks. Rather than upholding privatized resilience and recovery as an individual responsibility as government agencies tend to do, mutual aid collectives expand alternative public forms of care that collectivize certain domestic social reproductive labors.

## **Disaster Governance and the Resilience Imperative**

Disaster governance is a framework I draw on to understand post-disaster struggles and the purportedly neutral institutional discourses, practices, representations, rationales, and categories that regulate disaster survivors and enable or foreclose certain kinds of recovery. The term emerged in disaster research literature in reference to the forms of state apparatus “collaborative governance” that have been established to manage risk and crisis over the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Marchezini 2015; Tierney 2012). Scholars describe “neoliberal disaster governance” as a framework that organizes contemporary disaster recovery approaches around individual and private property rights, the free market, self-sufficiency, and resilience (Adams, Van Hattum and English 2009; Gunewardena 2008; Parson 2016; Pyles, Svistova and Ahn 2017). Social justice scholar Loretta Pyles and her colleagues, for example, examined news media sources after Hurricane Katrina (2005, U.S. Gulf Coast) and the 2010 earthquake in Haiti to show how neoliberal disaster governance manifests through securitization and militarization, resulting in displacement and disaster capitalism (Pyles, Svistova and Ahn 2017).<sup>4</sup>

Critical disaster studies have shown that government institutions charged with managing catastrophic events deploy techniques of biopolitical disaster governance that do not necessarily map onto the concerns or lived realities of disaster affected communities (Barrios 2017b; Gamburd 2013, Marchezini 2015). The discrepancies between the orientations and concerns of disaster governance and lived experience can manifest in major mitigation and relocation efforts, but also in more mundane procedures and expectations that I describe below such as bureaucratic homeownership scrutiny. In the context of Puerto Rico, it is important to

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<sup>4</sup> See Schuller and Maldonado (2016) and Villanueva and Cobián (2019) for critical analyses of the disaster capitalism framework and the shortfalls of its application to Puerto Rico. Similarly, Hilda Lloréns (2019) asks “when was capitalism not a disaster?” for Indigenous and Black communities of the Global South.

consider how coloniality articulates through neoliberal disaster governance. Scholars have offered the lens of “coloniality of disaster” to show how enduring structures of “racio-colonial governance” (Bonilla 2020a; Bonilla and LeBrón 2019) shape the impact, aftermath, and negligent federal and territorial government response after Hurricane Maria. I use the frame of colonial-neoliberal disaster governance to refer to these structuring logics.

In the wake of a climate event such as a hurricane, the home becomes a primary site through which survivors encounter state apparatuses and embark on their initial recovery process in the most intimate space. As discursive techniques and material social relations of disaster governance, property and homeownership articulate through race, class, and coloniality. In discussing property below, I follow scholars who problematize the notion of property as an objective “thing” and instead point to property as a set of contingent social and political relations constructed through both discursive and material means. Struggles over property can thus be understood through the narratives people express to make sense of property, its multiple representations, and the material relations of power and resistance that shape how property is enacted, remade, and contested (Blomley 1998; Blomley 2004; Roy 2016; Ward et al. 2011). Power relations are key to analyzing property relations because people’s relation to property has long been used in valuations about citizenship, morality, and political worth (Blomley 2004; James 2007).

This moral valuation is echoed in Governor Vázquez’s remarks above about women heads of household accessing resilience through home property titles—a catchall solution for housing recovery that obscures the conditions that make people vulnerable in the first place. Here, the conditions that produce informality are irrelevant; what matters is that the women secured resilience and personal “autonomy” through a title. I argue that the categories of

property and homeownership are thus productive sites that can reveal tensions between disaster governance, federally imposed valuations and policies, and survivors' lived experiences and understandings of these relations. In other words, property and titling illuminate urgent questions about who counts as a subject who can claim homeownership and thus access basic disaster aid for home repair.

Discussions on titling date back to the 1980s and Peruvian businessman Hernando de Soto's *The Other Path* (1989), which guided World Bank and other international lending institutions' housing development policies around property rights and title formalization. De Soto promoted titling as the solution to eradicating informality and uplifting the urban poor from poverty in the developing world. As Mike Davis explains, De Soto argued that titling would “instantly create massive equity with little or no cost to government; part of this new wealth, in turn, would supply capital to credit-starved microentrepreneurs to create new jobs in the slums” (Davis 2006, 80). However, critics point to titling as a “double-edged sword” (Davis 2006). On the one hand, formal titles permit tenure security and facilitate access to credit markets and property transfer. However, Davis draws on research across the Global South to show that titling also “accelerates social differentiation” and tends to depoliticize and fragment housing movements (Ibid. 81-82).

Disaster governance in Puerto Rico is built around resilience imperatives. Morphed from its early use in ecology and engineering, the term “resilience” has increasingly been applied to populations and individuals in circles ranging from business to humanitarianism and psychology (Holling 1973; Leary 2018). Resilience has become part of the global disaster risk and environmental governance lexicon. For instance, the 2019 United Nations Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction relies heavily on calls for “resilience building”

and “community resilience” for disaster risk management (United Nations 2019). Similarly, analysis of the World Bank World Development Reports over time shows an exponential rise in the term’s use since 2008, mostly in reference to resilience as something that can be produced by external intervention to address or adapt to environmental change, disaster, and economic development (Felli 2016). According to John Patrick Leary, resilience is a “keyword” in the “new language of capitalism.” Leary explains that current uses of the term tend to obscure exploitation, naturalize a certain social order, describe heroic suffering, and signal depoliticized individual responsibility to adapt to duress or endure more hardship (2018). Similarly, geographer Michael Watts notes that “resilience” shares a common semantic space with “a larger, post-9/11 vocabulary: other words include “risk,” “uncertainty,” and “security” (Watts 2014, 146).

Related discussions on risk and “risk society” provide an interesting social and institutional juxtaposition to the individualizing logics of resilience analyzed in this chapter. Sociologist Ulrich Beck argued that “risk society” is a structural condition of advanced industrial capitalism in which the system manufactures its own hazards (Beck 1996). In the age of risk society, governments and institutions are characterized by “organized irresponsibility” by which they reproduce risk while reducing their ability to manage it (Adam, Beck, and Loom 2000; Beck 1996; Bonilla 2020b). Individuals and communities, therefore, assume the burden of resilience in the risk society.

Critical scholarship has drawn attention to resilience in disaster management policy frameworks as an “anticipatory logic” to “govern uncertain futures” that enhances the subject’s capacity to *live with* and *self-manage* risk and uncertainty rather than politicize or transform underlying conditions that produce vulnerability (Grove 2014, 243). Geographer Kevin Grove

argues that resilience renders disaster victims as “active agents with inherent self-help capacities that can be strengthened through proper resilience programming” (Grove 2014, 243-244). Case studies in the U.S. reveal that the operationalization of disaster resilience approaches privileges technocratic solutions to disaster vulnerability. In the non-sovereign Caribbean, resilience figures as a “catchall” term mobilized by colonial/post-colonial state institutions “to legitimize their power and re-establish control over collective life” (Rhiney 2018, 16; Tierney 2015). Along these lines, Watts argues that the ubiquity of the term “resilience” forms the basis for addressing the uncertainties of contemporary capitalism and the national security state, from the spectacular (9/11 attacks, climate disaster) to the banal (transportation, financial networks, self-help practices, home titling) (Watts 2014, 147).

### **Disaster Aid Eligibility Exclusions in Puerto Rico**

Hurricanes Irma and Maria struck Puerto Rico within two weeks of each other in September 2017, causing unprecedented damage to the housing stock and infrastructure. Estimates suggest that over 700,000 homes were damaged or destroyed (Ayuda Legal Puerto Rico and Earth Economics 2020). Despite the massive need, property and ownership are used as categories of exclusion for various recovery programs. I focus on individual assistance procedures because they are central bureaucratic spheres that mediate survivors’ experiences with state apparatuses. The federal Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act establishes FEMA as the central agency for federal disaster coordination in the continental U.S. and U.S. territories. FEMA provides three categories of disaster assistance: individual assistance, public assistance, and hazard mitigation assistance. The Individuals and Households Program (IHP) provides financial assistance for unmet primary residence recovery needs for uninsured or



underinsured homeowners. Proof of formal property title is *not* a requirement for receiving IHP assistance according to federal guidelines. The 2016 Individuals and Households Program Unified Guidance, which was effective after hurricanes Irma and Maria, defines an “owner-occupied residence” as one where the applicant “is the legal owner or does not hold a formal title to the residence and pays no rent, but is responsible for the payment of taxes or maintenance of the residence, or has lifetime occupancy rights with the formal title vested in another” (FEMA 2016, 17). The guidelines list documentation that can be presented to “verify ownership” when applying for federal disaster aid, including a deed, official record listing the applicant as the legal owner, or mortgage documentation. Alternative documentation to prove ownership can include property tax receipts, deed contracts, a Bill of Sale, or a “will naming the applicant as the heir to the property and a death certificate” (FEMA 2016, 18). In cases where primary or alternative documentation is *not* available, FEMA authorizes a *document exception* to verify ownership through “a written statement from the applicant indicating how long they have lived in the disaster-damaged residence prior to the Presidential disaster declaration, and an explanation of the circumstances that prevent standard ownership verification” (FEMA 2016, 18). In other words, an applicant should not have to provide a formal title to be considered eligible for housing disaster assistance.

Despite these guidelines, lack of formal property title was a major factor in FEMA’s high denial rate for individual disaster assistance in Puerto Rico, leaving thousands with major unmet housing needs. About 60 percent of the 1.2 million residents who applied for the FEMA IHP after hurricanes Irma and Maria to repair interior and structural damage to their homes were denied—double the denial rate for applicants in Texas after Hurricane Harvey (Disaster Housing Recovery Coalition 2019). An estimated 77,000 households (11 percent of all denials) received

no assistance because “FEMA failed to recognize local land ownership practices and the island’s ‘informal’ housing system” (Disaster Housing Recovery Coalition 2019).<sup>5</sup> As legal scholar Érika Fontáñez Torres and her colleagues note, the “informal” has become for many the customary while the “formal” is understood as recognized by the state. But between these two categories “there are a diversity of situations that do not necessarily equate the first to the illegal and the second to the legal” (Fontáñez Torres et al. 2019). As studies have shown, federal agencies charged with managing the disaster created obstacles that required onerous formal documentation from the most vulnerable and resisted making these procedures more flexible to respond to Puerto Rico’s socio-juridical reality, amounting to “institutional oppression” (Ocasio 2018). In effect, federal proof of ownership requirements functioned as disciplinary tools that subjected Puerto Ricans to a set of externally determined disaster aid policies out of their control.

FEMA expanded acceptable forms of evidence to verify ownership and residency in August 2018 following pressure from legal advocacy groups. Even though the alternative forms of proof technically just reinforce the federal guidelines described above, FEMA stated that the new “sworn declaration” was implemented in response to the “unique homeownership laws in Puerto Rico, including heirship and prescription” (FEMA 2018). The sworn statement became available to survivors appealing individual assistance denials, but rather than systematically informing denied applicants of the new option, FEMA directed survivors to legal aid organizations for help with the alternative documentation. Along with the sworn statement, owners were encouraged to provide “alternative documentation instead of a title such as tax

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<sup>5</sup> The Government of Puerto Rico defines housing informality as structures built without property titles, constructed without proper permitting or adherence to building codes, or construction “completed without the assistance of an engineer or architect” (Government of Puerto Rico 2018, 52). Ayuda Legal Puerto Rico (2019) has pointed to the confusing ways that informality is referred to in CDBG-DR guidelines, potentially leading to unequal or discriminatory treatment in these recovery programs.

receipts, home insurance, a utility bill, a letter of credit from the utility company, receipts from repairing the property, or any other documentation that would support that they were currently occupying and maintaining the home” (García 2020). Media discourse tended to portray disaster aid eligibility exclusions as a result of the individual choices of “illegal settlers” or “squatters” rather than systematic failures and discrimination (see for example Acevedo and Pacheco 2018; Woellert 2017). This orientation supports the policy framework that housing recovery can be managed by granting individual formal property titles.

Federal recovery funds have been allocated to “resolve” property title issues in Puerto Rico—another “opportunity” the disaster aftermath has presented to the government. In both published guidelines and official public discourse, property formalization figures as a national project of long-term reconstruction that is central to official visions of national “resilience,” mitigation, and disaster preparedness.<sup>6</sup> For example, Puerto Rico’s Disaster Recovery Plan, which sets priorities and estimates costs, proposed property title registration and resolution as part of its “resilient housing” goal. Applicants who were ineligible for aid to cover unmet housing needs through the Home Repair, Reconstruction, or Relocation Program (R3) program<sup>7</sup> due to lack of formal title were referred to the \$400 million CDBG-DR-funded Title Clearance Program. The program aims to assist low- and moderate-income households located outside of risk zones “obtain clear and marketable titles of their properties, which will promote long-term self-sustainability and resilience” (Puerto Rico Department of Housing 2020, 7). Legal advocacy groups and some lawmakers have criticized major disaster recovery programs backed by CDBG-

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<sup>6</sup> A key question for regularization or formalization programs is “regularization for what?” The answer could suggest that formalization is an isolated end in itself, or a means to an end such as improving people’s life circumstances and providing the conditions for housing security (Fontáñez Torres et al. 2019).

<sup>7</sup> The R3 program was implemented in July 2019 by the Puerto Rico Department of Housing (PRDOH) and accepted applications for assistance until May 2020. The program received 27,000 applications, and as of October 2020, only 167 homes have been repaired.

DR funds for their exclusionary criteria, discrimination against residents without formal property title, lack of community participation, and framework that focuses on relocating people away from risk zones rather than mitigation or adaptation (Grijalva et al. 2019). Regarding discrimination against residents without formal property title, *Ayuda Legal Puerto Rico* (Puerto Rico Legal Aid)—a legal advocacy organization that has led access to justice initiatives in the wake of Hurricane Maria—recommends that federal and local recovery programs implement uniform processes for residents without formal title to be eligible for funds as part of the “affirmative steps towards a just recovery” (Ayuda Legal Puerto Rico 2019, 11). In November 2020, over three years after hurricanes Irma and Maria, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Housing Survivors of Major Disasters Act in a potential gesture towards reforming the discriminatory policies. While Senate approval remains unclear, the Bill responds to the failed government response and injustices around housing recovery by expanding forms of ownership proof and authorizing the sworn statement for applicants to self-certify ownership and their eligibility for disaster assistance for future U.S. disasters.

The federal Office of Inspector General published a searing investigation of HUD’s disbursement of grant funds for disaster recovery and mitigation in Puerto Rico that demonstrates how the Trump administration’s Office of Management and Budget (OMB) advocated imposing certain criteria around property as a prerequisite for Puerto Rico to access \$8.3 billion in CDBG mitigation funds (CDBG-MIT). For example, in Spring 2019, the OMB proposed revisions to HUD’s draft CDBG-MIT notice suggesting a number of “structural reforms,” including that Puerto Rico must “establish systems for effective property management” including title clearance (Office of Inspector General 2021, 25). A footnote in the federal watchdog investigation states that “HUD officials noted that Puerto Rico’s housing stock was

‘informal’ (*e.g.*, a lack of clear property titles)” (Office of Inspector General 2021, 25). These so-called proposed “structural reforms” were not imposed on other disaster recovery grantee jurisdictions. At the insistence of the OMB, HUD also implemented a discriminatory decision to “split Puerto Rico from the CDBG-MIT notice applicable to other grantees because of concerns regarding alleged corruption and fiscal mismanagement” (Office of Inspector General 2021, iv). Collectively, these hurdles delayed the publication of HUD’s mitigation notice for Puerto Rico and the release of desperately needed funds.

The disaster aid exclusions around property and ownership reveal how race, class, and coloniality shape uneven access to recovery. In Puerto Rico, FEMA arbitrarily ignored federal guidelines on homeownership verification, disregarded legally recognized definitions and practices around property arrangements and ownership, and failed to systematically inform denied applicants of alternative forms of documentation. The local legal system is a mix of common and civil law. Puerto Rico’s legal framework does not require a formal title to be recognized as an owner of land, immovable property (*i.e.*, a house), or both. It is estimated that over 260,000 homes in Puerto Rico lack formal title or deeds and about 20 percent of housing construction in Puerto Rico lacks a property title (García 2020; García 2021; Government of Puerto Rico 2018). Securing formal title can be a long and expensive process involving lawyers, inspectors, and cumbersome bureaucratic procedures and is not necessarily a priority for people struggling to address other urgent needs (Fontáñez Torres et al. 2019). However, while not a legal requirement, the lack of formal title can create homeownership insecurity, further criminalize poor people, and bar access to the insurance market and mortgages (Ayuda Legal Puerto Rico n.d). The scarcity of accessible “formal” housing alternatives for low-income people has resulted in various situations of “informality” in Puerto Rico (Algoed and Hernández

Torrales 2019; Cotto Morales 2011).<sup>8</sup> Notable alternative property arrangements, such as the Caño Martín Peña Community Land Trust (CLT), aim to protect historically marginalized communities from displacement and real estate speculation. The Caño CLT instrument is organized around collective land ownership and individual surface rights to structural improvements (houses) and provides a model of participatory planning (Algoed and Hernández Torrales 2019).

It becomes evident that title clearance, relocation, and mitigation are not just neutral interventions. People residing in designated risk areas (flood zones or landslide risk zones) are prohibited from receiving funds to repair or rebuild homes and cannot access home or flood insurance, raising concerns about displacement. However, an estimated 200,000 properties in Puerto Rico are in flood zones (Caribbean Business Español 2018), underscoring patterns of undemocratic land-use planning and weak environmental legislation (García-López 2018). FEMA and PRDOH's prioritization of relocation over mitigation and adaptation thus exposes the legacies of "environmental colonialism" and how environmental injustices directly shape the recovery process (Concepción 1988; García-López 2018; Rivera 2020). Furthermore, as Joaquín Villanueva and Martín Cobián argue, the federal CDBG-DR funds, along with the designation of 95 percent of Puerto Rico as an "opportunity zone" to attract investment, constitute two main channels that are now preparing Puerto Rico for "accumulation by dispossession dressed up as reconstruction" (Villanueva and Cobián 2019).

In Puerto Rico, the administration of federal disaster aid had an exclusionary effect: the exercise of "policies that look to avoid unlawful claims by those who do not own property" can in practice "punish hardworking citizens who rightfully own their homes but lack the documents

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<sup>8</sup> On informality historically, see Ramírez 1977 and Safa 1980.

to prove it” (García 2020). Disaster aid eligibility exclusions, of course, were not only contested by legal advocacy organizations and concerned government officials, but also by communities and individual survivors in everyday bureaucratic encounters. I now turn to the story of two households’ experience with the disaster aid process to illustrate how state uncertainties about homeownership emerged and were navigated.

### **Disaster Aid in Caguas, Puerto Rico**

Receiving insufficient disaster aid or being deemed ineligible for aid was a frequent experience among the people I came to know. Issues of homeownership repeatedly came up in these cases. What follows is the story of two households in Las Carolinas, Caguas, which highlights how lived experiences of property and ownership came up against the federal government-imposed definitions and assumptions to the effect of making housing recovery a discriminatory and onerous process.

### **Jennifer’s story**

#### *“Total Loss”*

Jennifer is a resident of Las Carolinas and was a *Centro de Apoyo Mutuo* leader through December 2018. After Hurricane Maria, she lived with a blue tarp covering her roof until August 2019. Blue tarps were the provisional coverings FEMA distributed after Hurricane Maria that became visual reminders of the ongoing disaster lingering across the landscape—mostly hidden from tourist visibility but in plain sight walking among affected communities or from aerial view as planes descend into San Juan. Jennifer applied for FEMA’s Individuals and Households Program, and FEMA inspectors arrived five weeks after Maria to declare Jennifer’s case a “total

loss.” Jennifer has lived in her home for forty-four years, but like others in Las Carolinas who live on *parcelas* that have been divided over time and passed on through inheritance, she does not have formal property title. While Jennifer was the rightful “owner” of her home according to Puerto Rican law, her lack of *formal title as proof of ownership* shaped her entanglements with punitive disaster governance and how the federal government regulated aid access.

Because of her tenuous ownership status in the eyes of the federal government, Jennifer was originally denied FEMA disaster aid and then appealed with support from a pro bono lawyer and an affidavit stating that she was the rightful owner and occupant of the home and that she was in the process of securing her formal title. To Jennifer’s surprise, PRDOH finally began processing her application for formal title after Maria, even though she had been applying for “decades.” During conversations throughout 2018, Jennifer expressed to me a sense of relief because she almost had her title, as if this document might reduce her vulnerability to future storms or make her a more responsible homeowner in the eyes of the state.

After accepting Jennifer’s appeal with the affidavit, FEMA authorized \$11,000 to repair structural damage, including a new cement roof, doors, and windows. However, Jennifer was not able to find a contractor to do the job within this budget. She estimated that \$11,000 would cover only materials, wood, and some of the labor because of a post-disaster construction market boom (Robles 2018). Jennifer appealed the FEMA decision to try to get a larger amount but was denied and could not understand how “total loss” amounted to only \$11,000: “They came and took photos. *They saw,*” she said.

To fill in the federal disaster assistance gap, PRDOH recommended that Jennifer apply for *Tu Hogar Renace* (Your Home is Reborn), a FEMA-funded program locally administered through PRDOH that provided up to \$20,000 for minor emergency repairs to make houses “safe



and functional.”<sup>9</sup> *Tu Hogar Renace* approved Jennifer for the maximum \$20,000 for interior repairs like replacing the stove, sinks, refrigerator, cabinets, and beds and for installing electric generators.<sup>10</sup> But Jennifer kept delaying the work because it was senseless to install interior equipment without a proper roof. “I was waiting and waiting, time was passing, and the roof was becoming more damaged. And every time [*Tu Hogar Renace*] wanted to come and install the equipment, I had to stop them because without a roof everything inside the house would be damaged,” she said. *Tu Hogar Renace* told Jennifer to call once she had the roof done. Then around September 2018, she called because she had gotten some temporary sheet metal panels on part of the roof, so she figured *Tu Hogar Renace* could start installing the interior equipment little by little. But *Tu Hogar Renace* had closed her case without any notification. “Time was up,” they told her, and the promised \$20,000 vanished. Ironically, *Tu Hogar Renace’s* webpage logo at the time read, “The first step to your recuperation.”<sup>11</sup>

### *A roof two years later*

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<sup>9</sup> *Tu Hogar Renace* is organized around seven construction conglomerates (five U.S. companies, two Puerto Rican companies) that divided up the archipelago into contractor zones. One of the companies, the Texas-based SLS Company (designated for Zone 2), was awarded a \$145 million contract in 2018 for Texas border wall construction, highlighting the entanglements between the U.S. disaster and security industries. These entanglements are not so surprising considering that U.S. disaster response is largely framed through the lens of “national security.” FEMA was established in 1979 and its predecessor was the Office of Civil Defense (OCD), from which it inherited a tradition of militarization and Cold War politics. In Puerto Rico, the agency was even charged with surveilling anti-colonial political movements (see Rivera 2020; Rodríguez-Silva 2019). George W. Bush’s administration in the early 2000s saw FEMA as an “oversized entitlement program” and significantly cut its disaster preparation budget in favor of free market solutions for disaster relief (Schwartz 2015, 317). FEMA was absorbed into the Department of Homeland Security in 2003 and its primary focus shifted from disaster preparation to anti-terrorism. The contradictions in this free-market shift were of course exposed during Hurricane Katrina (2005). On the “disaster economy” buildup of the contractor infrastructure, see Arena 2012 and Klein 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Jennifer did not previously have electric generators, and I found in multiple interviews that *Tu Hogar Renace* installs or adds items like smoke detectors and electric generators onto their jobs that were not there before or were not requested by the homeowner. These extra installations, of course, raise the repair estimate and thus the profits to the contracted companies.

<sup>11</sup> <https://tuhogarrenace.com/>. Accessed March 2, 2018.

One hot afternoon in August 2019, I stopped by Jennifer's home after spending the morning at the *Centro de Apoyo Mutuo*. Jennifer's home, like many others in Las Carolinas, had a blue "Homes International"<sup>12</sup> sign posted in the front yard, a portable toilet for construction workers, and a pile of materials, signaling that the nonprofit was in the process of completing home renovations. Homes International was wrapping up its pilot project in Las Carolinas to repair and rebuild homes after Hurricane Maria, focusing on homeowners who were underfunded or denied access to federal disaster assistance. Homes International's work is donor-funded, but the territorial government facilitated its work through expedited permit access and inspections. I was relieved to see that Jennifer finally had a roof on her two-story home after enduring nearly two years (and two hurricane seasons) with a blue tarp. But it was ultimately up to an international nonprofit to build a roof at no cost to the homeowner and get her closer to living in a dignified home.

Jennifer invited me into the two-bedroom bottom floor apartment where she lived with her three sons and a student temporarily staying on her couch. Until Hurricane Maria, Jennifer's family had utilized both floors, but since the top floor was totally destroyed, the whole family had moved to the bottom floor. The small apartment smelled of garlic and *recao* (culantro) as Jennifer was busy cooking a large pot of rice and beans. Even so, she insisted we sit for a cold drink of *jugo de acerola* (acerola juice). She called her son to ask him to go to the corner store and pick up some ice, since she didn't have any in her freezer and she would not serve the juice warm.

Jennifer was much more at ease during this conversation compared to previous ones I had with her because she would soon be able to move back into the renovated upstairs apartment

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<sup>12</sup> I have changed the name of this organization.

and secure her formal property title. It was one thing checked off the list of what she was negotiating in her daily life. Jennifer had been recently fired from her part-time kitchen staff job at a café in San Lorenzo (a nearby municipality), and even though the boss owed her backpay, she decided not to pursue legal measures. She repeated the phrase she often used to calm her sense of resignation after Hurricane Maria: “*Dios me recompensa*” (God rewards me). Jennifer also recently asked her long-time partner to leave; her son had just been released from prison; and she was preparing her other son with special needs (*diversidad funcional*) for the Special Olympics in Mexico, for which she was collecting donations to help fund his trip and passport application.

As we sat drinking the acerola juice at the kitchen table, she pointed to a huge crack in the wall next to the TV, which she said resulted from the house shaking (*temblando*) during Maria. She pointed to spots along the ceiling that leaked for almost two years from the water that would enter through the blue tarp, flood the top floor, and make its way down through the cracks. Homes International had sealed the leaks, but the water marks were still visible—a lasting reminder of the damage beneath the superficial repairs. She toured me from the living room into the two connecting bedrooms, emphasizing all the furniture that was damaged and everything that she had to move from the top to the bottom floor. Homes International had left a stack of unused paints in the front room for when Jennifer has a chance to paint the bottom apartment, a task that seemed secondary to her hopes of constructing a deck off the side of the house with the materials left from the old structure.

She took me up to the top floor and enthusiastically showed me the new two-bedroom, two-bathroom construction. Homes International had been working for over one month to totally gut the apartment and finish the plumbing and electric installation. All that remained from the

old structure were some painted kitchen wall tiles and some of the bathroom equipment. Her new roof was made of sheet metal secured with nails, a material conventionally understood as adequate, but not as hurricane-proof as cement.<sup>13</sup>

Jennifer's story of being in limbo with federal disaster assistance to secure a proper roof and a dignified home is not exceptional, but rather a familiar story especially among working class, poor, and housing insecure Puerto Ricans in the wake of Hurricane Maria. Disaster survivors are made legible as "deserving" or "undeserving" of disaster aid (and nonprofit benevolence) in part through valuations about their lived property relations and how they can "prove" ownership according to federally imposed notions rather than locally recognized practices. Jennifer's struggle to repair her home involved private contractor and nonprofit programs like *Tu Hogar Renace* and Homes International, which demonstrate the replacement of government infrastructures with organizations accountable to profit margins and donors. Both programs, ultimately, were implemented to cover repair work that FEMA failed to do. Jennifer's story also reveals how disaster governance works through an onerous process of bureaucratic "waiting" for documents, lawyer notarizations, signatures, inspections, and contractors, which some scholars have described as the "slow violence" of bureaucracies (Auyero 2012; Gupta 2012; Nixon 2011). Rather than ameliorating the insecurity of living without a proper roof, bureaucratic processes reproduced the condition of Jennifer's life in a vulnerable limbo for almost two years.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> In addition to materials, a structure's ability to weather storms also depends on adherence to building codes, which some homeowners do not follow due to lack of money or access to knowledge about the process, which is another sign of state abandonment.

<sup>14</sup> For a related discussion on bureaucratic waiting, the "Road Home Program," and displacement in post-Katrina New Orleans, see Adams, Van Hattum, and English 2009.

### **Milagros's Story: Assessing "direct" and "indirect" damage**

Bats had invaded Evelyn's second-story home, entering through the torn-open roof and releasing excrements that aggravated Evelyn's asthma, her sister Milagros told me as she pointed to the part of the roof that remained covered with a FEMA blue tarp over one year after Hurricane Maria. The front part of the roof covering the second-floor balcony was the only part that remained intact because it was made of cement. The rest of the roof made from sheet metal and wood had been destroyed during Hurricane Maria.

Milagros and I were talking at the residence where her elderly parents and sister, Evelyn live in the "*parcelas viejas*" (old *parcelas*) section of Las Carolinas. Various governors throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century politicized the "gifting" of formal titles to *parcela* land holders to gain political support in strategic areas. Milagros's father Manuel was in fact one of the early *parcela* residents in Las Carolinas after the distributions began in 1955. Over time, Manuel and his brother built homes on the *parcela* their family was allotted. Milagros recounted how after applying for over two decades, her father and her uncle received their formal property titles at a ceremony held in the north-coast municipality of Isabela in the early 1990s when government officials "gave the property title to some people in their hand," similar to present-day titling ceremonies.

Manuel lives on the first floor of the house with his wife who has severe dementia. Both are in their 80s. Their daughter Evelyn lives on the second floor of the house where the roof came off. Manuel and his two daughters rotate caring for his wife. Milagros—a part time home health aid worker—and Evelyn—who at the time had a part-time job and was experiencing anxiety—care for their mother three mornings per week when Manuel participates in the *Centro de Apoyo Mutuo*'s activity center for elderly residents. Manuel—a retired carpenter—sees the

CAM as a space for socializing with neighbors, developing artistic skills, and as an outlet for the strenuous and emotionally taxing care work he performs in the home. Manuel's house is a consistent stop on the CAM's lunch delivery route, which is how I met his daughter Milagros.

As we sat in her parents' living room with her mother watching television, Milagros recalled how her family's disaster aid case unfolded, starting with learning about applying for disaster aid through "word of mouth" in the long lines for gas, food, and water immediately after Hurricane Maria. Milagros used her niece's phone, which had intermittent internet connection after the storm, to apply for FEMA IHP for her parents' home.<sup>15</sup> The first floor suffered interior damage and severe flooding because the roof on the structure came off. Manuel and his wife went to live with Milagros for two months in her downtown Caguas apartment in a public housing complex, where they had water, but no electricity until November 2017. Despite the roof damage, Evelyn remained in her apartment. She first got a blue tarp from the municipality and then two months later, a blue tarp from FEMA. After some debate and confusion about ownership and Evelyn's eligibility for disaster aid (discussed below), FEMA evaluated the structure as two separate homes. Milagros's parents received \$500 immediate cash assistance and FEMA approved about \$3,000 for Manuel to "make the house habitable" and fix interior damage including kitchen cabinets, furniture, windows, a hole in the kitchen wall, and the first-floor awning. However, FEMA did not approve any disaster aid to cover first-floor damages from the flooding and leaks, since they were considered "indirect" damage—not due directly to

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<sup>15</sup> FEMA did not establish mechanisms for residents to apply for disaster aid that responded to the infrastructural collapse after Hurricane Maria when electricity and telephone service were out throughout nearly the entire archipelago. For example, a FEMA press release on September 21, 2017 (one day after Hurricane Maria) states: "Those in designated areas of Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands who are able to register for assistance may do so online at [www.DisasterAssistance.gov](http://www.DisasterAssistance.gov). If able, online registration is the quickest way to register for federal assistance. Survivors who do not have access to the internet may register by calling 1-800-621-FEMA (3362) or 1-800-462-7585 (TTY). If you use 711 relay or Video Relay Service (VRS), call 800-621-3362 directly." See <https://www.fema.gov/news-release/2017/09/21/hurricane-maria-response-and-relief-operations-underway>

the hurricane, but to the structure's roof damage, which pertained to Evelyn. Manuel therefore had to invest his own money to fix the damages from the leaks and flooding. The housing recovery program *Tu Hogar Renace* did not cover flood damage in Manuel's home either, but instead installed smoke detectors (that the family did not previously have or specifically request) and repaired the bathroom sink (that Milagros said had been leaking).

FEMA did not approve enough money for Evelyn to fully fix the roof given the high construction costs, so she appealed the first decision and received a small extra amount that was still not enough. She too invested her own money to finish the new roof made of sheet metal with nails. "Supposedly now it won't fly off," Milagros told me. *Tu Hogar Renace* approved repairs in Evelyn's home, but with the roof damaged, they could not do much besides fix window handles, leaving housing recovery in limbo.

Milagros described her sister's physical and emotional drain, especially from the bureaucratic wait and unmet expectations of the government's role in the wake of disaster:

It was very intense. To lose everything and not have sufficient help. Well, you think that the government is going to cover everything, you think it's going to be like that. And emotionally, she [Evelyn] was very affected. She's still very affected...It's not easy when a hurricane takes everything from you and then you cannot recover.

### *Legitimizing ownership*

I initially wanted to talk to Milagros's family because the Las Carolinas Residents' Association had been tracking residents with blue tarps and told me about Evelyn's experience with FEMA.<sup>16</sup> Besides providing Evelyn insufficient disaster aid, FEMA inspectors expressed

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<sup>16</sup> Nearly two years after Hurricane Maria, as residents prepared for Tropical Storm Dorian, an estimated 30,000 homes in Puerto Rico still had blue tarp roofs (PBS News Hour 2019).

initial doubts about residents' eligibility for aid and said that Evelyn's house was in a "*zona invadida*" (invaded zone, connotating self-built homes without permissions or clear title). It was not clear whether this designation was meant for only the *parcelas viejas* section of Las Carolinas or to the whole sector. Nonetheless, this would not have been the first time FEMA excluded Las Carolinas residents from disaster assistance. A 2011 FEMA memo written by the Individual Assistance Branch Chief to the FEMA Federal Coordinating Officer in Puerto Rico titled "Non Traditional Forms of Housing (All Puerto Rico Disasters)" lists Las Carolinas as one of 116 areas in Puerto Rico that FEMA identified as a "squatter community" (Cabrera 2011).<sup>17</sup> The memo provides inspection guidelines and states that squatters, and presumably the entire communities listed, are *ineligible* for home repair assistance because "they are not the owner of the damaged dwelling."

This stigmatization and discrimination against "squatter communities" calls to mind the *rescate* (rescue) movement of both spontaneous and organized land occupations that peaked during the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>18</sup> *Rescates* were a response to the social contradictions of housing access resulting from rapid industrialization, urbanization, and the limits of the mid-century PPD urban and housing reforms. As sociologist Liliana Cotto Morales documents, residents from urban *barriadas* (slums) staked their claims on publicly or privately-owned land in search of more adequate living conditions and self-built communities (Cotto Morales 2011). Land rescuers were often represented as a threat to social stability, as Cotto Morales demonstrates through extensive periodical analysis. Adversarial government and market actors

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<sup>17</sup>"Squatter" as noted in this Memo can be loosely translated to "*invasor*," or "invader" in Spanish.

<sup>18</sup> The language around land occupations is an important area of contestation depending on social location and relation to the occupation. The earlier *rescate* movement in Puerto Rico certainly resonates with post-Maria mutual aid organizing in distinct spatial locations and with new forms of state surveillance, as I discuss in the following chapter. I am grateful to anthropologist Isar Godreau, who suggested in a 2018 conversation with me that school occupations accelerating after the 2017 storms were like a "new *rescate*" movement. I plan to further explore this framing in future work.



identified the protagonists as “invaders” rather than “rescuers,” and various *rescates* were met with state violence, evictions, and laws that criminalized their practices. Similarly, the 2011 FEMA memo ties a punitive government response (federal disaster aid denial) to a stigmatized property arrangement (squatter communities). The assumed categories of “squatter” or “invaded zone” throw ownership into doubt and represent a moral valuation about residents and their supposed fraudulent ownership status. While Milagros said that historically some parts of the sector may be considered “invaded” or rescued zones, she noted that the designation did not apply to the *parcelas viejas* or her father’s property. Evelyn contested FEMA’s arbitrary designation and ultimately was eligible for disaster aid.

In November 2018 the FEMA Puerto Rico News Desk confirmed with me via email correspondence that the 2011 squatter communities list had *not* been updated, although it remains unclear whether this list was used during Hurricane Maria and how the memo might have influenced the agency’s assumptions about “squatters” and communities identified in the memo. Thus, questions about the validity of ownership claims may foreclose access to certain modes of recovery through necessary programs such as the Individuals and Households Program. Here, we are reminded of how the assumed links between vulnerability and informality are constructed through official and popular discourses that depict informality and vulnerability as a choice and a national threat (Algoed and Hernández Torrales 2019). Evelyn’s challenge to this designation was a way of defending ownership claims amid a landscape of exclusionary scrutiny.

I asked Milagros what she thought about the “invaded zone” designation that FEMA inspectors had mentioned to her sister. Referring to her parents’ and sister’s homes in a single structure, Milagros said:

They [FEMA] understand that when there is more than one house, it’s ‘invaded’...But it’s not ‘invaded.’ This is what my sister told me that they

[FEMA] had said to her, and she explained to them that it [the property] is not invaded. She [Evelyn] has her *papers* for the house [the second floor] that say it's hers...so that she can do her own thing with the house. It's a bit more difficult if you don't have title or if you don't have a *paper* saying the property is yours (my emphasis).

During our conversation, the issue of formal property titles came up. Milagros clarified that the two-story house does not have two titles, but rather “*dos propietarios*” (two owners). Manuel holds the formal property title and over time ceded surface rights to Evelyn on the top floor. Milagros explained that her sister “does not have title but she has the *forms* and the *papers* that say the house is hers...She has the house *registered* as her property” (my emphasis). Milagros also described her sister as in charge of maintaining her home, taking care of it, and fixing problems as they arise.

Milagros then referenced the high-profile case of Adolfina Villanueva Osorio, an Afro-Puerto Rican resident of the northeastern coastal municipality of Loíza whose story illustrates the entanglement of racial dispossession and land struggles. Adolfina was killed by police trying to evict her from her beachfront home in 1980 (Dieppa, Lydersen, and Bayne 2019). It is reported that Adolfina and her husband, a fisherman, inherited the land from her father and had lived there for forty years. The Catholic Church had hoped to acquire the property, but Adolfina's family refused to move. Police raided her home in an attempt to expropriate the land and shot Adolfina dead, claiming she was brandishing a machete. No one was ever held accountable for Adolfina's murder. The construction project was continuously disrupted and finally halted by protesters. Adolfina's story lives on and provides a long-standing frame of reference for struggles around land, racism, ownership, and dispossession beyond the municipality where she lived. For example, an interview with Adolfina's widower was featured in a popular periodical to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of her death and to reflect on the racist state violence that

ties Adolfiná's story to the 2020 police murder of George Floyd in the continental U.S. (Bauzá 2020).

The terms around which Milagros articulates her sister's ownership through things like papers and continuous acts of maintenance gesture towards how ownership is locally lived and legally recognized as detached from a formal property title in Puerto Rico. Here we see how property claims are continuously "enacted," through material and discursive means rather than objectively existing (Blomley 2004). If Evelyn had not challenged FEMA's doubts about the *parcelas viejas* as an "invaded zone," her case could have been outright denied like thousands of other FEMA applicants. Milagros's invocation of the collective memory of Adolfiná Villanueva Osorio, land expropriation, and murder with impunity also suggests the political, classed, and racialized stakes around claims to property and ownership, particularly when they are challenged by those in power.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter examined government directed disaster governance targeting the home as both the primary site for recovery and anticipatory resilience building for future emergencies. Examining specific aspects of disaster governance interventions—in this case property ownership requirements for federal disaster aid—provides a useful analytic into how institutional power relations bear out in quotidian experiences and shape recovery access and privatized resilience. Property is indeed a "discursive site" (Rhiney 2018) because it reveals major narratives and institutional priorities guiding disaster preparation that legitimize a specific kind of privatized resilience-building in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria. I have tried to show how property and ownership are mobilized and contested within disaster governance. U.S.-established

policies and expectations around ownership were leveraged as political, moral, and disciplinary categories to determine aid eligibility to the effect of scrutinizing survivors' legitimate homeownership claims. I have demonstrated how this scrutiny exposed survivors to onerous procedures to prove ownership and/or to disaster aid denial. Bureaucratic barriers to accessing disaster aid or aid denials took on a particular colonial characteristic because FEMA home assessment criteria both contradicted official federal guidelines and imposed understandings of property and ownership that disregarded local law, practice, and needs. The official long term recovery objective to regularize property titles in Puerto Rico, and the challenges owners with unclear title confront in accessing current and future aid, must be understood within the trajectory of popular struggles over housing, ownership, habitation, and life-making through diverse practices that have historically been surveilled as suspect, destabilizing, or illegitimate.

Disaster aid eligibility exclusions cause social harms that cannot be remedied by patchwork technical solutions such as title granting because they fail to address social and structural conditions that produce vulnerability. For the housing title recipients mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, isolated measures such as ceremonial title granting summon resilient individuals and homeowners to self-manage climate risk rather than provide material protections. Underscoring the patchwork recovery approach, urbanist Raúl Santiago Bartolomei argues that Puerto Rico's housing recovery strategies, including individual title formalization, are more like a "catalog of ideas" rather than a comprehensive planning and public policy framework (Santiago Bartolomei 2019, 2).

As a moral category attached to people in disaster governance discourse, "resilience" requires us to interrogate "the distance between the resilient subject and the person or institution calling them such" (Leary 2018, 151). In the cases above, there is a vast power differential

between Puerto Rican households and the federal and territorial state agencies directing disaster aid programs. Measures to regulate disaster aid access through specific notions of homeownership represent resilience as a private, individualized, depoliticized capacity to self-manage crisis and bounce back from duress. Nonetheless, disaster aid bureaucratic encounters also became spaces where survivors creatively negotiated and contested the government's terms of recovery. In contrast to the top-down, exclusionary bureaucratic approach presented in this chapter, the grassroots mutual aid initiative that I examine in the following two chapters politicizes the question of disaster preparedness and recovery and amplifies public forms of care.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **Repurposing Abandonment: Occupation, Rescue, and Geographies of Mutual Aid**

At 6am one hot morning in 2010, Las Carolinas parents, grandparents, great grandparents, students, and residents gathered at the gates of the María Montañez Gómez School, glued the lock keyholes shut, and formed a picket line to block the entrance. Press arrived to cover the protest action and members of the *Federación de Maestros de Puerto Rico* (Puerto Rico Teachers' Federation-FMPR) participated in solidarity to defend public education from deepening austerity under PNP Governor Luis Fortuño's administration. After a few hours holding the picket line and blocking the entrance of teachers, students, and school staff, the Fire Department arrived to break the rear gate locks, effectively forcing the school to open. Students and teachers entered the school while protesting parents confronted the director, demanding answers "*en arroz y habichuelas*" (in rice and beans) about the impending transfer of teachers. The school director deflected, refusing to provide concrete information and instead suggested that the parents take up the issue with the regional Superintendent.

Rosa and other parents followed the director's suggestion and drove right to the Superintendent's office in the adjacent municipality of Gurabo, where emergency meetings were held over the next few days between school officials and parents. Rosa is a CAM leader in her mid-forties and a long-standing defender of the school. She recalls that "all the problems" began around 2010 when "rumors" circulated about relocating the best teachers out of the school because student enrollment was declining. Austerity targeting of public education, backed by official narratives of "school consolidation" in the 2010s (Brusi 2020), coincided with widespread dispossession of poor and working classes as Puerto Rico faced a growing economic

and debt crisis. For example, Governor Fortuño’s first executive order of his term declared a fiscal state of emergency, followed by Law 7 of 2009 that dismissed 30,000 public employees, and imposed budget cuts on the University of Puerto. These actions sparked a general strike in 2009 and a UPR strike in 2010, both of which were brutally criminalized. In this context of intensifying crisis, parents in Las Carolinas organized the school shutdown described above to draw attention to their concerns about teacher transfers impacting the quality of their children’s education and community life more generally.<sup>1</sup>

At the time of the shutdown, Rosa was working in medical billing at a hospital in Caguas and had the “security” of family support close to the school. These support networks were crucial for working-class families to navigate the everyday challenges of deteriorating public education. “With the Department of Education,” Rosa explained,

nothing is secure because one day you [a student] arrive and they say there are no classes or that school closes at noon. Or they say there’s no water or electricity. They are supposed to wait two hours in case the utilities are restored, but if they are not, the students have to go. I had them [my sons] in this school because my grandmother lives here [right in front of the school].

Rosa frequently shared an insight with visitors to the CAM that stuck with me. She said that Las Carolinas experienced “three hurricanes:” the school closure, Irma, and Maria. Like many parents in Las Carolinas, Rosa’s connection to the María Montañez Gómez School is intergenerational, as she and her eldest son both graduated from the school. Her youngest son attended the school for first through third grade before transferring to another school better suited

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<sup>1</sup> This account of the protest action is based on the recollections of two participants (a mother and a teacher) whose accounts overlapped from different points of participation. Rosa used three terms to describe this temporary shutdown—*huelga* (strike), *paro* (stoppage or shutdown), and *piquete* (picket). Neither Rosa nor Paola could pin an exact date on this action. Both estimated that it took place around 2010. I searched various periodicals’ digital archives as well as the Caguas Municipal Archives print records for the local Caguas newspaper *La Semana* but did not find any press coverage.

for his intellectual and social needs. Rosa was born and raised in Las Carolinas, where she lived with her family up until about the early 2010s when they moved to the nearby municipality of Aguas Buenas. She maintains strong connections with Las Carolinas through her parents and extended family that still live there, and now through her CAM leadership. Rosa has an Associate Degree and worked in medical billing at a Caguas hospital. Around 2015, the hospital restructured amid the spiraling public debt crisis, and Rosa was laid off. Since then, she has been a full-time homemaker and mother, or “soccer mom” as she describes herself. Rosa dedicates a significant amount of time to supporting her oldest son’s soccer activities and her younger son’s special learning needs. Rosa joined the CAM through the encouragement of her mother Adriana, one of the CAM founders. She plays substantial roles, including managing the lunch delivery routes, communications, and food shopping. Shifting a large portion of her weekly care and social reproductive labor to the CAM was initially a challenge for her family, especially for her husband who had assumed the CAM would be temporary and had to adjust to her more frequent absence from the home during weekdays. To negotiate her family’s needs and expectations, Rosa coordinates her CAM tasks around her sons’ school schedules, always leaves in time to prepare dinner, and occasionally misses CAM days to attend to her sons’ medical or recreational needs. As of 2020, Rosa’s oldest son (a student at the University of Puerto Rico) began to participate more actively in the CAM and coordinate the ear acupuncture clinic.

The day before the 2020 shutdown, Rosa attended a meeting with other parents and community members at the Residents’ Association community center and drove through Las Carolinas with a megaphone inviting residents to meet at the school gates at 6am the next morning. The date was strategically chosen to coincide with the administration of the standardized “*Las Pruebas Metas*” (The Target Tests), which the Department of Education uses



to assess student achievement and rationalize consolidation of “underperforming” schools. The goal was to put pressure on the Department of Education to halt teacher relocation by disrupting these important standardized exams. Rosa explains the significance of the disruption on this day:

Someone would come listen to us. Because the Department of Education, with these tests—it’s like the biggest thing to happen! They orient the students not to miss school that day, that they will have a pizza party if everyone attends...They have t-shirts made that say, ‘I’m taking the Target Tests.’ Things like that.

As a result of the meetings with the Superintendent that took place following the shutdown, Las Carolinas parents managed to negotiate a commitment from the Department of Education to only transfer two out of the four to six teachers that were originally slated for relocation. However, the official carrot and stick approach required parents to agree to no further disruptions to the standardized tests. The *Pruebas Metas* were administered a few days later without additional pickets or shutdowns, although one family boycotted the exams and kept their son home from school. However, in the face of this uncertainty, Rosa decided to transfer her youngest son out of the school, and the Department of Education relocated additional teachers the following academic year. Rosa asserts that the shutdown demonstrated a multi-generational coalition defense of the school, which would be active through its closing in 2017 and after Hurricane Maria when residents repurposed the abandoned school as a CAM and defended it through new political tactics.

I begin with the 2010 school protest because the story is representative of long-standing community struggles against austerity that predated Hurricane Maria and were often led by women. The CAM Las Carolinas is thus a reorganized site from which residents continue to defend community resources and infrastructures in the aftermath of the school closure and from which participants construct disaster recovery relations that subvert privatized resilience

frameworks discussed in Chapter Three. This chapter parts from Rosa’s understanding of “three hurricanes” to explore how the CAM Las Carolinas repurposes abandonment in the context of debt crisis, uneven or “unnatural” disaster, and education reform in Puerto Rico. Public school closures and the recent proliferation of school occupations and rescues such as the CAM Las Carolinas make visible the colonial politics of disposability and debt capture as a social spatial process.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the spatialization of school closures and occupation/rescue serves as a lens into the spatialization of debt, revealing which communities bear disproportionate burdens of Puerto Rico’s bankruptcy. Marginalized, urban peripheral geographies such as the *parcelas* of Las Carolinas are both disproportionately impacted by austerity and actively participating in a process of taking back space and infrastructure. Grassroots school occupations/rescues have surged since Hurricane Maria, suggesting the formation of new political subjects acting upon a conjuncture in which the austerity-driven abandonment of public property coincides with unmet needs for physical space to organize disaster recovery and community repair from below. The hurricane and its aftermath thus become a methodological lens to examine the lived and ongoing effects of public debt, and vice versa.

I argue that the CAM Las Carolinas did not emerge spontaneously in response to the immediate crisis of the 2017 hurricanes. Rather, residents—especially mothers—activated to occupy the María Montañez Gómez School and develop a CAM. The CAM’s vision and daily practices repurposed long-standing forms of abandonment and resisted the individualized organizing logics of disaster governance that I described in the previous chapter. In other words, previous struggles around concrete community resources at stake such as the school shaped the

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<sup>2</sup> Following Lazzarato (2015), debt capture is a temporal process that lays claim to the future. Following Harker (2020), I add that debt capture is also a social-spatial process.

actions residents engaged in to develop the CAM and defend their complex ownership claims to the school.

My use of “repurposing abandonment” draws on Kimberley Kinder’s ethnography (2016) on “DIY urbanism” and self-provisioning tactics in Detroit, where she traces residents’ efforts to transform urban landscapes of abandonment and disinvestment. However, Leary cautions that “DIY” has become a “mixture of autonomous self-determination with entrepreneurial self-reliance” that can replace demands for a robust public sphere by “masquerading as a practice of citizenship” (Leary 2018, 70-71). The contradictions and dilemmas of “DIY” ethos are not lost on Kimberley Kinder and Detroit residents who engage in self-provisioning, nor are they lost on mutual aid practitioners in Puerto Rico. Kinder argues that while self-provisioning provided immediate solutions, residents recognized that DIY practices “do little to challenge the fundamental role reversal where residents are becoming de facto property managers and service providers while market and government actors merely pitch in as occasional volunteers” (Kinder 2016, 30). These contradictory dynamics resonate with debates about *autogestión* and mutual aid in Puerto Rico, which I attempt to describe with nuance and attention to local dynamics. Rather than a static binary opposition of “*autogestión*” or self-provisioning versus “the state” or public demands, I show how these relations are contingent and strategically mobilized.

I focus specifically on the school as a socially significant space that crystalizes the local and intergenerational effects of public disinvestment, residents’ struggles over public/social infrastructures, and the tactics of rescue and occupation that constitute the CAM. These tactics mirror the wider production of insurgent geographies of mutual aid emerging across the archipelago, as evidenced by an exchange I detail below between the CAM and prospective

school occupiers from a nearby community. While the hegemonic framework of disaster governance relies on privatized resilience, the repurposed school is the point from which the CAM Las Carolinas organized alternative recovery practices and public forms of care, which I further analyze in the following chapter. As Christopher Harker argues, instances and practices of refusal are starting points for challenging the violence of debt (2020, 5). Ultimately, I argue that repurposing abandonment is a form of debt resistance and refusal that places spatial occupation at the center of rejecting the violence of austerity and reimagining recovery otherwise.

First, I explore the terms, trajectories, and politics around occupation/rescue in Puerto Rico. I then examine austerity-driven education reform and mass closure in Puerto Rico to situate the long struggle over the María Montañez Gómez School as central to repurposing abandonment *before and after* its May 2017 closure. I describe the emergence of the CAM, provide a spatial and photographic overview to highlight aesthetic and material transformations, and detail its organizational structure with attention to the particularities that distinguish it from other CAMs across the archipelago. I then draw on an instance of knowledge exchange between the CAM and prospective school rescuers in another *parcela* community to demonstrate the political significance of school occupation in shaping the emerging geographies of mutual aid. Lastly, I consider how the CAM both challenges and works within the legalities and official politics governing abandoned public property. These questions point to the complexities of *autogestión*, refusal, and strategic negotiations with the state. I examine how the CAM navigates its ambiguous relation to the school through unauthorized occupation, formal lease application, legislative strategies to secure ownership title, and protest. Importantly, Las Carolinas elders have been at the center of these efforts.

## Occupation/Rescue

The terms and traditions around spatial occupations that seek to “build power in common by rescuing the common(s)” carry political and historical weight in Puerto Rico (Zambrana 2021a, 144). Reference to the “commons” is useful as an analytic for struggles that build alternatives to market enclosure and/or colonial-state cooptation of common resources. Scholars have analyzed commoning initiatives around forests, fisheries, urban gardens, and housing, for example, as “a mode of governing access to and use of shared resources” (Frischmann 2018) and as the “seeds” of “an alternative mode of production in the make” (Caffentzis and Federici 2014, i95). However, commons are not inherently counter-hegemonic, but rather at times contradictory and struggled over in everyday practice through which “people care for and (re)produce their social and ecological sustenance” (García López, Velicu, and D’Alisa 2017; see also Bollier and Helfrich 2015). Struggles over the commons in Puerto Rico articulate through contemporary “rescues” across property arrangements, including private property, property declared a public disturbance, vacant land, urban infrastructures, and public abandoned property. Rescues such as the CAM Las Carolinas echo previous occupation “waves” where disenfranchised people mobilized spatial practices to meet basic needs and confront power relations (Moscoso 2018). These waves include public land occupations on the urban periphery during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (e.g., communities surrounding *El Caño Martín Peña* in San Juan), the *rescate* movement of the 1960s-1970s, where some 86,000 Puerto Ricans claimed lands through collective action to establish “informal” settlements for housing rendered scarce by failed economic development policies, and recent urban occupations of abandoned private and public properties (Fontáñez-Torres 2017; Moscoso 2018). Zambrana refers to these waves of

taking back land over time as a “modality of *autogestión*” that does not rearticulate power through governance structures, but rather through a mode of “unbinding and binding life anew,” a “material praxis” that challenges the logics of private property (Zambrana 2021a, 160-161).

Other protest occupations in Puerto Rico place bodies and political demands in significant spaces where participants are often criminalized. For example, we can think back to the waves of civil disobedience and protest encampments on restricted land during the struggle to remove the U.S. Navy from Vieques; the Encampment Against Coal Ash in Peñuelas to stop toxic dumping in local landfills; the 2018 *Colectiva Feminista en Construcción*'s three-day “*plantón*” (sit-in) in front of the governor’s mansion to demand the declaration of a state of emergency to address gender violence; as well as the emerging *Alacenas Feministas* (feminist pantries), some of which are built into the walls of closed schools to facilitate solidarity exchange during the pandemic; and the summer 2021 protest encampment that emerged at a beachfront condominium in the western coastal municipality of Rincón to block construction of an ecologically disruptive pool.

In her study of the *rescate* movement, Liliana Cotto-Morales (2006) demonstrates that semantic choices during the 1960s and 1970s fell along lines of social location. For instance, “distinctions made in court, the media, and by law enforcement between ‘invaders’ and ‘rescuers’ ran along race/class lines” (Zambrana 2021a, 154). For Cotto-Morales and Zambrana, the *rescate* movement protagonists’ understanding of their own subversive practices as “rescue” articulates taking back the land in moral-political rather than legal terms (Cotto-Morales 2006; Zambrana 2021a). Las Carolinas residents similarly mobilized moral-political terms to assert a right to take back local resources through “commoning”—in this case, occupying and repurposing the abandoned elementary school to organize social reproductive labor and disaster

recovery collectively. CAM Las Carolinas participants prefer the term “rescue” (*rescatar*) instead of “occupy” (*ocupar*) to describe their unauthorized and liminal relation to the María Montañez Gómez School because “rescue” is a politically neutral term with broader appeal, as organizers told me.

For these rescuers/occupiers, rescuing space and repurposing abandonment is synonymous with reimagining recovery. Their spatial practices reimagine space and recovery through the restoration of use values that disrupt enclosure processes, potential commodification through new government leases, and the legalities around abandoned public property. Considering this local, historical, and political context, I follow current activist tendencies around the language of spatial occupation in Puerto Rico and deliberately use “rescue” and “occupation” interchangeably throughout the chapter to acknowledge both the spirit of reclaiming and rehabilitating space and the politically confrontational nature of occupation (see also Márquez 2019).<sup>3</sup>

There has been a notable surge in abandoned school rescues/occupations in the wake of Hurricane Maria. These new takeovers respond to both the urgent need for physical space (often still connected to water and electricity) to organize post-hurricane collective survival and the daily degradations of the debt crisis crystalized by education reform. While the school occupation phenomenon requires further study, urbanist and self-described “professional occupier,” Marina Moscoso, suggests that school rescues may coalesce into a fourth and prolonged occupation “wave” (Moscoso 2018).

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<sup>3</sup> Sophie Gonick (2016) makes a similar argument about occupation and recuperation in relation to squatters’ movements in Madrid. Research on agrarian struggles in Latin America further illuminates the contested terminology around land appropriation and occupation from below. For instance, in Brazil, media, the government, large landowners, and other elites use the term “invasions” while peasants prefer “occupations” (Rangel Loera 2010; Zimmerman 2012). In Central America, peasant movements refer to land “recuperations,” rather than rescues as in Puerto Rico (Edelman and León 2013).

## **Education Reform in Puerto Rico**

The María Montañez Gómez School shut down in May 2017 as part of the Puerto Rico Department of Education's mass closure of 184 public schools during the 2016-2017 academic year, which displaced 27,000 students (Morales Pomales 2017). Public education is a *strategic* target for both the federal Oversight Board and the local administration, which is pushing charter schools and suppressing political opposition via the slow dismantling of the University of Puerto Rico, long a site of social and political struggle. Neoliberal educational reform in Puerto Rico has been part of the political agenda for administrations at least since Governor Luis Fortuño (2009-2013). Scholars such as Rima Brusi have pointed to the shifting narratives and design around education reform in Puerto Rico, from the language of "school consolidation" in the late 2010s to the "school choice" narrative of the 2017 education reform bill (Law 85-2018) that formalized public to private transfers through vouchers and charter schools (Brusi 2020). Some understand the arrival of charter schools to Puerto Rico as part of the politics of disaster capitalism because the legislation was pushed through in the months following Hurricane Maria when Puerto Ricans were without water and electricity (Klein 2007).

The official narratives suggest that school closure decisions are based on physical facility deterioration, decreasing enrollment due to outmigration, and low academic achievement, which have proven to be inconsistent and arbitrarily mobilized criteria (Brusi 2020). While the Puerto Rican government and the federal Oversight Board's justification for shutting down schools and displacing students has been to generate extensive savings for the bankrupt territory, the opposite has proven true. Economist José Caraballo Cueto published an analysis in which he found the savings between 2017-2020 to be only about 2 percent, while the Department of



Education's school maintenance costs drastically increased over the same period (Caraballo Cueto 2020). Strikingly, the 2021-2022 Fiscal Plan certified by the Oversight Board predicts that education reform (a key line of "structural reform" along with welfare reform, energy reform, and "ease of doing business reform") will add a 0.15 percent cumulative impact on GNP by fiscal year 2051 (Financial Oversight and Management Board 2021, 41). After two years of public outcry over the contradictions of education reform and the ruins it has left behind, the Puerto Rican Senate passed a resolution in February 2021 to investigate the use and condition of all public schools closed from January 2011 to January 2021. Reports and impacted communities frequently highlight the afterlives of abandoned school structures that have become breeding grounds for pests, clandestine storage units, sites for illicit activity, garbage dumps, and makeshift horse stables.

These processes are not unique to Puerto Rico, but rather part of the "slow violence" of education reform across the U.S. since the 1980s (Aggarwal, Mayorga, and Nevel 2012). Public schools in the U.S. are mainly funded through property taxes, and school closures often correlate with the slow erosion of the local tax base. In Puerto Rico however, all public schools fall under the centralized Department of Education and operate independently of municipal property taxes. Research has shown that unlike the correlation between homeownership and so-called "high performing" schools in the U.S., in Puerto Rico "homeownership rates do not insulate against school closures" (Rubiano et al. 2020, 15). About half of the public schools in Puerto Rico have been closed since 2007, outpacing the rate in Chicago, the district with the second highest rate of closures in the U.S. (Rubiano Yedidia et al. 2020). School closures accelerated in 2013, and during the last austerity wave between 2017-2019, a staggering 438 schools were closed under the leadership of the former Secretary of Education Julia Keleher, who is now under federal

investigation, and PNP Governor Ricardo Rosselló. The conjuncture of climate disaster, public disinvestment, and the racial politics of disposability across U.S. jurisdictions has demonstrated similar patterns. For example, Hurricane Katrina (2005) marked a watershed moment in the transformation of public education in New Orleans and the implementation of the charter school model. Today, all but one of the city's 87 schools is a charter school (Abrams 2019).<sup>4</sup>

Former Governor Ricardo Rosselló initiated a process through executive order in 2017 for organizations and municipalities to submit applications to purchase or lease school facilities in disuse. As of 2020, only 18 percent of the schools closed since 2007 were formally contracted for reuse (Rubiano Yedidia et al. 2020). The average sale price of a school property is about \$400,000 and lease contracts, which characterize 80 percent of all the formal reuse arrangements, tend to favor private or for-profit schools, educational non-profits, and private real estate or commercial developers (Rubiano et al. 2020). Contrary to official claims to prioritize proposals from impacted communities (Rivera Clemente 2019), the sale and lease applications are exclusionary for grassroots collectives who are illegible to the state without official status designations, a bank identity, and financial resources. Given these limitations, the FMPR has organized the *Movimiento al Rescate de Mi Escuela* (Movement to Rescue My School) to support occupations and advocate on behalf of community-based lease applicants.

The spatialization of school closures is a lens into the spatialization of public debt and the communities that bear disproportionate effects of the crisis. Sixty-five percent of school

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<sup>4</sup> Disaster is not always directly linked to the charter school push in the U.S., as cases such as Philadelphia demonstrate. Comparing the experiences of post-Katrina New Orleans and post-Maria Puerto Rico merits further investigation. One key difference in the education reform process is that after Katrina, the state of Louisiana took over the school system and dismissed all teachers, crippling the teachers' union. This mass teacher layoff did not happen in Puerto Rico, and both the teachers' association, the *Asociación de Maestros de Puerto Rico* (Teachers' Association of Puerto Rico-AMPR), and its more militant counterpart, the *Federación de Maestros de Puerto Rico* (Teachers' Federation of Puerto Rico-FMPR), have played critical roles in pushing back against certain aspects of education reform.

closures between 2006-2018 occurred in rural and/or low-income areas, which are more likely to have limited access to public transportation and other public services (Hinojosa, Meléndez and Pietro 2019). Furthermore, school closure decisions have not contemplated long-term risk mitigation. The 2019-2020 earthquake swarm permanently damaged over half the functioning public schools in southwestern municipalities of Puerto Rico, while some schools that had been closed did not sustain any structural damage. Public school buildings can also serve as official emergency shelters, leaving impacted communities deprived of crucial emergency protection. Thus, school closures make visible the interplay between debt capture and the politics of disposability by subjecting populations surrounding closed schools to increased forms of risk and vulnerability. As I show below, these processes especially impact women and children. Nonetheless, mass school closure in times of crisis has catalyzed new tactics of resistance and refusal that shape emerging geographies of mutual aid to repurpose abandonment. This context of national education reform amid economic and environmental crisis illuminates how residents' actions to defend the María Montañez Gómez School—first as an elementary school and later as a CAM—are grounded in but not bound by local conditions.

### **Repurposing Abandonment: Geographies of Mutual Aid and Debt Resistance**

The CAM Las Carolinas is one of many emerging grassroots organizations that utilize “illegal” or unauthorized spatial occupation as a tactic to establish their projects (Roberto 2017). I argue that these tactics constitute a process of debt resistance via repurposing abandonment and actively producing social space (Lefebvre 2011). In Puerto Rico, abandoned privately-owned or publicly-owned buildings—especially schools—become significant sites of rescue because they crystallize popular grievances around the harms of education reform, disinvestment in

recreational spaces, housing, and municipal services, and recent government incentives for wealthy U.S. investors to buy up property (Villanueva, Cobián and Rodríguez 2018).<sup>5</sup> In discussing mutual aid centers as a manifestation of a “radical *autogestión*” movement, organizer Giovanni Roberto highlights the fact these occupations often take place in the structural vestiges of the state, such as closed schools and public offices, from which a new form of popular power emerges (Roberto 2017).<sup>6</sup> These are the contested “gray spaces” (Yiftachel 2009)—“in between spaces” that “private owners abandoned and public officials neglected” (Kinder 2016, 5). Intervening in landscapes they do not officially control, occupiers and mutual aid practitioners build a collective possessory logic and practices of spatial “rescue” and rehabilitation. These practices make new claims on these landscapes and resist the logics of debt capture that otherwise render them as casualties of closure or sites for new exchange values. At the CAM Las Carolinas, a possessory logic manifests through what Kurt Iveson (2013) calls “micro-spatial practices,” including structural maintenance and improvements, artwork, “naming” classrooms, cooking, gardening, mounting locks, engaging in forms of exchange, recycling, and facilitating garbage removal.

In this section, I return to the 2010 school shutdown through the perspective of another Las Carolinas mother and a former teacher to examine the significance of the María Montañez Gómez School as both an integral part of the local social fabric and as a long-standing site of struggle. This trajectory is crucial to understanding why and how the CAM emerged as an

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<sup>5</sup> School rescues continued throughout 2019-2020 in the wake of additional school closures after the seismic swarm. While I focus here on rescues by autonomous or semi-autonomous collectives, municipalities and non-profit organizations also play a role (Torres 2019).

<sup>6</sup> In this article, Roberto (2017) describes mutual aid as an anti-systemic position that challenges the ideological modes of “colonial welfare” as well as traditional left politics by centering and creatively responding to people’s needs rather than centering mass street actions.

extension of the school defense through the actions of intergenerational protagonists who experienced shared circumstances of abandonment.

*Before the Shutdown: Local Struggles to Defend the María Montañez Gómez School*

Generations of Las Carolinas residents graduated from the María Montañez Gómez School, which was central to the community's social infrastructure and identification. Prior to its 2017 closure and subsequent recuse as a CAM, the school had long been a politicized site where parents, students, residents, and teachers engaged in protests, standardized test boycotts, strikes, and countless meetings with education and municipal officials to defend the neighborhood's only elementary school. The elementary school was central to neighborhood social reproduction for both its role in children's education and community recreation. For instance, elderly residents often correlated the school closure with the decline in neighborhood and organized sports activities in the adjacent baseball field and basketball courts. Municipal maintenance services for these recreational spaces declined after the school closure and more so after Hurricane Maria, opening opportunities for more illicit uses of the park.

Mothers and grandmothers—often the backbone of neighborhood kin support networks and community action groups (Stack 1974; Susser 2012)—took on crucial political roles in the actions leading up to the school closure, and thus understand the emergence and preservation of the CAM as an extension of these struggles. Mothers and grandmothers who had encountered each other on the school picket lines or in Department of Education offices defending their children's right to accessible public education eventually extended their struggle to occupy the school and establish alternative, yet unauthorized, infrastructures of care that confront their disposability in relation to the state. As feminist scholars have shown, common identification

among mothers in specific contexts of economic crisis, political turmoil, or racist state violence at times opens the possibility to “extend their techniques as mothers beyond the veil of traditional domestic spheres” (Gilmore 2007, 196), mobilizing a foundation around “public mothering,” activism, and political subjectivity (Bookman and Morgan 1998; Boris 1989; Bouvard 1994; Gilmore 2007; Lawson 2018; Susser 1992; Susser 2012). I argue that the trajectory of mothers (biological, social, public, or otherwise) and other residents defending the school as an essential site of social reproduction provided the foundation for new possibilities of grassroots organizing to emerge, namely the CAM. The alternatives emerging from these spaces further complicate stereotypes of Puerto Ricans as vulnerable, dependent colonial subjects, a trope that particularly resonated in mainstream media portrayals after Hurricane Maria described in the Introduction.

During the 2010 school shutdown described above, teachers did not actively participate in the picket line, but they refused to cross it “in support of the parents,” recounted Paola, a drama teacher at the María Montañez Gómez School from 1997-2017. I met Paola at the CAM’s first anniversary celebration, along with several other former teachers who had been following the school’s rescue process. Paola described the María Montañez Gómez School prior to its closing as “center of the community” because school activities for special occasions such as Christmas, World Peace Day, and Friendship Day would bring multiple generations of residents to the school. When Paola started teaching at the María Montañez Gómez School, total enrollment for kindergarten through sixth grade was about 300 and she taught classes of about 20 students each. By 2017, she estimated total enrollment at about 140 and her classes at about 15 students each. However, at the time of its closing, the school had a large kindergarten class enrolled—about 25 students according to Paola.

Teachers also engaged in their own efforts to defend the María Montañez Gómez School. Paola recalled that in 2017, former Secretary of Education Julia Keleher invited representatives from the Caguas region schools slated for closure to an assembly downtown where school representatives were given three minutes to provide reasons for not shutting down their school. Paola asserted that “Keleher is not an educator, she’s an administrator,” and thus had prepared repudiations of the teachers’ concerns. Ultimately, the Department of Education justified the María Montañez Gómez School closure because of “low enrollment,” an argument that Paola refutes because it did not account for the decrease due to removing the sixth-grade class a few years earlier when middle schools were restructured across Puerto Rico.

Carina—CAM leader and lifelong Las Carolinas resident—also graduated from the María Montañez Gómez School, where she sent two out of her three children. Carina’s son graduated from the school in the last sixth grade class before the middle school restructuring. Recalling one of the final 2017 protests before the closure, Carina told me:

My dad, aunts and uncles, my kids, and I all studied here. I remember the last sixth-grade graduation here was when my youngest son graduated. . . I remember we held a strike to protest the school closing, and a friend of mine asked me, “What are you doing here?” And I said, “Why are you asking me this?” “Because your son already graduated,” she said. And I said, “What does that have to do with anything? My son graduated, but he came from here, and I still have his cousins here, and I’m here for them, and for your daughter too, who’s still here.

Even though the closure would not directly impact her children, Carina’s statement points to the wider social significance of the school as a community resource to be defended. Carina’s experience also sheds light on the intersecting issues around gender and mobility that complicate efforts for families relocating their children and families with older children attending schools at a distance from Las Carolinas. For example, Carina’s youngest son attends middle

school in downtown Caguas. Carina does not have a driver's license and her husband works full time and uses the family car. To get to school, her son wakes up before 6am to walk to the one school bus stop in front of the corner store. Public school bus transportation is means-tested, so Carina must apply to access it every year. In the case of an emergency or the all-too-common school interruptions due to blackouts, Carina must coordinate a trip within the few times a public van passes through Las Carolinas and endure an over one-hour long trip to get to her son's school.

On May 9, 2017, archipelago-wide actions were organized among the schools scheduled to close later that month. The press reported on over twenty actions, including pickets, school blockades, and protest encampments. Teachers, parents, and students at the María Montañez Gómez School participated in the national day of action, which drew police presence and media attention. A *Noticel* news article quotes school defense leaders reacting to the closures and the proposed \$300 million budget cut to the Department of Education: "Secretary Keleher cannot expect the vulture fund debt to be paid to be paid with children's education money" (Noticel 2017).

Despite these efforts at individual, community-wide, and national scales, the María Montañez Gómez School closed in May 2017. Right before the shutdown, Paola engaged in one last act of rescue and resistance. Teachers were instructed not to take anything from the school, but Paola surreptitiously took all the theatre materials that she had spent years acquiring—partially with her own money—including makeup, costumes, and puppets. Paola described her decision: "It was like, they are closing the school, we do not know what is going to happen here, so let's take everything we can to rescue it and keep using it."



Paola used these rescued materials at her new school for a drama production that she premiered with her students at the CAM Las Carolinas in 2018. If Paola had not taken these materials, they might have been left with the other discard CAM organizers discovered as they opened and cleared out classrooms after the occupation. The photos below capture some of this discard, including over two dozen laptops, a television, textbooks, and encyclopedias, as well as manila envelopes that contained sensitive and identifiable documents such as students' school records, contact information, and personalized certificates. CAM organizers took any personal documents belonging to younger relatives, but in order to avoid accusations of theft, they reported all the supplies to the Department of Education to pick up. These conditions of abandonment suggest a politics of haste and disposability that guides the Department of Education's closure process. The CAM's efforts to repurpose abandonment is indeed a refusal of the politics of disposability.



*Figure 7 - Laptops left in a classroom by the Department of Education. Photo by author.*



*Figure 8 - Personal documents, textbooks, and encyclopedias left in a classroom by the Department of Education. Photo by author.*



*Figure 9 - Classroom left in disarray by the Department of Education that the CAM repurposed as the Centro Nuevo Amanecer. Photo by author.*

### *Emergence of the CAM Las Carolinas: Spatial and Organizational Overview*

This section provides a spatial and organizational overview of the CAM Las Carolinas, situated in the repurposed María Montañez Gómez School. I incorporate photographs throughout the text to provide a material, aesthetic, and spatial perspective of the school rescue process and the central spaces within the CAM. The María Montañez Gómez School complex is located on Calle Lirio—a residential street that curves around from the *colmado* (local store) and abuts the ballfield, basketball court, and the Residents' Association, which used to house a community clinic and medicine dispensary. The school property is comprised of six single-level structures that used to house classrooms, storage facilities, school offices, and the cafeteria. Entering the parking lot, two classrooms on the right first contained the Bazaar (thrift shop). As donations piled up, these classrooms became the storage room where women sorted donations and classified clothes and other items to prepare them for sale or gifting.



*Figure 10 - View of CAM entrance gate from the comedor. Photo by author.*

The third classroom in this building on the right was essentially a dumping ground for the discard left behind by the Department of Education shown in the photos above. The second building straight back from the entrance gates became the *Centro Nuevo Amanecer* (discussed in Chapter IV) because of its easy access to two bathrooms in the back of the building. This arm of

the project emerged in 2018 to provide an arts and crafts space for elderly residents who frequented the post-Maria community kitchen and sought out new spaces of socialization and craft activities that could meet their limited mobility constraints. The *Centro Nuevo Amanecer* occupies one large classroom entirely energized by donated solar panels with a sink and ample storage cabinet space for arts and crafts supplies.



*Figure 11 – Artwork on the door to the Centro Nuevo Amanecer. Photo by author.*



Figure 12 - Centro Nuevo Amanecer artwork display. Photo by author.

The building just to the left of the entrance gate became the “*espacio de relajación y bienestar*” (relaxation and wellness space) where residents and CAM leaders gather for auriculotherapy (ear acupuncture), aromatherapy, massages, and meditation. Over time the room acquired a unique character with plants, paintings, decorations, and reclining lounge chairs. The exterior wall of this room was painted in bright colors by the children who attended the CAM summer camp in 2018 and became the go-to wall for photos with visitors or promotional material. The wall was later repainted with graffiti art of the common flowers in Las Carolinas. Just outside this room was a papaya tree that participants harvest when the fruit is ripe.



Figure 13 - Exterior wall of the Wellness and Relaxation Room. The wall is painted with the words, "Autogestión and Solidarity." Photo by author, 2018.



Figure 14 - Graffiti art on exterior wall of the Wellness and Relaxation Room. Photo by CAM Las Carolinas (Facebook, June 30, 2020).

The classroom next to the wellness room eventually was cleared out and became the “Salón Sarah Molinari,” which was inaugurated during the surprise going-away party the CAM organized for me in August 2019. This classroom was originally designated as the office space but shifted to house the CAM Bazaar because of its large layout and decent air ventilation. A social worker contact helped to establish a relation between the CAM and the Bayamón prison

through which incarcerated men provided service hours labor to knock down walls to expand this room. The room next to it is for storage. Here all the food and supplies donations are stored and organized on shelves and pallets—everything from canned goods to flashlights and adult diapers. Organizers diligently keep hand-written inventories of all have donated items in the storage rooms, making note of their expiration dates because at times companies donated goods already expired or near expiration, thus creating the extra labor of hauling heavy supplies to the trash.



Figure 15 - New Bazaar-"Salón Sarah Molinari." Photo by author.

Walking straight back from the entrance, one passes the *huerto* (garden) space between the *Centro Nuevo Amanecer* and the *comedor*. This green patch became quickly overgrown and requires frequent maintenance provided by residents in exchange for a nominal payment and lunch. The green space contained about three *plátano* trees—often used for *escabeche* (marinated) recipes and a large tree trunk around which a squash patch emerged and where Justo planted *gandules* (pigeon peas). Justo was eighty-eight years old at the time of this research and died in 2020. An agricultural enthusiast who grew subsistence crops on his property for home consumption, Justo enjoyed using the CAM property as an extension of his own gardens and

would often prepare seedlings in his home to plant throughout the CAM. Hurricane Maria did not damage his home, but he emphasized that the storm destroyed many beloved plants and trees, a loss that disaster recovery monetary aid certainly does not replace.

Justo attended school through the fourth grade and worked *agregado* on a Caguas sugar farm owned by a *colono* (landowner) he identified as Leoncio Velázquez (described in Chapter Two). He acquired a *parcela* in Las Carolinas with his wife in 1955 and considered himself one of the community's "founders." He built a wooden house with a sheet metal roof for himself and helped his two brothers "*asaltar terreno*" (establish unauthorized claims to land) in Las Carolinas. During our oral history, he used a newspaper and pen to convey what land demarcation looked like at the time, connecting four dots in a square to symbolize posts placed in the ground that people would enclose with a rope to designate their claimed land claimed. Hurricane Santa Clara hit Puerto Rico the year after Justo moved to the *parcela* and he recalled that neighbors gathered in the most durable homes to pass the storm together, much as residents gathered at the occupied school in Hurricane Maria's aftermath to facilitate basic needs.

After he left the sugarcane, Justo and his wife began to work in the Consolidated Cigar factory, a U.S. company that closed its Caguas factory in 1973.<sup>7</sup> After the shutdown, he went to work for the municipality of Caguas doing road and vegetation maintenance for thirty-three years. Justo participated in the *Centro Nuevo Amanecer* from its launch because a friend told him that "they play dominos there." He described the CAM as a good "distraction" because "there is not much time for thinking." This sentiment perhaps signaled that creative activities with his peers provided a distraction from the difficult care and social reproductive responsibilities he assumed in his home as the primary caretaker for his ailing wife and adult daughter. Justo's

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<sup>7</sup> Ismael García-Colón (2006) notes that in the 1960s, women in the east-central region of Puerto Rico began to work in nontraditional agricultural and industrial jobs, including the cigar industry.



creativity flourished in the *Centro Nuevo Amanecer* and he became well-known for his artwork and love of music, often leading CAM participants in song during special celebrations. Justo's gardening inspired the CAM to expand community garden spaces with lettuce, squash, beans, herbs, and pineapples. The community garden took off in 2019 with donated supplies from a U.S. university. After a lull in garden production in 2019, the CAM resumed garden expansion work during the pandemic with the help of younger collaborators and agroecology experts.

The *comedor* (cafeteria or community kitchen) is located right off the garden patio along with the bathroom, wash closet, and recycling space. The largest and most frequented space, the *comedor* contains the kitchen with donated stoves, a sink, makeshift mobile countertops, and food preparation stations. Donated solar panels provide the *comedor's* energy, which only links up to the electric grid on during periods of extended cloudy weather. Behind the sink area is a pantry that stores the delivery containers and trays, spices, and food for daily use. The dining area takes up about two-thirds of the *comedor* and has round tables and chairs where the women congregate, prepare and pack the lunches, and where participants eat lunch and read the morning newspaper and the supermarket flyers to search for the best shopping deals. The *comedor* also serves as a makeshift office with a desk, printer, and filing cabinet. Meetings were often held on the front long rectangular table. A dry-erase calendar is mounted on the wall above the filing cabinet to keep track of meetings, activities and the monthly "meals served" count at the bottom, which as of August 2021 averaged over 600 meals/month.



Figure 16 - CAM comedor and food preparation. Photo by CAM Las Carolinas (Facebook, December 9, 2020).



Figure 17 - CAM chef preparing sorullos de maiz con queso (corn fritters with cheese) in the comedor. Photo by author.



Figure 18 - CAM comedor pantry. Photo by author.



Figure 19 - Birthday celebration in the CAM comedor. Photo by author.

The *comedor* wall just outside the door has a big whiteboard that for some time kept track of total number of meals served and activities organized. Exiting the *comedor* and moving

to the right is another driveway area leading to the third set of buildings across from the basketball court that was separated by a gate. Hurricane Maria damaged the mesh netting covering the court, creating gaps for birds to enter. The netting was not repaired until 2019, after a debate between FEMA and the municipality over which entity was responsible for covering the repair costs. There is some green space between the *comedor* and the gate where Justo used to plant *gandules* and *ajís*. However, he was always worried that lawn maintenance would accidentally uproot his plants. During my visits in late 2019 and early 2020, he expressed hesitancy about planting more seeds because of the CAM's uncertain status in relation to the school property (discussed below). However, he was always encouraged to plant seeds as a gesture to establish claims on the space, regardless of the unauthorized occupation. There is also a canal in this area bordered by a fence that is occasionally cleared out with chemicals. The canal often floods, and residents have been waiting for years for the government to begin construction to channel (*canalizar*) the water flow. The first door one comes upon in this set of buildings is a classroom with multiple storage refrigerators



Figure 20 - Whiteboard tally as of October 2019 on the exterior wall of the *comedor* that indicates 33,170 meals served since November 2017. Photo by author.



*Figure 21 - Basketball court with hurricane-damaged netting and baseball field adjacent to the CAM. Photo by author.*



*Figure 22 - Storage room with refrigerators and desks left by the Department of Education.*

Passing this storage room, a gate opens to the back part of the property with a few more buildings that contain unused classrooms, except for one with an air conditioner that became an office and the new meeting space. A few classrooms in this back area were rented in late 2019 to Endeavor, a company that helped residents around Caguas access alternative forms of disaster

aid or work on unfulfilled FEMA claims. This back area also contains another green space with a large tree, where the women had planned for another possible garden space. The school's swing set was located all the way back through the building corridors and was rarely used by the CAM. The back of the property has a small raised flower bed where Justo transplanted seedlings after preparing them in his home. The rear gate exits onto the sidewalk of Calle Lirio, which leads to the Residents' Association.

Anchored in the school complex described above, the CAM Las Carolinas emerged from the activation of neighborhood women following the inspiration of other mutual aid organizations after Hurricane Maria. The CAM responded to both immediate and long-standing needs and forms of abandonment in Las Carolinas. Lucía, the CAM's founding member, had been volunteering at the nearby CAM Caguas Pueblo—the first CAM to emerge after Hurricane Maria. A lifelong resident of Las Carolinas, Lucía is in her early fifties and a single mother of three children who all live stateside. Currently an entrepreneur with her own flan business, Lucía was working part-time as an administrative assistant in a medical office at the time of the occupation.

Lucía recalled her fascination with the CAM Caguas Pueblo mutual aid project and brought her niece and another young woman from Las Carolinas to volunteer as part of their school-required community service hours. Lucía would return to Las Carolinas from the CAM Caguas Pueblo and pass by the closed María Montañez-Gómez School where she and her three children had graduated from. It occurred to her that the abandoned school structure could be repurposed to serve as a CAM. She brought the idea to her friend and neighbor Adriana, both of whom were elected representatives in the Las Carolinas Residents' Association Board at the

time. However, the Board initially did not support the occupation, leading both women to resign and move forward with the CAM on their own.

Adriana is a retired nurse's assistant in her early sixties. Her father was an *agregado* sugar cane worker in Puerto Rico and a farm worker stateside. Adriana moved with her family to Chicago for some of her youth, returned to Puerto Rico, and moved to Las Carolinas in 1968 where she began married life. After two decades of being a fulltime "*ama de casa*" (homemaker), she decided to complete an Associate Degree in Nursing after a painful divorce in 1989. Over three decades later, her divorce is still a source of resentment, although she affirms that she loves the freedom to do and wear what she pleases and to maintain a home on her own. Although Adriana did not graduate from the María Montañez Gómez School, she was active in the struggles to defend the school because her daughter Rosa and two grandsons attended. In 2017, Adriana retired from the hospital and sought out community activities to invest her energies and manage an onset of depression. Adriana is one of the CAM's primary chefs and administrative coordinators who spearheaded the activity center for neighborhood elders called the *Centro Nuevo Amanecer* (Center for a New Dawn, or CNA). Given her nursing background, she is also the go-to health expert and has grown very fond of using medicinal plants such as turmeric in daily recipes. Adriana experiments with plant-based alternatives and is known for testing out her soy-based recipes at the CAM.

Lucía and Adriana began contacting people to get the project going, with promotional help from megaphone announcements driving around the neighborhood. Lucía played a significant leadership role at the CAM through managing the initial delivery routes, administering surveys, and introducing the first collaborative agreements between the CAM and

the Residents' Association until she left the project in early 2019 due to interpersonal conflict and disagreements over leadership visions.

After its closing in May 2017, the María Montañez-Gómez school complex remained on the electric grid, but the water had been disconnected. CAM organizers described the stable electricity as a welcome oversight on the part of the Department of Education. An elderly neighborhood electrician became the CAM Las Carolinas's *de facto* plumber and handyman and "illegally" hooked up the water and installed sinks and tubing in the kitchen. Early crucial support also came from a Las Carolinas chef who lost his job after the hurricanes and decided to move stateside. He lived in the *urbanización* section of the neighborhood and helped with the initial *comedor* set-up, cooking, and kitchen orientation. Before moving, he donated all his "chef supplies" to the CAM, adding to their collection of large pots and pans.

An initial group of kin and "fictive kin" facilitated the occupation by cleaning and preparing the *comedor*.<sup>8</sup> The first appliances and start-up materials were purchased thanks to a donation from CAM Caguas Pueblo. While Adriana tells the story of "breaking through the locks" to open the school gate and begin occupation on November 6, 2017, Lucia describes the entrance as a less dramatic "lifting a gate that was already opened." Nonetheless, the "break in" story certainly helped the CAM create a narrative of insurgency, autonomy, and ownership among a group of mostly women and elderly residents with little to no previous organizing experience within the most commonly known (metro-centric) activist circles in Puerto Rico. One instance that demonstrates the distance many of organizers had from the metro-centric activist circles occurred on International Women's Day in 2019. I had spent the morning at the CAM doing the usual lunch preparation and delivery tasks, but I was rushing to get back to San Juan to

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<sup>8</sup> There were extensive kinship relations among CAM organizers, some of whom were mothers and daughters, cousins, or related through marriage.



attend a major afternoon march organized by a coalition of feminist groups. I incorrectly assumed that women CAM leaders were aware of the international commemorative day and the activities organized in San Juan by a feminist coalition. Their distance from both the symbolically designated day and the activities taking place in San Juan may point to some of the gaps in feminist politics shaped by class, racial, and spatial dynamics in Puerto Rico.

This characteristic distinguishes the CAM Las Carolinas protagonists from other CAMs that were organized through mostly “millennial” established activist networks and university-educated leaders who had experience in the UPR student movement and other well-known anti-austerity organizations. Even though CAM Caguas Pueblo organizers, who were highly visible within prominent activist spaces, provided initial financial assistance and logistical guidance, Las Carolinas residents themselves have consistently been the most central project leaders. However, absence from prominent metro-centric activist circles did not mean the women were unfamiliar with community struggle. As I show in this chapter, the process of repurposing abandonment through the CAM was not totally spontaneous. Rather, Las Carolinas residents’ trajectory of defending public resources and their elementary school before its closure shows that the school occupation and transformation into the CAM must be understood with this longer process of community struggle and politicization. This framework advances a nuanced understanding of the temporality of disaster, an argument I continue in Chapter Five.

Like many community-based autonomous groups, the CAM Las Carolinas’s initial organization was marked by the challenges of limited resources and reliance upon mainly women’s unpaid care labor. These challenges led to complex decisions about how the CAM negotiated between autonomy and formalization. The main organizers consisted of a core group of about eight women loosely organized around horizontalist principles without a formal

administrating structure. This led to certain women taking on disproportionate roles and group challenges to define long-term strategy and division of labor throughout 2018 and most of 2019. A number of the original organizers scaled back their participation or disconnected totally from the group due to either personal tensions, family circumstances, or other obligations.<sup>9</sup> For example, cooking was the most sought-after role at the CAM. However, too many organizers operating behind the stoves often led to idiosyncratic tensions and placed some women consistently in the less preferred maintenance roles such as mopping, bathroom cleaning, and trash removal. The lunch delivery routes also became a source of tension that highlighted the CAM's major challenge of sustaining itself through unpaid labor and scarce monetary resources. For example, the women who delivered lunches used their own gas and exposed their personal vehicles to extra wear and tear driving through the steep and narrow hills of Las Carolinas. There was one instance of significant damage when one woman's van backed into a concrete wall, scratching the side and breaking the back light. Eventually, organizers used monetary donations to reimburse themselves for gas money for the lunch routes and other errands in which they used personal vehicles such as food shopping and visits to the banking cooperative.

Negotiating *autogestión* between the “state,” external donors, and collaborators was a dynamic process. The unauthorized occupation of the school at times made potential collaborators and donors skeptical and gave the impression of the CAM's ephemerality—a project that could be dismantled at any moment. Furthermore, long-term financial stability and collaborations often hinged on the CAM being recognized as an entity for banking purposes with

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<sup>9</sup> For instance, in August 2018, founding member Lucía resigned from all her CAM duties after unresolvable interpersonal tensions with another CAM leader that were exacerbated by diverging leadership visions and the circulation of gossip. After multiple attempts at conflict resolution, Lucía stepped back to protect her own mental health and focus more on developing her flan business and other volunteer activities. Another significant rupture came in the summer of 2019 when Miguel Rosario-Lozada stepped back from an active role in the CAM due to growing demands of his other professional and political commitments. Miguel had provided sustained support of the CAM through his role as President of the Residents' Association.

a formalized relation to the school. In response to these obstacles, the CAM incorporated itself with the Puerto Rico State Department as a “domestic non-profit corporation” in May 2019 under the name “*Centro de Apoyo Mutuo y Resiliencia Comunitaria Las Carolinas Inc.*”<sup>10</sup> The official documents listed Miguel Rosario-Lozada as the Executive Director, but the group acknowledged that this structure was more a bureaucratic protocol than a guiding rule. The CAM’s non-profit incorporation coincided with its official break with the CAM Caguas Pueblo and its umbrella organization CDPEC, which was in a process of expansion. This difficult decision was made after months of strains around communication, leadership expectations, reciprocity, and diverging visions. For example, one CAM Las Carolinas leader described CDPEC’s work as “political” while the CAM Las Carolinas’s work was “cultural.” Rather than evacuating the politicization of daily life that the CAM Las Carolinas articulates, this distinction points more towards the two organizations’ different vocabularies and approaches. In early October 2019 at a critical juncture with political attention around the school rental application, Lisa—an acupuncturist in her mid- thirties who had been collaborating with the CAM since 2018—assumed the role of Executive Director to take the lead in coordinating activities, grant applications, and external collaborations through her departure in January 2021.

However, the CAM’s formal registration with the State Department was met with skepticism from some other mutual aid organizations who envisioned the CAM archipelago network as totally autonomous from the state as a practice to reverse dependency on any state or

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<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, the name addition of “*resiliencia comunitaria*” resulted from a local donor organization’s pressure to frame the CAM’s project around “resilience,” a popular and contested term in the post-disaster milieu. There was much confusion among the women about this top-down naming even though they understood they were mobilizing a catchy new keyword that was supposed to inspire donors. During this re-naming process, CAM organizers joked that they did not even know what the term was supposed to mean and had not heard it circulate in Puerto Rico before Hurricane Maria. Despite its longer official name, organizers kept referring to the project as the CAM Las Carolinas.

institutional assistance.<sup>11</sup> But the ideal of full autonomy from the state did not necessarily resonate in the case of the CAM Las Carolinas for various reasons. Instead, the CAM Las Carolinas negotiated *autogestión* through mobilizing the municipality as a vehicle to advance certain goals through “strategic entanglements” (Bonilla 2015), including making demands on the municipality to hold it accountable for local disaster response, as discussed above, and securing municipal endorsements for the official transfer of the school to the CAM, as discussed below. In contrast, the CAM positioned itself more antagonistically with the central territorial government agencies that managed both the school closure and the CAM’s school rental application process to the point of refusing a lease offer due to its onerous terms. This strategic municipal engagement echoes nascent global trends around “new municipalism” that interpret the municipality or the local government as a key scale of transformative governance (Thompson 2020).<sup>12</sup> These debates have been taken up in Puerto Rico, especially in light of the botched disaster recovery and the 2019 summer mobilizations that ousted Governor Ricardo Rosselló. For example, economist Heriberto Martínez-Otero published a column situating Puerto Rico in the wider “municipalist framework” and arguing for a re-articulation of public policy at the municipal scale (Martínez-Otero 2020).

Various circumstances facilitated this strategic relation with the municipality. For example, Las Carolinas has historically strongly identified with the PPD (the Caguas mayor William Miranda Torres’s party), and the CAM maintained a collaborative relation with the Las Carolinas Residents’ Association (an entity organized under the Caguas Department of Social

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<sup>11</sup> The debate about autonomy within the CAM movement echoes renewed debates around the possibility and limitations of autonomy for Latin American movements, including peasant, indigenous, feminist, and anarchist movements. Some have renewed this discussion in light of widespread institutional abandonment experienced during the global pandemic (Rosset and Pinheiro Barbosa 2021; see also Vergara-Camus 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Matthew Thompson (2020) argues that “new municipalism” is not very “new,” but in fact draws on traditions of municipal socialism and international municipalism.

Development and Community *Autogestión*).<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Mayor Miranda Torres and the Caguas municipality played a significant role in the CAM Las Carolinas's first anniversary celebration in November 2018, donating a stage, chairs, audio-visual equipment, and food. The mayor and his family attended the event and celebrated the CAM as an outstanding example of community self-organizing. CAM leaders, however, were critically aware of these relations and understood the contradictions embedded within the mayor's celebration of *autogestión*. For example, while the municipal government expressed support for community self-provisioning and *autogestión*, they played an active role in processes of organized abandonment. The CAM Las Carolinas strategically navigates these contradictions as much as possible for their benefit. For example, the CAM petitioned the municipality for bus and van transportation to initially bring elderly residents to the *Centro Nuevo Amanecer* and for occasional fieldtrips. The CAM mobilized its role as a grassroots community institution to also demand property maintenance, health fairs, educational and recreational programs through the Caguas Family Department, and official letters of support for the school rental application (discussed below). In this context, the notion of totally rejecting any relation with the "state" did not reflect the CAM Las Carolinas's political orientation or its participants' local circumstances or desires.

The CAM has consistently experienced financial precarity, but its perseverance through 2021 attests to the participants' extraordinary will and creativity. Loosely organized around a solidarity economy model of three modes of exchange (money, labor, materials), the CAM has relied on unpaid care labor and monetary and in-kind donations since its emergence. Monetary

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<sup>13</sup> Elderly people often spoke fondly of PPD Caguas mayors William Miranda María (1997-2010) and his son William Miranda Torres (2010-), both of whom would accept invitations to traditional family celebrations in Las Carolinas. The hosts viewed these dinners as neighborly invitations without political motive. One elderly resident maintained a tradition of having Mayor Miranda Torres and his family over to her home for an annual traditional Christmas season dinner.

donations come from organizations inside and outside of Puerto Rico, such as The Maria Fund, Grassroots International, and Rutgers University. Local Puerto Rican companies, Caguas business establishments, neighborhood residents, and other individuals provide material and service donations of food, supplies, and equipment, as well as services such as lawn maintenance, plumbing, recycling pick-up, painting, and installations through barter. As of the summer 2021, the municipality of Caguas was providing lawn and vegetation maintenance around the school property free of charge every three months. Other sources of financial support come from small weekly monetary donations from neighborhood lunch recipients (averaging \$5-\$20 per week), participation fees from food or craft-based public workshops, the sale of handmade crafts and decorations from the *Centro Nuevo Amanecer*, the sale of food at local events, community Bingo, and clothing sales from the CAM Bazaar, which generated up to \$100 per week during 2019. Beginning in late 2019 after the conclusion of my fieldwork, the CAM expanded its revenue sources and began to “rent” individual classrooms to organizations and local vendors, including a barber and hairstylist, tee-shirt and shoe designers, a doula, and a local kombucha-brewing collective.<sup>14</sup> This revenue expansion reflects the CAM’s growing sphere of collaboration and its goals to generate sustainable economic arrangements, support local endeavors with a social justice orientation, and reduce reliance on donors.

### *Building Collective Knowledge and Networks of Insurgent Mutual Aid*

In the summer of 2019, community organizers of a nearby Caguas sector that I will call *Las Parcelas Arriba* held a meeting with CAM Carolinas organizers to seek orientation about school occupation. By that time, the CAM Las Carolinas and their occupation of the María

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<sup>14</sup> Rental arrangements are organized informally through mutual agreement between the parties.

Montañez Gómez School had become well-known throughout the municipality. Three residents and community organizers from *Las Parcelas Arriba*—two elderly and one middle-aged—gathered in the CAM *comedor* to discuss tactics and planning with CAM leaders, a few Las Carolinas residents, and a municipal official from the Department of Social Development and Community *Autogestión*. The municipal representative's presence suggested something between tolerance and support for school rescue projects throughout the municipality. The community representatives from *Las Parcelas Arriba* were members of an association that was planning to bring the occupation proposal first to residents to lay out how the project would directly respond to residents' needs. *Las Parcelas Arriba* shared many characteristics with Las Carolinas—a semi-rural *parcelas* community, a closed and abandoned school, an elderly population, many bedridden residents, and conditions that exposed residents to environmental hazards. Several families had been forcibly removed because of landslides in *Las Parcelas Arriba*, highlighting their sense of urgency to initiate the project during hurricane season when these families were most vulnerable.

Organizers from both communities were novice insurgent occupiers. As one organizer from *Las Parcelas Arriba* explained, the motivation to occupy the closed school did not emerge from the impact of Hurricane Maria, but rather from longstanding concerns to address residents' wellbeing and recuperate abandoned structures. Like the María Montañez Gómez School, the school complex in *Las Parcelas Arriba* had not suffered damages from Hurricane Maria and was described as a solid, two-story structure with bathrooms on both floors and a basketball court. Even though the abandoned school property was at the time used for grazing horses, the organizers' vision was to develop an emergency shelter to provide families temporary housing in case of environmental disaster or personal emergencies such as house fires. They also sought to

use some of the space for arts and cultural programming for elderly residents and for a multi-purpose activity room to host *plena* workshops, among other activities.

The CAM Las Carolinas's experience with state intimidation tactics, bureaucratic neglect, and the longevity of their project gave organizers a solid experience from which to provide orientation about occupation and rescue. To initiate the occupation, CAM leaders encouraged the *Las Parcelas Arriba* residents to first call the Infrastructure and Public Works Department to inquire about any current applications to lease the school. Then they were advised to break any existing locks, enter with a large group of allies, and secure the property with new locks. An important initial step was to establish a sense of ownership and identification with the rescue. For the CAM Las Carolinas, this took shape through mounting a full kitchen, painting exterior walls, planting fruits and vegetables, maintaining the vegetation, and displaying statistics about the number of meals served and activities organized. To reduce potential issues with Puerto Rico's Department of Education, the CAM advised the occupiers to clean out the classrooms, make an inventory, and separate out any materials and equipment left behind for the Department of Education to pick up. The CAM leaders emphasized that despite the number of times Department of Education representatives might show up at the school to dissuade occupation, they have no authority to remove the occupiers. Documentation was thus important in case *Las Parcelas Arriba* leaders encountered any questioning or intimidation. Documentation included making inventories, taking photos of the spatial transformation process, and recording attendance at all activities.

After a successful occupation, *Las Parcelas Arriba* organizers planned to weigh the options for either maintaining the project autonomously ("unauthorized" occupation at the margins of the state) or registering as a non-profit organization and submitting an official



application to lease the school. Residents were concerned about financially maintaining the project and planned to seek donations from neighbors and to write donation letters to Econo (a Puerto Rican-owned supermarket chain and employer of one of the organizers). CAM Las Carolinas organizers cautioned about bureaucratic neglect and disregard for their official lease application, which they attribute to discrimination against grassroots organizations that lack money and political capital, as explained below. *Las Parcelas Arriba* would likely face similar discrimination. This exchange of accumulated knowledge and practices to orient another school occupation opens the possibility to expand the geographies of mutual aid and build a wider insurgent politics around occupation and rescue of abandoned public property.<sup>15</sup>

**After the Shutdown: “¿Titularidad Pa’ Cuándo?” (When do we get ownership title?)**

The police officer briskly approached my friend Ricardo and me as we began pitching the tent, organizing water and snacks, and unfolding the chairs on the lawn in front of the *Capitolio* (Capitol building) in Old San Juan. “Who is in charge here?” he questioned. Channeling the fearless horizontalism that marked the *Verano Boricua* mobilizations, Ricardo, a CAM collaborator and acupuncturist in his 30s, paid no mind to the officer and continued to set up. He calmly asserted that “we are all in charge. There is no leader here.” The officer proceeded to call for backup and asked for our official permissions for the demonstration. Ricardo explained that we did not need permission to occupy *public* space for a protest to draw attention to the CAM’s struggle for the property title to their school. We continued the preparations, and I reflected on the fact that my presence as a white North American, English-dominant woman

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<sup>15</sup> As of 2021, the school has been successfully occupied by the *Las Parcelas Arriba* community. Organizers have initiated a gymnasium space and are planning to open a community kitchen in the rescued school complex.

likely quieted what could have been a more antagonistic confrontation between Ricardo and the officer.

Thirty minutes later, a van provided by the mayor of Caguas arrived, and about 15 mostly elderly CAM participants joined us under the tent with handmade square posters (pictured below). The energy was palpable. While some of the middle-aged demonstrators had participated in the summer mass mobilizations, the elders were novice protesters intervening in the center of governance for the first time. The police officer, baffled by the senior protest contingent, retreated to the stairs of the *Capitolio* and asked us no further questions. The protest was not just confined to the *Capitolio* lawn. Elders with mobility constraints took turns sitting on the lawn with their posters, while others walked in small groups over to the pavilion facing the police on the stairs and chanted, “*¡Queremos la escuela!*” (We want the school!) and “*¡La escuela es nuestra!*” (The school is ours!). Those who remained around the tent responded to press interviews throughout the morning, repeating the narrative that their school lease application process had been discriminatory and that their struggle was part of a larger mutual aid movement across the archipelago. A small group entered the *Capitolio* to lobby House representatives and managed to briefly meet with two PDP representatives and one PNP representative.

The CAM strategically organized the October 2019 protest on a workday to draw elected officials’ attention to their demand for a secure ownership arrangement for the school. Specifically, their presence at the *Capitolio* was meant to garner support for a Joint Resolution (RCC 541) proposed by House Representative Dennis Márquez (Puerto Rican Independence Party, PIP) and supported by co-authors from both the PDP and PNP. An ally of the school occupation movement who learned about the CAM Las Carolinas through media profiles,

Márquez's Resolution would legitimate the CAM's ownership of the school and set a precedent for transferring other abandoned schools to grassroots collectives that faced bureaucratic barriers. Although the Rosselló administration had denied favoritism, the abandoned school lease and sale process seemed to prioritize large NGOs or groups with PNP political affiliations (Rivera Clemente 2019). The House Joint Resolution proposed to order the Committee for the Evaluation and Disposal of Real Estate Assets created under Law 26-2017 to transfer full ownership rights (*titularidad*) to the CAM for a nominal \$1.00 value.

CAM leaders saw legislative intervention as a last resort option after over one year waiting for a response to their lease application. Since submitting their application in April 2018, the CAM made multiple attempts to follow up, diligently communicating with the interagency office by email or phone. The CAM even frequently checked for official list of schools available to rent or purchase to ensure that the María Montañez Gómez School was not advertised to other prospective applicants. In February 2019, a group of five CAM organizers went in person to the office in Old San Juan, only to be denied an in-person meeting and instead handed a landline to speak with an office representative who claimed that the committee would soon evaluate their application—the playbook response to all of their inquiries.

Over the course of 2019, the CAM's ambiguous status—unauthorized occupation of abandoned public property with a simultaneously pending lease application submitted to the state—became more of obstacle to external collaborations. For example, potential donor or collaborator organizations, mostly from the states, were often reluctant to commit to a group of working class, women, and elderly school occupiers who could be forcibly evicted from the school at any moment. The CAM received a number of unannounced visits and inspections from prospective NGO applicants who had been sent by the office in charge of the lease applications,

deepening the CAM's sense of government disregard for their community. On these occasions, CAM leaders directly addressed the visitors to assert their claim to the property and even gathered petition signatures throughout the neighborhood to document public rejection of any other external applicant renting or purchasing the school.

Building from the summer 2019 protest spirit and national fervor around ordinary people taking action to confront the state, the CAM organized a multifaceted strategy for their cause that included media coverage and written endorsements, including letters from the Las Carolinas Residents' Association and from the Caguas mayor addressed to Governor Wanda Vázquez. They also wrote to District Senator Miguel Laureano (PNP) requesting that he propose a similar resolution in the Senate. After high profile media attention in the months leading up to the *Capitolio* protest, including a cover story on the second anniversary of Hurricane Maria in the widely circulating *El Nuevo Día*, the Department of Transportation and Public Works (DTOP) offered a lease proposal in attempt to placate the CAM and bypass the legislative Resolution. However, the terms were onerous and discriminatory, requiring the CAM to have an account balance of at least \$25,000, insurance policies, financial statements and expense projection reports certified by an accountant, and a 45-day probationary period where it would have to suspend community services. Frustrated that this process ignored local realities and needs, the CAM rejected the lease offer and set their goal on obtaining the full title or proceeding with the unauthorized occupation on their own terms.

The House Governing Commission published an evaluative report of RCC 541 in November 2019 that interestingly uses the Oversight Board's certified fiscal plan and PROMESA as legal justification for the Resolution. The report connects Puerto Rico's fiscal crisis to an infrastructure and real estate crisis and suggests that the Resolution contributes to the

public policy goal of putting abandoned public properties to use to increase government revenue *or* for the “common good” for nonprofit, commercial, or residential uses. Essentially, the authors of the Resolution were using the terms that govern the debt crisis to legitimate a practice that subverts the violent impacts of public debt. Despite the legislative advances, the Resolution ultimately failed to move forward. However, in the process of attempting to secure title through the lease application and the House Resolution, CAM participants asserted themselves as political subjects laying claims to space on their own terms. I argue that the everyday practice of mutual aid and the spatial practices of occupation/rescue were formative to this politicization that ultimately brought novice, mostly elderly demonstrators to directly confront state authority at the *Capitolio* and to refuse an undesirable lease offer. The process also reveals the complexities of autonomous organizing and *autogestión*. At strategic moments, the CAM mobilized the law and certain relations with state and other actors (the municipality, cross-party elected legislative officials, DTOP, the media) to achieve concrete goals and resolve the barriers they faced to external collaborations.

The struggle for title challenges the violence of debt capture and subverts the legalities and formalities around public property by claiming and repurposing abandoned space with new use values without permission. The CAM simultaneously straddled an unauthorized occupation, a formal lease application through official channels, and a legislative process while affirming a right to refuse the government’s lease terms. Regardless of the legal title status, I have tried to show how the CAM in fact asserts its ownership claim to the school property through spatial practices of rescue, informed by a history of neighborhood struggle to defend the school through its multiple iterations. As of August 2021, DTOP still has not responded to the CAM’s request for amendments to the 2019 lease proposal. On the legislative front, Representative Márquez is

supposedly working on a new House Resolution to transfer the school title to the CAM. Despite these impasses, the CAM persists with its unauthorized school occupation, repurposing abandonment to build a commons that resists the local impacts of debt and reimagines recovery from the ground up.



*Figure 23 - October 2019 protest at the Capitolio, Old San Juan. Elderly participants from the Centro Nuevo Amanecer hold signs that read from left to right: "We want to be heard PLEASE. Las Carolinas, Caguas," "Two years waiting and the ownership title FOR WHEN?," "In struggle and in peace WE MAKE COMMUNITY. Las Carolinas, Caguas." Photo by author, cropped to preserve anonymity.*



*Figure 24 - October 2019 protest at the Capitolio, Old San Juan. Two CAM Las Carolinas leaders hold up signs and chant in the plaza facing police barricades. Photo by author.*

## **Conclusion**

Puerto Rico's education reform highlights the colonial politics of disposability and debt capture, while subsequent school rescues draw on traditions of occupation and enact diverse ownership claims that repurpose abandonment through repossession, use value, and alternative space-making practices. The intersections of school occupation, mutual aid, and *autogestión* activate multiple points of debt refusal: first, by reclaiming and repurposing spaces of abandonment, occupiers refuse the logics of debt capture that render disposable both people and social infrastructures crystalized in a public school. Second, the grassroots-oriented practices that emerge from these rescues extend the temporalities of disaster beyond an emergency moment, locating repair outside the realm of privatized resilience, the free market, or the domestic sphere. School occupations and rescues are thus material, symbolic, and political practices that physically restore abandoned space through collective social reproductive labor and new use

values. Women, mothers, and other community members involved in domestic and community social reproduction play a central role in these processes.

Within the physical infrastructure of a school complex, mutual aid organizers construct new social relations and alternative visions of repair and recovery futures to expand the geographies of mutual aid. The rescue process over time contributes to the formation of new political subjectivities, in this case expressed through strategic tactics of state negotiation, confrontation, and refusal. School rescue is also a local form of risk mitigation. Indeed, communities are better prepared to confront environmental hazards when abandoned properties are repurposed as service hubs, storage facilities, food distribution centers, communication networks, and emergency shelters. While it is enticing to celebrate the politics of repurposing abandonment through occupation/rescue as alternative modes of being and relating, it is nonetheless pertinent to consider these actions as part of the very *conditions of working-classness in contemporary Puerto Rico*. In other words, occupation/rescue and the emerging geographies of mutual aid represent renewed resistance around space/place, the daily degradations of public debt, and alternative modes of disaster recovery that center vulnerable people as political actors. At the same time, working class Puerto Ricans engage in these urgent strategic actions because alternatives are extracted from them in order to negotiate daily life and social reproduction amid overlapping crises.

Drawing on the long trajectory of Las Carolinas residents defending the María Montañez Gómez School, I have tried to demonstrate the school's significance for social reproductive struggles and mothers', grandmothers', and teachers' grassroots activism. Their trajectory of organizing to defend a particular resource under threat translated to the school's re-politicization and occupation as a CAM and to new tactics to claim ownership. Therefore, the



CAM Las Carolinas is best understood as emerging to confront not only the immediate crisis of Hurricane Maria, but rather longstanding processes of abandonment crystallized in Rosa's theory of "three hurricanes." Importantly, residents, especially mothers and other caregivers, had already built a politicized identification around the school that shaped the school's use value as a rescued commons from which to organize disaster recovery that responded to local needs rather than top- official disaster governance imperatives. Finally, the exchange of insurgent knowledge about occupation and rescue tactics between two Caguas communities on the municipal urban periphery advances a collective praxis shaping the emergent geographies of mutual aid. The following chapter expands on this argument by examining how mutual aid is mobilized in daily practice at CAM Las Carolinas to shape what I term "infrastructures of care."

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **Mobilizing Infrastructures of Care: *Apoyo Mutuo* in Action**

Ingrid cut our visit short because she had to stock up on water and fill the available tanks, buckets, and bottles around her mother's property. She read on social media earlier in the day that the water in Las Carolinas would be shut off that night for maintenance work, and she was unsure of when it would be restored, or better yet, she did not trust the water authority to restore the service in a timely manner. Everyday infrastructural disruptions like this were unexceptional, but they posed challenges for the elderly and caregivers like Ingrid. In this context of infrastructural degradation exacerbated by the debt crisis and then Hurricane Maria, alternative infrastructures become more relevant for social reproduction and meeting basic needs.

In this chapter I examine the mobilization and effects of care in the CAM Las Carolinas to argue that mutual aid relations are not just short-term, survival solutions or charitable acts (see Spade 2020). Rather, this case demonstrates how mutual aid practices and relations can be mobilized over time to develop what I call “infrastructures of care” that support vulnerable populations' wellbeing, play an institutional role in communities, and subvert the organizing values, discourses, and practices of official disaster governance and austerity politics.<sup>1</sup>

Ingrid's mother Luisa lives around the corner from the CAM on the block of the Las Carolinas ballfield and the Resident's Association. Luisa's home was often the first stop on the CAM's lunch delivery route. Ingrid had been receiving lunches from the CAM since its start in

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<sup>1</sup> In the film *Aftershocks of Disaster* (2020), activist, author, and CAM Caguas Pueblo leader Giovanni Roberto distinguishes between *autogestión* (autonomous organizing), solidarity, and survival. He argues that the *Centros de Apoyo Mutuo* emerged with an intentional orientation towards autonomous organizing to create lasting, alternative community institutions. In contrast, he describes emergency responses to Puerto Rico's 2019-2020 seismic swarm (food distribution, shelter acquisition) as “solidarity and survival.”

2017 and makes consistent cash donations on a weekly basis to sustain the project. Ingrid's family was quite involved with the CAM beyond the cash donations—her deaf-mute brother José helped with the CAM's outdoor maintenance work, mowing the lawn and maintaining the greenery around the school on a regular basis for pay and lunch. Ingrid is sixty years old and a full-time caretaker for her mother, Luisa. Luisa is eighty-three, bedridden, and an advanced Alzheimer's patient for the past nine years. Luisa's condition at the time had deteriorated and she was unable to talk, make eye contact, or control her movement. Even though Luisa cannot communicate, Ingrid encourages visitors to interact with her. The day of my visit, Ingrid brought me into her mother's bedroom and pulled back the mosquito netting on her bed so that I could say hi and "*bendiciones*" (blessings). Ingrid pointed to her bed next to Luisa's mobile hospital bed, but said she often moves to the couch because her mother has screaming episodes in the middle of the night. I had arrived that day around 1pm, after I knew Ingrid had finished eating lunch and feeding her mother—a process that often requires her to grind up or soften the meals the CAM delivers so that Luisa can swallow them smoothly.

Ingrid and her seven siblings were born and raised in Las Carolinas, in the house where my visit took place. Ingrid cares for her mother Sunday through Friday and has a brief break Friday evening through Sunday evening when one of her siblings relieves her. During the weekend, Ingrid returns to her own home in *la urbanización* section of Las Carolinas, where she maintains her event planning and florist business. Ingrid has a small "*casa de novias*" (bridal and event planning service) in her home, where she plans weddings and *quinceañeras* for local Las Carolinas and Caguas residents and creates floral arrangements for occasions such as Valentine's Day and birthdays. After graduating high school, Ingrid trained in cosmology and worked for a wedding event planner in downtown Caguas for twenty-five years until the business closed in

2015 when the owners moved to the United States. She spent some time unemployed, and the job loss coincided with Luisa's worsening Alzheimer's condition and need for full-time care. Ingrid and her siblings moved Luisa from her deceased second husband's home in *la urbanización* to the house in Luisa's name in the *parcelas viejas* section where she had raised her eight children. Luisa and her first husband were among the "founding" residents in Las Carolinas through the *parcela* repartition in the 1950s. Ingrid recalled that "no one lived on this street" around the time of the *parcela* repartition, a distant landscape that challenged the contemporary eye looking out onto a street lined with houses and cars.

Caretaking for the elderly and/or disabled people became more challenging in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. The storm destroyed Luisa's bedroom, breaking the windows, and damaging the ceiling. Luckily, Ingrid had moved her mother to an interior bedroom that was not as exposed to the elements. Sitting in Luisa's living room, Ingrid pointed to various spots on the ceiling and explained that "this house has leaks," which worsened after Maria and continue to damage the floor. Ingrid explained that her sister had tried to construct a small apartment above Luisa's home but never finished, causing ceiling damage and interior leaking that worsened with Maria. Ingrid expected that FEMA would cover the costs to repair her mother's bedroom and the roof issues that were causing the leakage. However, FEMA attributed the ceiling and interior leak damage to the second-floor construction that was never finished. Because the second-floor construction was not a registered primary residence of the homeowner, FEMA covered no part of the home underneath that construction and allotted \$3,700 to repair Luisa's bedroom, fix only the bedroom ceiling, and replace all the bedroom windows. Ingrid recalled the stress of receiving insufficient aid to cover the cost of repair: "I said, 'and now what do I do with \$3,700?'"

Ingrid hired a licensed contractor who lives in *la urbanización* section of Las Carolinas and got an estimate for \$5,500 for the work just to cover repairs to her mother's bedroom. She paid off the \$1,800 difference little by little with financial help from family members in Puerto Rico and the diaspora. On top of dealing with home repair issues, the blackout and lack of water put the elderly at high risk. Ingrid reflected on the significance of the CAM's alternative infrastructures for caregivers after Hurricane Maria:

Maria came and there were various difficulties, because we had difficulties, you know? And as a result of this, work became more challenging. There were more things to do, more things than we used to do...And with all this, as a caregiver, I had to depend on a lot of help because sometimes I was alone and I said, 'my God, send an angel to help with something so that I can take care of my mother.' And then, well, [they] set up the community kitchen...Every day I give thanks for this community kitchen. Well, because they said 'we are here to help with whatever we can. We can leave the lunch here for you.' And from there I did not have to be in the kitchen during lunch time...So I said, well since [the CAM] brings me lunch, I can dedicate this time to my mother.

Dedicating more time to her mother, Ingrid explained, means more time to do the daily work of bathing her and washing and changing the sheets. Ingrid described this break from the kitchen cooking lunch three times per week as giving her more "flexibility." Providing Ingrid with six lunches per week of course does not transform the material conditions in which her or her mother make their lives. However, these everyday acts of care brokered through food delivery and accompaniment altered Ingrid's experience of time and daily routine, providing some relief, flexibility, and a support network throughout the ongoing process of recovery. As a mode of alternative grassroots recovery, infrastructures of care thus contest the neutrality of institutional recovery frameworks that fail to account for the circumstances of caregivers, the elderly, and/or disabled people with limited resources.

As she prepared to collect the water, Ingrid walked me out onto her mother's front patio, and we looked onto the empty ballfield adjacent to the house. Fondly recalling a not-so-distant past, she pointed to all the directions from which school children would walk to get to the María Montañez Gómez elementary school and described an active ballfield when the school was in session. Now, the ballfield lay empty and was occasionally maintained by either the municipality or residents themselves. Ingrid explained diminished participation in events hosted by the Residents' Association, for example, as a result of the school closure disrupting the "sense of community" (*sentido de comunidad*) that had existed. For caregivers like Ingrid, the CAM has contributed to renewing a sense of community, in part through the meal delivery service that provided a small form of relief for caregivers and their elderly and/or disabled family members.

Elaborating on the CAM's everyday values and practices of care through ethnographic vignettes and personal histories with participants like Ingrid, this chapter shows how infrastructures of care are mobilized through accompaniment, self-organized material improvisations, locally created and administered assessment tools, enrichment activities for elderly residents, food exchange, and intergenerational circuits of care giving and receiving. Most of the evidence I draw on for the chapter is situated around the first anniversary of Hurricane Maria (2018). First, I examine women community leaders' interpretations of *apoyo mutuo* as a starting point to discuss care and mutual aid in action. These acts, I argue, constitute infrastructures of care that support and partially collectivize social reproduction of the elderly and/or disabled people and their caregivers in material and affective ways. Mutual aid flows in multiple directions within the CAM and between the CAM and Las Carolinas residents. Infrastructures of care that emerge from sustained mutual aid practices thus render ambiguous the lines between care giving and care receiving—a characteristic that distinguishes *apoyo mutuo*

from top-down, paternalistic charity modes of care. The chapter closes with a case example of a missionary group's visit to the CAM that articulates charitable care as a performative act to circulate propaganda.

### **Infrastructures of Care Framework**

The concept of infrastructures of care is useful for unpacking the layered dimensions of mutual aid, and the subjective effects and political openings catalyzed by long-term mutual aid projects in Puerto Rico. My framework draws on interventions from feminist theory, disability studies, and geography that have analyzed care as situated everyday practices constituted through relations among humans, the environment, materials, and non-human agencies in the context of unequal power relations (Held 2004; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018; Power and Mee 2019). Further, I draw on “relational” and “lived” theories of infrastructure that go beyond infrastructure as material “stuff,” and instead attend more broadly to its material, symbolic, and affective dimensions (Star 1999; Berlant 2016; Wilson 2016; Alam and Houston 2020). As Lauren Berlant notes, infrastructure is “the living mediation of what organizes life: the lifeworld of structure” (Berlant 2016: 393). I follow scholars who have turned to examine alternative, autonomous, and “fugitive” infrastructures as assemblages that allow for sustenance and alternative futures (Cowen 2017). Infrastructures of care are “fugitive” in the sense that they resist individualization, the organizing logics of austerity and institutional disaster governance, and the rules governing property. As I analyzed in the previous chapter, the rescued and occupied school is a central physical/social infrastructure that spatially anchors the CAM's mutual aid practices and care circuits described in this chapter.

The concept “infrastructures of care” is not my own. Rather, at least three other studies have used this framework to integrate feminist ethics of care with the “infrastructural turn” (Amin 2014). For example, Peter Danholt and Henriette Langstrup (2012) draw on science and technology studies to argue that infrastructures of care (medications, time management devices, pain alleviation technologies, communication infrastructures, etc.) facilitate a patient’s self-management of chronic medical conditions and the distribution of care between the patient and the healthcare system. Geographers Emma Power and Kathleen Mee (2019) posit housing as an infrastructure of care, focusing on how housing systems and homes “pattern” the organization and practices of care across scale. Lastly, Abby Mellick Lopes and her colleagues (Mellick Lopes et al. 2018) draw on geography, urban studies, and design theory to call for the expansion of social and technical infrastructures of care that promote comfort, mobility, and sociality in the city. Their work suggests commoning practices to create public cooling spaces as a form of climate change mitigation in cities impacted by extreme heat.

The two latter studies reference the private domestic “home” as a crucial but limited life-organizing infrastructure, and thus suggest a move towards commoning practices and alternative infrastructures that organize care *beyond enclosed private domains*. They point to the relevance of exploring dynamic “infrastructures of daily life” (Gilroy and Booth 1999) and problematize how the rendering of care as a private domestic practice can obscure care as a political concern (Tronto 2013). At the CAM Las Carolinas, for example, women perform public care in certain realms of traditional private gendered domesticity by repurposing an abandoned structure into a community kitchen. Put simply, as Carina states in the documentary *Después de María: Las Dos Orillas* (2018), “If you cook in your house, why not also cook for somebody who really needs it?”



I build on these conceptual frameworks' attention to the human, social, and affective aspects of infrastructure, as well as the blurred boundaries of private and public spheres to examine how mutual aid organizing over time mediates everyday acts and relations of care. I argue that infrastructures of care are assembled through CAM leaders' and participants' engagement with alternative space-making practices of rescue, material and aesthetic improvisations, forms of exchange, and knowledge production. These engagements in turn have local and subjective effects that challenge and extend beyond the conventional progressive temporality of disaster and recovery—in other words, the time-bound notion of disaster as *event* and the linear progression from disaster preparation to response and then recovery. The conventional temporality of disaster reduces time-space, obscures the forces that produce a disaster and social vulnerability, and presupposes race, gender, and class-neutral subjects. I follow César Pérez-Lizasuain's (2018) argument that the linear temporality of disaster in fact opens the possibility for resistance and what he calls "alternative sociabilities" to emerge.<sup>2</sup>

Hil Malatino (2020) makes an important intervention in the conceptualization of care work, arguing that dominant modes of understanding and critiquing care work tend to reinforce hetero-cis-normative family structures and gender arrangements. Rather than point to care or care work as an essentialized, gender-based activity, I aim to offer "infrastructures of care" as a framework for relational forms of care that intersect the social, affective, material, and ecological within a specific gendered context.

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<sup>2</sup> I quote Pérez-Lizasuain at length for clarity: "The idea of response has to do with a notion of linear or progressive temporality whose logical succession of events are presented as the 'natural' causes of certain social conditions. This reasoning makes use of the following narrative: 'A disaster has been generated as a result of the hurricane event.' This linear temporality obviates the political, economic and biopolitical conditions existing at the moment in which the atmospheric event occurs. To be more precise, the imposition of neoliberal policies of austerity during the past 15 years, before the hurricane, have made great part of the Puerto Rican population vulnerable" (Pérez-Lizasuain 2018, 44).

Infrastructures of care become more discernable when juxtaposed with other modes of care. Drawing on observations and reflections on my own complicity during a religious missionary organization's visit to the CAM, I highlight how mutual aid arrangements are distinct from charitable modes of care. I illustrate charitable care as a colonialist performative act that reinforces rather than blurs the boundaries between care giving and care receiving and reproduces a colonial power dynamic. Charitable care in this case mobilizes an economy of suffering and imposed messages of religious redemption to stage propaganda that ultimately circulates for the organization's media and fundraising purposes. I show that the subjects of charitable care are in fact not the people whom volunteers claim to help, but rather the detached charitable volunteers themselves and the donor networks to which they are obliged. Departing from the charity framework, I argue that locally mobilized infrastructures of care offer political openings via alternative disaster recovery visions and sets of relations to support life-affirming practices amid overlapping crises of debt, climate disaster, and infrastructural collapse.<sup>3</sup>

### ***El "SWAT de hambre": Competing Portrayals of Mutual Aid***

One morning in August 2018, CAM organizers sat around the table in the *comedor* with coffee and snacks for the usual social conversations, gossip, and planning that took place while others cooked, cleaned, or did supply checks and chimed in sporadically. Often local newspapers could be found scattered on the cafeteria tables and CAM leaders would flip through them throughout the morning or start conversations about a particular headline.

That day, Adriana—a sixty-five-year-old CAM Las Carolinas leader—made one of her first attempts at vegan cooking and brought in a soy "meatloaf" to share. Soy was one of the

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<sup>3</sup> I take inspiration from ethnographies such as Katherine Browne's *Standing in the Need* (2015), which explores care in terms of kin interdependence in post-Katrina New Orleans.

meat alternative products the CAM was trying to substitute in some recipes to offer meal delivery recipients a meatless option that could be more healthful for those with obesity, diabetes, or heart conditions. The CAM chefs did their best to prepare appealing soy “meat” with the same spices and herbs they would use for beef.

The women were discussing the possibility of opening up another classroom as an activity center geared towards elderly residents of Las Carolinas, which came to be called the *Centro Nuevo Amanecer* (discussed below). Organizers imagined the kinds of arts and crafts materials they already had at home (paints, recycled plastics, tissue paper, ribbons, pipe cleaners) and how they could decorate and bring new life to the classroom that had been callously littered with debris left by the Department of Education—a stark marker of the government’s disinvestment in the Las Carolinas and its residents. During the planning discussion, the conversation shifted to a recent *El Nuevo Día* article that was published on July 30, 2018—Puerto Rico’s first major mainstream periodical that spotlighted the CAM Las Carolinas (Pérez Pintado 2018). As the newspaper was passed around, two of the women expressed their dissatisfaction with the media portrayal of their mutual aid efforts, especially the narrow focus on responding to community “hunger” and the militaristic imagery conveyed in the title—“*El ‘SWAT’ del hambre’ alimenta la esperanza en Caguas*” (The hunger SWAT feeds hope in Caguas). The imagery of a SWAT team—an almost supernatural force—feeding hungry residents signals a heroic response to exceptional conditions, rather than women organizing care and life-affirming practices *through and beyond* the emergency of the hurricane. In other words, this media trope dilutes and depoliticizes mutual aid as a mode of charity, heroic volunteerism, and survivalism. By survivalism, I refer to an orientation towards the immediate needs of

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<sup>4</sup> SWAT stands for Special Weapons and Tactics Unit.

individual survival amid adverse circumstances. Certain kinds of care (meal service for the supposedly hungry and external aid) are made visible while other kinds of care, social relations, and forms of resistance are obscured.

I had read the *El Nuevo Día* article a few days earlier and assumed that organizers suggested the “SWAT” metaphor. However, the women confirmed that the journalist chose the metaphor. The imagery struck a particularly bothersome chord that day among the CAM organizers because it felt disconnected from their efforts to construct spaces, activities, and social relations that extend the temporality of disaster and respond to long-standing needs. The long-term mutual aid project in Las Carolinas thus departs from the technical and bureaucratic frameworks that characterize top-down, state-led disaster recovery described in Chapter Two. The article highlights two cohabiting sisters in their 60s for whom the CAM provides what the article called their “main source of sustenance” with three prepared hot meals per week. The younger sister Maria uses a wheelchair because she lost one of her legs and her prosthetic was damaged during Hurricane Maria. She cares for her older sister Katia, who has mental and physical disabilities. While the article mentions the CAM’s expansion of services to address other local needs, its focus is on hunger and the “external aid” the sisters have received through the CAM, including missionary volunteers from the U.S. who organized the funding and labor to repair Hurricane Maria damage to their home. The article thus portrays individual suffering ameliorated by volunteer labor and paternalistic missionary projects.

The article in *El Nuevo Día* echoes common media tropes that emphasize trauma, suffering, and exceptional, heroic volunteerism as part of a racialized visual and narrative construction of disaster and of people’s actions in response to disaster (Lloréns 2018). These media disaster tropes are often cast within a specific temporality of the “emergency,” or as an

exceptional moment in time. In this case, the featured sisters' suffering is bound within the temporal frame of Hurricane Maria and its aftermath, rather than within the long-standing structures of inequality that shaped their life circumstances. Furthermore, mutual aid practices are similarly bound within an immediate disaster temporality and portrayed as an act of emergency charity and volunteerism rather than a political act or a future-oriented project. In focusing on how the CAM provides some residents with their only hot meal of the day and offers support to those in need "after" or "as a result of" Hurricane Maria, the article obscures the wider temporal scope of how women understand their care work and mutual aid relations within Las Carolinas.

The article concludes with a profound yet unexamined statement by Lucía, one of the project's founders and leaders until late 2018. She says, "*Lo que pretendo es que Puerto Rico completo sea un Centro de Apoyo Mutuo, pero tengo que empezar por mi casa*" (What I intend is for all of Puerto Rico to be a Mutual Aid Center, but I have to start with my home). Here, Lucia blurs the boundaries between domestic home and CAM, projecting these initiatives onto the national scale, and thus depicts mutual aid practitioners across the archipelago as political actors.

During the discussion about how to respond to the article, Adriana said, "*lo que hay aquí no es hambre, sino soledad. La gente tiene comida y sus cupones*"<sup>5</sup> (what we have here is not hunger, but rather loneliness. People have food and their [government] food assistance). This comment referred to conditions nearly one year after Hurricane Maria when commodities and food preparation and preservation were more widely accessible. Asserting that "people have

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<sup>5</sup> *Cupones* locally refer to food stamps, or the *Programa de Asistencia Nutricional* (PAN), which is administered by the Puerto Rican government through an annual block grant provided by the federal government. Unlike the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) in the 50 U.S. states, the federal government caps the PAN funding structure, forcing the local government to set PAN eligibility and benefit levels based on the block grant budget rather than overall need or food price fluctuations.

food” and government assistance to access food in Las Carolinas shifts the focus of mutual aid and recovery work to other social relations of care beyond survival.<sup>6</sup> For example, the women “illegally” entered and occupied the closed school to cook and serve food in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Maria, ensuring residents’ ability to meet basic needs in the context of post-disaster government neglect. The physical space of the CAM *comedor* in effect became a hub to organize alternative social infrastructures that met people’s needs through hot meals, potable water, electrical outlets, supplies, carpooling, and information networks. However, the organizers’ vision extended beyond the emergency period and the neighborhood’s electricity and water restoration in March 2018. Infrastructures of care were organically expanded to include lunch delivery routes for the elderly and/or disabled, their caregivers, and those with mobility and/or health impediments; the implementation of survey tools to assess residents’ ongoing needs and interests; and the preparation of the new activity center that was being planned the day of the article discussion. It was clear that three delivered hot meals per week would not solve residents’ potential food insecurity or hunger, as the *El Nuevo Día* article suggested. Rather, the material, symbolic, and affective exchange of food and the physical space of the occupied school were central to brokering multiple care relations, as I explore below.

Perhaps a “SWAT team” feeding the hungry is a more captivating image for some audiences receptive to the notion that charitable benevolence can adequately respond to what vulnerable communities experience in the wake of disaster. “*Soledad*,” or solitude, is a less attractive, mundane, everyday condition that resonates with Las Carolinas because of its majority elderly population, many of whom live alone, serve as caregivers, or require their own

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<sup>6</sup> Jacqueline Villaruubia-Mendoza and Roberto Vélez-Vélez (2020) argue that while the CAMs sustain a critique of dependency on government assistantship programs (*asistencialismo*) through *autogestión* (autonomous organizing), breaking away from *asistencialismo* represents the biggest challenge to the CAMs.

caregivers. Accompaniment as an ethic of care (Mulligan and Garriga-López 2020)—demonstrating a supportive presence either through the relational bridge of meal deliveries, check-ins, or a gathering space for people to come together and *desahogarse* (to let off steam)—was in fact central to the politics of mutual aid in Las Carolinas and its transformative effects. The *Centro Nuevo Amanecer* symbolized this aspiration, for example, by intentionally creating a space of accompaniment and “*ocio*” (leisure) for elderly residents, which simultaneously altered residents’ experience of time, space, and significant community infrastructures such as the school—a physical symbol of the community’s experience of organized abandonment.

### ***Apoyo Mutuo: Visions of Recovery Futures***

In interviews with CAM Las Carolinas leaders, I consistently asked what *apoyo mutuo* (mutual aid) means to them. A common theme that emerges in their responses is an emphasis on future-oriented, prefigurative interpretations of *apoyo mutuo*, and specifically how the rescued school space might help to mitigate risk during future climate disasters.<sup>7</sup> The interpretations that leaders articulate help to distinguish mutual aid from charity, emphasize mutuality and attention to those most in need, and relate women’s subjective experiences to their care work. For example, Rosa—the forty-five-year-old daughter of Adriana and CAM leader born in Las

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<sup>7</sup> While Chapter Two expands on official mutual aid programs, everyday people’s contemporary understandings and practices of mutual aid likely draw on past experiences of mutual aid and other contemporary survival strategies. There are a number of references to historic forms of mutual aid in the literature. For example, Eileen Findlay (1997) mentions the growth of mutual aid and trade organizations in Ponce during the 1890s economic crisis. Helen Safa documents that 55 percent of the households in her study of urban shantytowns in 1959-1960 “had relatives living in the immediate neighborhood, most of whom saw each other daily, so that relations with kin and neighbors were very close, with extensive patterns of mutual aid involving sharing food to repairing houses” (2003, 19). In her 1980 study among rural households and women garment workers, Safa documents that “80% of the households had relatives living nearby, and often went to work together, and shared a car and other patterns of mutual aid” (Ibid., 27). One may also consider the literature on survival strategies in this discussion, for example research on how Puerto Rican fishers combine migratory wage labor and subsistence fishing to earn a living (Griffith and Valdés Pizzini 2002) and studies on coastal resource foraging as a mode of production to pursue livelihood and wellbeing in coastal southeastern Puerto Rico (García-Quijano, Poggie, Pitchon, and Del Pozo 2015).

Carolinas—describes mutual aid as “helping each other and helping the people most in need.”

Rosa elaborates on her vision of a future-oriented mutual aid practice in Las Carolinas centered around the rescued school:

I want this [project] to be converted into a mutual aid center where the community could come, distract themselves, have entertainment spaces. I want this to have a laundry facility, a shelter in case of a hurricane...so that you could come here and pass the storm or atmospheric event. You spend it here talking with people, not alone in your house. You spend it here surrounded by people.<sup>8</sup>

Here, Rosa points to what an alternative disaster response and recovery process might look like—shelter and basic services would be accessible and residents, especially the elderly and others living alone, would not experience alienation but rather community. Similarly, Carina—a forty-one-year-old lifetime resident of Las Carolinas and CAM leader—says that for her, mutual aid is,

the hope of the community. The hope of the community in case of whatever disaster...so we do not have to wait for anyone ‘*de afuera*’ (from outside) to come and say ‘look, on this day your help will arrive.’ And then one month later people are with practically nothing in their homes.

These understandings of *apoyo mutuo* relate to sociologist Ana Cecilia Dinerstein’s theorization of the organization of hope and prefigurative politics in Latin American autonomous movements. Dinerstein writes that hope is an “unrealized materiality” that exists “beyond the parameters of legibility of the demarcated reality” (Dinerstein 2015, 209). Women’s anticipatory hope for the CAM space to become an emergency shelter was an effort at disaster risk mitigation beyond the parameters of legibility due to scarce financial resources and tenuous ownership

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<sup>8</sup> Developing part of the rescued school as a shelter (*refugio*) was consistently on the CAM’s agenda from late 2018 through 2019, but the plan has not yet come to fruition due to financial and bureaucratic constraints.



claims to the school. The May 2017 school closure had deprived Las Carolinas of its official emergency shelter, placing a burden on residents to travel a distance to access the nearest shelter or temporarily take up residence in family member's homes during the long months after Hurricane Maria. These CAM leaders' interpretations of *apoyo mutuo* thus directly relate to their subjective and material experience of Hurricane Maria and suggest that they understand mutual aid not only as an effort to survive, but also as a process of localized world-making that articulates social relations of care and prefiguration.<sup>9</sup>

## **Mobilizing Care**

### *Assessing Needs: The First Survey as a Diagnostic and Participatory Tool*

June 1, 2018, marked the first day of the Atlantic hurricane season and the first full hurricane season since Maria. Prominent news conversations often centered around the mishaps of recovery and how vulnerable residents were facing a new hurricane season when it felt like they were still in the thick of the previous one. The 2018 hurricane season had already brought the threat of tropical storm Beryl, and Puerto Rico was anything but prepared. Thousands remained in the dark, blue tarp makeshift roofs peppered the landscape, and dangling or broken traffic and streetlights still made navigating the roadways an anxiety-producing experience.

It was a Friday and I had been volunteering at the CAM, preparing the auriculotherapy clinic, packing lunch containers with *chuletas* (porkchops), rice, and beans, and assisting with the lunch delivery route. The effect of the start of another hurricane season while Maria was still very much unfolding seemed to weigh heavily on everyone. My fieldnotes from that day reflect

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<sup>9</sup> On the anticipatory politics of prefiguration, see Polletta 2002, Graeber 2007, Bonilla 2015, Jeffrey and Dyson 2020.

some of the contradictions of simultaneous disaster “recovery” from the 2017 storms and “preparation” for the 2018 hurricane season:

Today marked the start of the 2018 Atlantic hurricane season, and much public and media scrutiny focus on how the government has not prepared and refuses to even acknowledge the death toll from Maria.<sup>10</sup> *El Nuevo Día* has recently published articles detailing what each municipality still lacks, with inventories of how many light posts are out or hanging by a thread, etc. Yabucoa, the municipality where Maria entered, is still about 50 percent without electricity.

With the possibility of new storms, the grassroots disaster recovery networks and practices organized throughout Puerto Rico’s more than a dozen *Centros de Apoyo Mutuo* became even more crucial. Some of the women and I joked that the CAM Las Carolinas was better prepared than the government to respond to another storm. Although the joke seemed hyperbolic, the infrastructures of care in formation were in fact necessary for disaster risk mitigation because they afforded a local sense of preparation and security that the government had failed to provide. The CAM Las Carolinas occupied a structure that could serve as a shelter, with water and electricity, a large stockpile of nonperishable foods, fruits and vegetables growing throughout the property, and a full kitchen with gas-powered stoves to prepare food if power were lost. Organizers had also gained a sense about Las Carolinas residents’ vulnerabilities and the households that would need to be checked on before and after another emergency. For example, during the CAM Las Carolinas’s initial period serving hot meals from the *comedor* between November 2017 and the end of the blackout in March 2018, women organizers administered a survey to assess residents’ needs and conditions.<sup>11</sup> The paper survey

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<sup>10</sup> The study “Mortality in Puerto Rico After Hurricane Maria” (Kishore et al. 2018) estimates the excess death toll due to Hurricane Maria and its aftermath at 4,645. In response to public indignation over the death count and the local government’s willful undercounting and data suppression, a symbolic shoe memorial was organized on June 1, 2018, at the *Capitolio*. The memorial brought together the contradictions of ongoing public mourning and recovery amid the start of preparations for a new hurricane season.

<sup>11</sup> This survey was created and administered with the help of CDPEC.

was voluntary and administered over a period of time when residents visited the *comedor*, the weekly auriculotherapy clinic where ear acupuncture is practiced, or other community events. The knowledge gathered through the survey enabled a more holistic approach to both disaster preparation and recovery.

This section focuses on the survey as a locally developed tool of assessment and measurement because it both illuminates common conditions and needs that residents experienced and articulates central features of the CAM's approach to recovery. It suggests both a diagnostic and participatory approach that, contrary to institutional disaster recovery approaches, meets the reality of people's life circumstances rather than assuming homogeneous subjects of recovery as race, gender, and class neutral. Furthermore, as a methodological tool of assessment and measurement, surveys empowered organizers with a greater understanding of local needs and informed the expansion of mutual aid practices and the mobilization of care.

On June 1, I was asked to help organize and tabulate the survey, which the women referred to as the "census." The CAM Las Carolinas operated mostly with paper documents, so two other volunteers and I split the task of tabulating the survey results onto construction paper with hand-drawn grids. Seventy-two people from teenagers to older adults in their eighties participated in the survey (50 women, 22 men).<sup>12</sup> The first section asked for general demographic information, including age, educational attainment, and household composition. The second part asked respondents to describe their most urgent needs and to indicate how to categorize those needs (food, housing, legal, health, mental/emotional health, education, information, work, and recreation). This was followed by a section on health conditions the respondent may be experiencing, including stress and anxiety, allergies, addiction, pain, insomnia, hypertension,

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<sup>12</sup> I thank Miguel Ángel Rosario Lozada for his helpful charts summarizing the survey results.

depression, and diabetes. The final sections asked whether the respondent would be interested in participating in organized sports in the community and how they would be able to support the CAM (through monetary, food, or material donations or through participation in activities and meal deliveries). The final questions asked respondents how they found out about the CAM and if they would participate in a community garden and/or the weekly auriculotherapy clinic.

The most urgent needs identified related directly to Hurricane Maria: 68 percent of respondents identified home repairs and 14 percent identified debris removal as their most urgent needs. Some respondents described these repair issues. For example, “we have leaks, and they don’t want to help us.” “They” likely refers to FEMA, the government, or other disaster aid agencies. In terms of health conditions, twenty-eight percent of respondents identified experiencing *nervios*/stress/anxiety and twenty-one percent insomnia. Other frequent conditions mentioned include hypertension, diabetes, and allergies/asthma. Given the psychological traumas documented among populations affected by Hurricane Maria, the high percentage of respondents who identified repairing their home as the most urgent need suggests that the commonly identified mental health conditions such as stress, anxiety, and insomnia may have some relation to their unmet recovery needs (Noboa 2019; Macias et al. 2019; Ortiz Torres 2020).

The survey was central to the CAM’s long-term mobilization of care in several ways. First, the survey performed a diagnostic function for CAM leaders to have a better sense of the social and health conditions among the people they were directing care to. The survey questions also reveal the kinds of concerns that organize community-based recovery and mutual aid in a specific space and time: a person’s age and employment status, whom they live with and their ages, urgent material needs, and health conditions. These are vital details largely absent from the institutional recovery framework that homogenizes disaster-affected people and neutralizes their

life circumstances and vulnerabilities. For example, unemployed people cannot easily access market solutions like home and flood insurance. Data about home composition and the ages and health conditions of its occupants can be a matter of life or death in case of an emergency evacuation. Secondly, the incorporation of questions about how respondents envisioned the CAM (through organized sports, a community garden, meal services, and auriculotherapy clinics) suggests that the survey was a participatory tool to envision the kinds of life-affirming practices of mutual aid that would best respond to residents' needs and circumstances. One such participatory, life-affirming initiative that developed was the *Centro Nuevo Amanecer* (Center for a New Dawn).

#### *The Centro Nuevo Amanecer*

The unmistakable smell of yellow Dial bar soap filled the rescued classroom. That smell was etched in my sensory memory because it is the soap my grandmother has used for as long as I can remember. *Bolero* music played from the stereo and the standing fans hummed loudly as they rotated on full blast to provide cooling relief from the summer heat. Elderly participants in the *Centro Nuevo Amanecer* were decorating Dial soaps to accompany the bathroom sets they had crafted earlier in the week. Lined along the display tables on the perimeter of the room were the draping toilet paper holders made from cloth and ribbon and the painted clothes hangers for towels. The idea was to sell the decorative and practical bathroom sets to a group of college students from the U.S. who were set to visit the CAM to fund-raise and give the students a souvenir. This gesture of exchange, however, did not phase Justo.<sup>13</sup> Justo carved his first name

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<sup>13</sup> Don Justo died in August 2020. I honor his memory and am grateful for everything he taught me about patience, plants, and local history. I am grateful for the multiple *piques caseros* (homemade hot sauces) he made me, even though he loathed spicy food.

onto the soap he decorated, paying no mind to the souvenir suggestion. Teresa—an eighty-year-old who has lived in Las Carolinas since 1956—and Sara—a fifty-five-year-old National Guard retiree who has lived in Las Carolinas for over three decades—glued lace strips around their soap bars. Manuel—a Las Carolinas resident since the 1950s who worked in sugarcane and carpentry—painted his soap bar with bright colors.

The *Centro Nuevo Amanecer* opened on August 15, 2018, two weeks after the initial planning discussions that coincided with the *El Nuevo Día* article publication discussed above. A Caguas municipal van was donated to pick up residents for the inauguration day and to build momentum, and moving forward, residents either walked (sometimes arriving at the school gates as early as 7:30am, before it opened) or were transported by family members or CAM organizers. Organizers paid special attention to assessing residents' interest in the new activity center and preparing to accommodate their needs through the administration of a survey along the lunch delivery routes in August 2018. This was the CAM's second survey, and it asked questions similar to their first survey (discussed above) about residents' most pressing material and immaterial needs, including caretaking. The survey also included questions about how the lunch delivery service benefitted recipients, their availability for a visit outside of the CAM operating hours, and their transportation/mobility needs for the *Centro Nuevo Amanecer*.

The activity center diversified access to the occupied school space and attracted new participants who might not already be attending the healing clinics (auriculotherapy), visiting the bazaar, or receiving food along the lunch delivery route. Each classroom in the occupied school that could be “opened” produced a place-making effect. With a new use value, the opened classrooms expanded both the CAM's community reach and the participants' sense of spatial ownership, autonomy, and rescue. In fact, organizers envisioned the activity center as working in

conjunction with the bazaar—participants could shop or donate clothing on the days the activity center was open, and they would attract other family members to visit and make purchases that helped sustain the CAM. The bazaar at times generated about \$100/week and impacted circuits of local consumption by collecting and selling gently used house and baby supplies, clothing, and jewelry donated primarily by Las Carolinas residents. I enjoyed frequenting the bazaar to make thrift purchases such that CAM organizers joked that my closet was becoming “*moda CAM*” (CAM fashion).

While elderly people are often portrayed in disaster literature and media as victims through the lens of social vulnerability (Adams et al. 2011), this mutual aid initiative centers elderly residents as protagonists and represents an effort to build alternative care institutions for elders—often caregivers themselves—where they can express different forms of agency and creativity. The *Centro Nuevo Amanecer* was purposefully located in a classroom adjacent to the bazaar where elderly participants would have easy access on a flat concrete path to the bathrooms in the back of the school. Coffee, snacks, and a sit-down lunch in the *comedor* were provided each day. Art was explicitly recognized as a therapeutic activity that organizers were enthusiastic to offer elderly residents as a new creative outlet. Studies show that elderly populations are disproportionately impacted by mental health conditions, abandonment, and loneliness in the wake of disaster (Adams et al. 2011). In response to the local realities of elderly Las Carolinas residents, the CAM established the *Centro Nuevo Amanecer* in August 2018 as a community activity center to gather elders and provide an outlet of artistic expression, companionship, elderly care, and healing. This classroom was often my first stop in the mornings when I arrived at the CAM.

I argue that prioritizing elderly Las Carolinas residents was central to how the CAM assembled infrastructures of care to respond to layered forms of abandonment and the specific needs of the community's largely elderly population. Las Carolinas' age demographics reflect larger trends in Puerto Rico, with 60 to 70 percent of the estimated 2,500 residents over 55 years old (U.S. Census Bureau 2017). Puerto Rico's aging population is partly a reflection of recent migration trends of younger and working age Puerto Ricans moving to the continental United States. About 18.5 percent of Puerto Rico's population is over 60, 36 percent of these people live alone, and 40 percent of this demographic lives below the poverty line (Burnette 2019). Health, transportation, and communications infrastructural collapse after Hurricane Maria particularly impacted elderly populations and exacerbated the experience of trauma (Wyss 2017). In the months after Hurricane Maria, the suicide rate doubled for people aged 65-69 and tripled for those aged 75-79 (Burnette 2019).

Most of the *Centro Nuevo Amanecer* participants were lifelong or long-term Las Carolinas residents, some with kin relations. Besides sharing a residential location, participants constituted what Philip Abrams termed a "sociological generation"—an identity that emerges within the "double construction of time" when "life history and world history coalesce to transform each other" (1982, 256). For instance, participants shared similar life trajectories marked by Puerto Rico's shifting political economy in terms of how they ended up in Las Carolinas, educational attainment, working-class jobs in agriculture, industry, and services, and complex embeddedness in networks of care giving and receiving. Out of the six participants with whom I conducted oral histories, five established themselves in Las Carolinas through the agrarian reform *parcela* repartition during the 1950s-1960s, either through their parents' or their own *parcela* acquisition. Only one out of six received a degree or professional training beyond



high school. All six had blue-collar, agricultural, or public service occupations, including sugarcane labor, cigar factory work, maintenance support in the now shuttered medical dispensary, vegetation maintenance for the municipality of Caguas, garment factory work, carpentry, social service program coordination, and National Guard service. These elders do not just form a generational cohort but are, as David Scott argues, “contemporaries”—“those who are linked to each other by having been subjected to similar formative influences” and a shared social-historical location (2014, 163). As a “social institutions of time,” generation is an important lens of analysis to unpack the complexities of the current crisis in terms of historically located experience.

All six participants described the impact of the *Centro Nuevo Amanecer* in terms of opening a space for dignity, emotional well-being, and creativity. Some common conditions they described experiencing include depression, insomnia, boredom, disability, and stress from caregiving roles. For example, three out of the six participants play a major caregiving role in their household. Justo and Manuel are the primary caretakers for their wives with severe dementia, and each has adult children living at home with psychological traumas. Teresa (age 80), whose story I highlight below, is the primary caregiver for her older husband. Beyond convening elderly residents three days per week, the *Centro Nuevo Amanecer* also provided a vital intergenerational care network.<sup>14</sup> The program facilitated CAM organizers to check in on *Centro Nuevo Amanecer* participants, communicate with their children and family members about physical and emotional health updates, and establish contact with participants and family members in emergency situations or for more mundane things like following up with doctors’ appointments or organizing transportation.

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<sup>14</sup> In general, there was a group of about seven to twelve consistent elderly participants.

For a generation who grew up with stringent gender norms, the *Centro Nuevo Amanecer* opened a space for more fluid forms of gender expression and aesthetics, particularly for older men. Hilda took on a leadership role among both men and women in the *Centro Nuevo Amanecer*, organizing craft activities and the daily structure. Hilda is in her late-seventies and lives a few houses away from the CAM Las Carolinas. She grew up in what became the “Los Ramos” section of Las Carolinas, where her father worked *agregado* harvesting tobacco on the *Finca Pedro Ramos* (Pedro Ramos Farm). Hilda also labored sewing tobacco from a young age. Besides giving a portion of his tobacco harvest to Pedro Ramos, Hilda’s father also sold some of his crop to the Consolidated Tobacco company. In 1957, the family moved to the *parcela* in Las Carolinas where she currently resides. The *parcela* has since been divided through inheritance between Hilda and her brother, who resides in an assisted living facility.

In 1970, Hilda moved to Boston where she married and worked for 20 years in social services coordinating a program on child rearing for immigrant families. Both her husband and only son died tragically, and she remains close with her granddaughter and great-grandchildren who reside in Boston. After her husband’s death, Hilda retired in 2016 and returned to Las Carolinas to care for her dying mother. Because of her extended time in the diaspora, some of Hilda’s neighbors marked her as a “fraud” rather than unquestionably “from Las Carolinas.” This suspicion about her relationship to place and home was heightened after Hurricane Maria when she applied for federal disaster aid and was met with probes about where she legitimately lived, even though she owns and resides in her house. Although she did not frame the experience in explicitly racial terms, Hilda’s dark skin may have weighed on how her neighbors brokered questions of othering and belonging. Hilda maintained a tangential role with the CAM until Spring 2018 when she lent her long driveway for the CAM’s temporary ear acupuncture space

and her kitchen for the preparation of hibiscus tea that accompanied the healing practice. At the time, the CAM was navigating a dispute over the school with a non-profit organization who applied to lease the complex. CAM leaders decided to move the clinic because they did not want to draw the authorities' attention with their unauthorized acupuncture practice.<sup>15</sup>

When the CAM's *Centro Nuevo Amanecer* opened in summer 2018 for neighborhood elders, Hilda volunteered to be the primary coordinator. She attributes her coordination skills and patience for working with elders to her work experience in Boston, the personal losses she has endured, and the care work she performed when her mother had severe Alzheimer's.

The participants in the *Centro Nuevo Amanecer* engaged in arts and crafts, jewelry making, painting, sculpture making, gardening, cooking workshops, and musical activities. Their craft projects were often on display in the classroom they occupied, in the *comedor*, and on long folding tables during public festivities. Most of the crafts were stored at the CAM to display, brought home for gifting and decorating, or at times sold to visitors at a low cost for fundraising. While the men would often be in the back of the classroom playing dominoes, they also participated in painting and jewelry making, adorning their own creations such as bracelets and necklaces with colorful beads, lace, and stones. For example, bathroom adornments and decorated product storage pieces described above would not conventionally be areas of concern for older cis-hetero identifying married men. The men would at times light-heartedly joke about crafts and jewelry making, but nonetheless proudly display their art in the CAM and around the neighborhood, or personally mark their designs, as Justo did with the Dial soap. The morning

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<sup>15</sup> Auriculotherapy, or ear acupuncture, is a healing practice common in multiple CAMs and advocated by organizations like *Caminando la Utopia*, which both performs and trains healers specifically in acupuncture. Technically, only medical doctors are authorized to perform auriculotherapy in Puerto Rico, so healers in mutual aid spaces see their work as healing justice that resists an exclusionary medical system, provides a critique of western biomedicine, and democratizes traditional healing techniques. Some healers explicitly frame their labor and their certification training in the radical traditions of the Black Panther Party and the Young Lords.

discussions often centered around joking with one another, sharing family and personal news (medical appointments, family issues, or upcoming trips to downtown Caguas), or taking up political discussions about the most recent local or national events.

The *Centro Nuevo Amanecer* demonstrates mutual aid as going beyond the politics of survival portrayed in the media trope described above. Elderly people are thus situated as protagonists in the community-based approaches to disaster recovery and rebuilding, which unsettles the top-down protagonist roles within charity modes of aid. In the following section, I weave one *Centro Nuevo Amanecer* participant's narrative about the CAM with her personal history to illustrate how the mobilization of care facilitated subjective transformations in her experience of time, space, and care.

### *Teresa's Story*

I had mixed feelings about interrupting Teresa's art activity at the *Centro Nuevo Amanecer* for our oral history in summer 2019, even though we had scheduled it in advance. I had been conducting oral histories with each of the *Centro Nuevo Amanecer* participants, and Teresa was one of the first. She paused her craft-making and we walked over to the classroom across the parking lot that was used as the relaxation and wellness room where auriculotherapy, aromatherapy, and massages were administered every Friday. Teresa actively attended these healing spaces and asserted that acupuncture was helping to reduce her insomnia. While Teresa knew about the subversive nature of unlicensed acupuncture practice in Puerto Rico, she likely was not aware of its radical history. While debate persists about the effectiveness of acupuncture, advocates argue that needle pricks to certain points in the ear can activate different organs, stimulate the immune system, or alleviate energy blockages in the body. A loosely organized

group of young acupuncturists has been especially active since Hurricane Maria, mounting mobile street “clinics” under tents or establishing more permanent clinics in collaboration with organizations such as the CAM Las Carolinas. These practitioners train each other or travel to the continental U.S. for certification in the five-point ear acupuncture National Acupuncture Detoxification Association protocol, which has its roots in the 1970s radical tradition.

Practitioners frame their work within the community health traditions of the Black Panthers and the Young Lords, who, in 1970 launched sit-ins, occupations, and protests at Lincoln Hospital in the South Bronx to demand adequate medical services. This pressure led to the creation of “Lincoln Detox,” a volunteer-run program where both methadone and acupuncture were used to treat drug addiction. As part of their “survival programs,” the Black Panthers encouraged addiction-focused acupuncture to democratize medical care access, fight racial discrimination, and train community health providers (Khazan 2018). Following this tradition, therapies at the CAM Las Carolinas integrated massage, aromatherapy, music, acupuncture, and ear pressure points. Teresa often kept these pressure points activated throughout the week, marked by one or two single black seeds taped to her earlobe, which she was instructed to pinch at moments of stress or anxiety. Teresa’s auricular acupuncture therapy was thus meant to treat insomnia, transmit a political message about community health and wellness beyond the biomedical model, and empower people to actively participate in and build their own healthcare infrastructures.

Before entering the relaxation and wellness room, Teresa wanted to check on the papaya (*lechosa*) tree right between the building and the fence facing onto the street. We were lucky to find a papaya ready to be picked, and Teresa surreptitiously took a broom from the *comedor* to knock it down, surprised that I did not know how to manipulate the broom correctly to *tumbar* (knock down) the fruit. She insisted that I take the papaya home and gave me tips

about accelerating the ripening process. Teresa adores the fruit trees and vegetation that grow in her yard and around Las Carolinas. Upon reflecting on Hurricane Maria, she emphasized all the fruit trees that Maria “took” from her:

I had a beautiful mango tree that produced wonderful fruit and [Maria] knocked it down. It [Maria] knocked down the avocados, everything. But thank God, little by little, one moves forward (*echar pa'lante*). We collected everything and cleaned the patio. For days and days, we were collecting things and taking out the trees that fell, putting them on the street. We filled up the sidewalk from the gate to the light post with garbage.

Teresa is eighty years old and has lived in Las Carolinas since 1956, one year after new residents began to acquire *parcelas*. Her life story mirrors much of Puerto Rico’s political and economic shifts throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century in terms of how these gendered processes bear out in working people’s lives, labor histories, and struggles. She began the oral history that day not with Hurricane Maria, but with Hurricane Santa Clara in 1956, the first major storm she remembers that struck Puerto Rico the year her parents acquired a *parcela* in Las Carolinas for \$1 as she returned from working in New York City.

At the time of Santa Clara, there was only one cement structure in Las Carolinas, and the owner allowed as many residents as would fit to shelter there during the storm. Teresa recalled an old schoolhouse in Las Carolinas with a sheet metal roof, which men in the community held down with ropes during the storm’s strongest winds. Gesturing out the window, Teresa described Las Carolinas during the initial *parcela* repartitioning that began in 1955 and transformed what had been vast agricultural lands:

There was not even a planted tree here. There was nothing! We would walk all around, we walked all of this and entered wherever—there were no fences, there was nothing! We walked around everywhere, we ran, we played all over the place. But then people began claiming their *parcelas*, and it was not the

same. They began planting their trees of *pana* (breadfruit) and avocado to eat and grow in their homes. And now it's a forest (*es un monte*).

Teresa was born in Bairoa, Caguas and her family lived and labored *agregao*' (as sharecroppers) on a sugar plantation. Her father worked in the *caña* and her mother sold coffee to make ends meet to buy school supplies for the six children, sometimes with Teresa's help when she did not have class. Selling coffee and fried foods like *bacalaítos* (cod fish) was a key part of her mother's civic engagement and how she provided support at political events for the PPD, which spearheaded the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century populist agricultural and social reforms discussed in Chapter Two. While Teresa does not feel the same attachment to the PPD—or any political party for that matter—she admired her mother's political fervor and consistently accompanied her mother to polling places to vote even during the last years of her life in a wheelchair.

Teresa explained that before her family established themselves in Las Carolinas, “we did not have any land. What we had was...a little hill that had an incline, and up there was my parents' house—a wooden house.” While the family lived *agregao*' in Bairoa, Teresa's mother also worked sewing tobacco at a tobacco processing center in Las Carolinas. Before the *parcela* repartition, Las Carolinas was occupied by privately-owned grazing livestock and tobacco farms, where women worked sewing and processing the tobacco not too far from where Teresa and I were sitting that day.<sup>16</sup> Teresa attended first and second grade at the elementary school in Las Carolinas while her mother worked. Occasionally, Teresa would accompany her mother to sew tobacco for “*dos o tres chavos*” (two or three cents), sitting on the floor with a small needle. She recalled the other women tobacco workers complementing her for how quickly she learned to sew, noting that the creole overseer would say to her, “*negrita, a coser bien!*” (time to sew well,

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<sup>16</sup> Multiple elderly people indicated that sheep and cattle were the primary livestock in Las Carolinas prior to the *parcela* partitioning when the zone was occupied by large landowners.

*negrita*). She then qualified this seemingly affectionate comment saying, “*porque era negrita*” (because I *was* Black, emphasis mine), signaling that blackness may be distant from her current self-identification. As anthropologist Isar Godreau and her colleagues assert in their research on the reproduction of national ideologies of *mestizaje* in Afro-Latin America, the diminutive *ita* is at times used “to communicate resignation, rather than pride or mere neutrality, towards blackness” (Godreau et al. 2008). Thus, Teresa’s subtle comment gives insight into how racial hierarchies are reproduced in Puerto Rico and Teresa’s own racialized experience of class and gender. The tobacco overseer not only asserts Teresa’s “place” in the racial hierarchy, but also his authority over her (potential) labor power and the expectation of production, although layered through endearment and hyperbole. In other words, as a young girl in first or second grade, Teresa was not expected to sew tobacco at the same rate as her mother and the other tobacco sewers, but her place in the socio-racial landscape was made evident.<sup>17</sup>

When Teresa was entering eighth grade in Bairoa, her parents took her out of school and sent her to New York City to care for her sister’s new baby. It was not until later in life that Teresa returned to her studies and completed a high school degree. She arrived in New York in 1952, at the onset of Operation Bootstrap in Puerto Rico and the establishment of the *Estado Libre Asociado* (Free Associated State, or ELA) arrangement.<sup>18</sup> The Operation Bootstrap development model relied on export production and U.S. direct investment in Puerto Rico facilitated through tax exemptions, low wages compared to the continental U.S., and open access

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<sup>17</sup> As Maritza Quinoñes Rivera asserts, terms of endearment such as *negrita* “attribute characteristics of honor and respectability that presumably only light-skinned women possess” while simultaneously serving as “another way to objectify the Black body” (Quinoñes Rivera 2006: 168).

<sup>18</sup> The *Estado Libre Asociado* is the political arrangement that resulted from the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century process of conferring limited sovereignty for Puerto Rico. The ELA was seen as distinct from overt colonial rule and as a U.S. showcase to promote liberal democracy in the region. However, the recent overlapping crises and judicial decisions in Puerto Rico have highlighted the contradictions of the ELA. Activists and artists frequently refer to a satirical “death of the ELA” marked by the PROMESA Act of 2016. See Garriga-López 2019.



to the U.S. market (Ayala and Bernabe 2007). Another central feature of the Operation Bootstrap transformation was simultaneous state sponsored mass migration of the surplus labor population to the continental U.S., especially to cities like New York where many worked in garment, manufacturing, and other industries (García Colón 2020). After three months of caring for her infant niece in New York City, Teresa's sister secured childcare from her mother-in-law, and Teresa began to go to work with her sister at the Western Spring Company factory in Brooklyn.<sup>19</sup> She was only thirteen years old and not qualified to legally work, but she described "passing" for eighteen years old at the factory:

There was an Italian man, and he would take out ten cents from his pocket and say to me, 'I will give you these ten cents if you tell me you are thirteen years old.' And I would say to him, no, I am eighteen. He said, 'no, I have six children and your face is that of a child. You are a young girl, why are you working here?'

Teresa did not express fond memories of New York City. She vividly remembers the cold winters and the difficulties of factory work at such a young age. Teresa returned to Las Carolinas, Puerto Rico at age seventeen, a few months before Santa Clara tore through the archipelago. During the hurricane recovery period, she met Antonio, who worked fixing the newly installed light posts in Las Carolinas. He was employed by the Puerto Rico Electric Authority (at the time called *Fuente Fluvial*), where he worked until his retirement in 1985. Teresa described her rebellious spirit and how she "ran off" with Antonio, unwed, to the municipality of Aibonito as soon as she turned eighteen. Her mother eventually convinced the couple to return and took them to a judge to officiate the marriage. Teresa and Antonio settled in Las Carolinas and had two sons and one daughter, all of whom graduated from the María

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<sup>19</sup> The Western Spring Company manufactures coil springs and wire forms and is currently located in Minnesota.

Montañez Gómez elementary school. As was often repeated among community elders, Teresa expressed her bewilderment at the school closure because she always remembers a high enrollment: “people would come even from other communities” to attend the school, she said, as she described the streets of Las Carolinas filled with children coming and going to school on foot.

Teresa’s young adult and adult working life coincided with Puerto Rico’s industrialization and the peak of manufacturing in the archipelago. Upon returning from New York in the wake of Hurricane Santa Clara, Teresa worked in a diamond factory in Caguas, attaching decorative diamonds to necklaces, bracelets, and earrings. She also worked in a dress factory called Lady Blanch and in other garment factories in Caguas’s bustling industrial hub sewing button enclosures for men’s sweaters. In the early 1960s when Teresa’s children were young, she worked in a bra factory called Sylvie’s in Aguas Buenas, a municipality to the west of Caguas. We talked about how the factories Teresa worked in have left Puerto Rico. Reflecting on the 1960s, Teresa said:

Caguas was a place with a lot of work. There were many factories, many, many factories. When I went to Aguas Buenas to look for work, well, look they took me that same day! And there were some *americanos* that were at the front of the factory, and they would come up to me from behind when I began to see how I worked.

Giving insight into the economic, gender, colonial, and racial power relations during Puerto Rico’s industrialization, Teresa recalled that these *americanos* who ran the factory spoke very little Spanish but would communicate their satisfaction with her work by saying “*bien, bien*” (good, good).

When we began to discuss how Teresa and Antonio negotiate their livelihoods in older age, the politics around debt, pension insecurity, and the Fiscal Control Board guided the

conversation. Even though Teresa claimed to “not know about politics,” she gave an astute political analysis that helps to explain why it is increasingly difficult for older people to sustain dignified and financially secure livelihoods. At the time of our conversation in 2019, pensions were a topic of political debate. The Oversight Board had proposed the latest debt adjustment plan that included pension cuts for retired government workers earning over \$1,200/month. Teresa said that her husband’s pension had already been cut in the past, but they are able to get by with his reduced pension and social security because neither has serious medical conditions. Teresa worries about possible further cuts to Antonio’s pension, which she sees as unjustified because public workers had earned and paid into their pensions years before retirement. The recently announced increases in household water and electricity rates also weighed heavily on her mind, especially since those in power always seem to escape austerity. She affirmed that “the people are paying the debt” and expressed frustration with the overpaid members of the Oversight Board and “experts” like ex-Secretary of Education Julia Kelaher, who is now under FBI investigation for fraud and conspiracy and oversaw the María Montañez-Gómez School closure.

So, I say to myself, why do they want to take away from the poor when it’s paying for those who are up there and have *unos sueldos sobrenaturales* (supernatural salaries).

Beyond corruption, Teresa’s indignation about Puerto Rico’s public debt stems from her understanding of the temporality of debt. For example, she recognized that even though she will not live for many more years, the burden and effects of public debt will be felt in the lives of her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, thanks to “*los grandes*,” or those in power. She explained that while she cannot control the national politics, she can make sure personal debt is

not passed onto her children. Antonio and Teresa do not have life insurance, but “we have all the money saved for our burial...we do not want anyone to be stuck with debt,” she said.

Hurricane Maria unexpectedly brought a renewed sense of community amid this hardship. After the storms, Teresa and Antonio managed to purchase an electric generator so they could access their well water, which they shared with neighbors. Teresa found out about the CAM and the initial *comedor* serving hot food at the school through word of mouth and began to go every day with a neighbor and then with her husband.

They said that this [the *comedor*] was for the community. Many people came, many, many people. Everyone took their food, a lunch, and they [the organizers] delivered food to the bedridden...It’s a beautiful thing that these women took this place. This school should not have been closed, but imagine, with the government now and all this corruption...things are not going well. Before, the children and teachers were here and now us older people are here. What a benefit for us, because, you know, you’re inside the house...sometimes you’re in a bad mood because we are human! And I tell you, Sarah, since I’ve been coming here, I feel well.

“I feel well” meant that Teresa feels more “active” and “agile” since she began to participate in the *Centro Nuevo Amanecer*, as she explained. Teresa was attracted to the *Centro Nuevo Amanecer* because lately she’s had “nothing to do” and always loved arts and crafts. In the past, Teresa participated in a crafts group that met in the Residents’ Association or in neighbors’ homes, and she even took ceramic classes from a woman in the neighborhood and macramé (textile knotting) classes in Caguas. She enjoyed macramé so much that she began giving free classes in her home to women who would bring their own materials. But all these activities died down and Teresa had been feeling a kind of emptiness with her time as of late. In our conversation about the CAM, I found it curious that Teresa casually repeated that she had a “mess” (*reguero*) in her home, a detail she said with a smile and seemed to purposely emphasize.

I have a mess in my house because, ok, I have it! [laughs] But look, when it's time to wash the windows, I wash the windows, and when it's time to sweep and mop, I sweep and mop.

As a caregiver for her older husband, Teresa's morning routine before arriving to the CAM consists of showering, making Antonio coffee and oatmeal, leaving out a glass of water for him to take his pills, and bringing water to their animals. The couple raises chickens, roosters, and other small livestock in their backyard, which Teresa assumed care responsibilities for as Antonio became less mobile. Occasionally, Teresa and Antonio go into downtown Caguas to purchase groceries or do other errands. The only time she goes downtown alone by public transportation is when Antonio is in the hospital; otherwise, Antonio drives, and they go together because he does not want her travelling alone carrying cash. Teresa did not seem concerned about her safety, saying that she only carries the money that she needs for whatever purchase she's making, and if she were to be robbed, she would just hand over the money without a problem. I was curious about this discrepancy between how Teresa and Antonio approach her personal safety, so I asked her whether she drives, expecting her to say no. However, Teresa said, "yes I have a license. I got my license when I was twenty-three-years-old." Unexpectedly, this detail prompted Teresa to share personal insights that helped me to understand the significance of the "mess" in her house and the sense of autonomy Teresa exercises through her participation in the *Centro Nuevo Amanecer*.

It was 1963—the year President Kennedy was assassinated, Teresa recalled. She had been working in the bra factory Sylvie's in Aguas Buenas at the time, and a woman in Las Carolinas cared for her children while Teresa worked. To make the commute easier, Teresa decided to get a driver's license in hopes of eventually purchasing a car to drive herself to and from work. She knew her husband would not approve, so she planned to do the exams and

driving practice during her work hours so it would remain “hidden” from Antonio. She assumed that he would have less to argue about if she presented him with the official driver’s license at the end of the process rather than consulting him beforehand. Teresa purchased an exam preparation book but was not able to study in the house, fearing Antonio would see the book and divert her plan. The first time Teresa took the written exam in Río Piedras, she failed by five points because she had not studied. During the second attempt, she rapidly studied the practice book on the bus from Caguas to Río Piedras and again on a bench in front of the exam center. “I passed it [the exam] by a lot, with 95 percent, almost 100 percent, because I read the book,” she said. With the written exam passed, Teresa scheduled practice classes at a local school called Caguas Driving—she needed a total of five driving practice hours, but it took her a while since she scheduled only 30-minute sessions in order to limit the time she took off from work.

The day before her driving exam, Antonio’s boss from the Electric Authority visited for dinner and the two men ended up drinking heavily. The next day, Antonio went to work as usual and Teresa left at 10am for the factory and had scheduled her driving exam for 2pm. She passed the exam and returned home at 3:30pm, assuming that Antonio would arrive as usual at 4:30pm.

Well, I thought that he was going to arrive at 4:30pm, as usual...When I arrive, I said there are beans in the house, but I went into the store to buy a can of stewed beans. And I said, well now I’ll go, make a sofrito, throw it into the beans, and I’ll make some kind of meat and a bit of white rice and there, the food is ready. When I arrived, he was home. *Ay nena*, the fight that took place!...When he began to fight with me I said, look, fight all you want, but I was taking driving classes and I passed the exam...But he never let me drive.

Teresa explained that Antonio suspected she was not in the house when she was supposed to be because she was having an extramarital affair, which would be an affront to his male honor.

Antonio also feared that if she got a car, Teresa could follow him wherever he goes “because he was not easy,” she said, alluding to possible extra-marital relations *he* wanted to keep from *her*.

Beyond curtailing her mobility, this incident redefined her relationship to work and the domestic sphere.

So, I had to quit work...he did not let me work anymore. Because if I worked, I could save up money and buy myself a car. I stayed at home with my children, caring for my children who were in school when they arrived home with my mother and father.

Antonio was one of those men “they call *machistas*,” Teresa commented as she reflected on the changing gendered dynamics of relationships over time; “now everyone is *free*, everyone gets their license when they are young” (my emphasis). Unfortunately, the driver’s license was not the only instance where Teresa’s personal autonomy was constrained. Antonio did not allow Teresa to take nursing or hair styling courses (refusing to drive her to the nursing courses and arguing that starting hair styling services in the home would attract men). She described not even being allowed to be the maid-of-honor in her friend’s wedding, after buying the dress that she ended up giving to another woman to fulfill the role.

I detail these life experiences because they contextualize the significance of the CAM for Teresa and her gendered subjectivity in relation to a masculinity where women figure as untrustworthy and unruly. Her experience echoes similar historical patterns of patriarchal gender norms that scholars have documented among rural working-class women in Puerto Rico. For instance, Ida Susser’s (1992) study of the changing political role of women in local health and environmental struggles in Yabucoa, Puerto Rico during the 1970s and 1980s highlights stark gender differences in mobility. She observes that even though most women in her study knew how to drive, men had control over the family car and were in charge of most the errands while women were expected to coordinate rides from their husbands or other friends. Furthermore, the

gendered division of labor placed an expectation on women to manage housework and childcare if they were not working elsewhere for a wage.

Teresa reflected on how in the past, she always had to plan her activities and mobility (the ceramic or macramé classes, for example) around Antonio's work schedule and her children's school schedule.

Now I am free...This is my time...But now I am calmer, I come here, I cook, I clean, and when I arrive home, I do whatever I feel like... Whatever I don't want to do, I don't do. In my house there is a mess (*un reguero*), I've already told you! In my house there's a lot of mess, but I don't mind.

Participating in the CAM—in the acupuncture clinic that helps her sleep and in the activities with her peers at the *Centro Nuevo Amanecer*—provides Teresa with a sense of personal autonomy that she had limited access to for much of her adult life because of the gendered, class, and patriarchal constraints within her marriage and society. In this sense, her integration with the CAM subverts some of the expectations of gendered domesticity that had shaped her life and curtailed certain experiences. Teresa in essence asserts a “right to a *reguero*” (a right to a mess) as a critical commentary on gender and domesticity that is facilitated by her experience at the CAM, even though she does not articulate it in these terms. Personal autonomy here refers to Teresa's ability decide what to do with her time, to participate in a renewed space for public care where elderly residents can express agency and creativity, and to have a mess in her house if she pleases.

### *Gender and the Geographies of Self-Reliance: Food as the “Key” of Care Relations*

Food preparation, distribution, and consumption figure centrally in the gendered mobilization of infrastructures of care. I draw on Ashanté Reese's framework of “geographies of



self-reliance” (Reese 2020) to discuss how mutual aid and care are brokered through food and intimate spatial knowledge in Las Carolinas. In her book on Black urban food justice in Washington D.C., Reese theorizes “geographies of self-reliance” to draw attention to “Black agency, particularly considering how this agency becomes spatialized within structural constraints of food inequities” (Reese 2020:8). I adopt Reese’s attention to place-making practices organized around self and community wellbeing to suggest that food and the social practices organized around it shaped *autogestión* (autonomous organizing), rescue, a re-valuation of social reproductive labor, and community repair in Las Carolinas.

The *comedor* was undoubtedly the most significant and frequented space in the CAM. Beyond the practical functions of cooking, the *comedor* served as a space for socialization, relation-building, and *desahogo* (letting off steam, or venting) (Williams-Forson 2006). Scholars have pointed to the foundational leadership and highly visible role of women in community kitchens, care work, and mutual aid formations across Puerto Rico (Lloréns and Santiago 2018; Vélez-Vélez and Villarrubia-Mendoza 2018). Considering the association between gender norms and class in Puerto Rico, I argue that these spaces lend themselves to a politicization, collectivization, and re-valuation of social reproductive labor, disproportionately performed by women and feminized people. Here I am referring to “labors that are spread out over an expanded social terrain and achieve new social prestige, embodied in feminized forms of leadership that refuse to be recognized in monetary terms or in terms of territorial authority” (Cavallero and Gago 2020). In this case, while women organizers at the CAM Las Carolinas are not necessarily subverting traditional gender roles of care work, they *are* reshaping the boundaries of domestic social reproductive labor in the public sphere of the rescued school. Working-class women at the CAM “challenge the cultural prescription that women should

remain in the home and leave civic and public duties only to men...the notion of ‘home’ extends to the community” (Lloréns and Santiago 2018, 401). This politicization and collectivization of the domestic through social relations of care turn “the domestic into an open space on the street” (Cavallero and Gago 2020) and insert women-led mutual aid formations within feminist demands and concerns.

The women I came to know at the CAM do not necessarily consider themselves feminists or situate their project within conventional feminist politics. An intersectional analysis that considers the local articulations of feminist politics in Puerto Rico may be helpful to understanding why. For example, feminist activist political expression in Puerto Rico tends to be centered in the San Juan metro area, which is inaccessible due to the gendered mobility constraints I have alluded to in this chapter. Secondly, some women may not identify with popular feminist vocabularies mobilized by college-educated activists in part because of their working-class experience and religious affiliations. In this sense, my use of “feminist demands and concerns” is my own analytical category because I see this particular mutual aid arrangement as centering social reproductive issues, women’s voices and leadership, embodied experience, and forms of autonomy.

During the CAM’s initial phase immediately after Hurricane Maria, residents gathered in the *comedor* for hot meals that were essential to sustaining families because Las Carolinas did not fully return to the power grid until March 2018. Except for some residents like Teresa who acquired gas-powered generators and shared power temporarily with neighbors, most residents were unable to use their kitchen appliances. Moreover, conventional grocery stores were often short on non-perishable supplies or engaged in price gouging. The hearty meals at the CAM *comedor* provided an alternative to the sugar and salt-laden foods that were offered through state

disaster relief, which did not even meet federal nutritional guidelines (Colón-Ramos et al. 2019).

The *comedor* became a central communications hub. As Adriana says:

We were meeting together, and everyone spoke about their needs, how they were getting along...we spoke about all of this. It was a mode of venting, as they say. Well, psychologically we were helping each other. We were transforming a situation in search of positive things to be able to survive what we were afflicted with. We were not going to stay quiet, we got moving.

Place-making strategies and the CAM's identity were often mediated by food. For example, women revered and desired to participate in the daily cooking and food preparation rituals, often reserved for the oldest women thought to have the best and most tested experience preparing large pots of rice, beans, and meats. CAM leaders drew from the agricultural knowledge of elderly participants and popular agroecology to cultivate garden spaces with squash, peas, beans, *plátanos*, lettuce, and herbs. Garden spaces surrounding the *comedor* are central to the CAM's future-oriented vision of environmental stewardship to produce the food it prepares, distributes, and consumes and to establish a community garden. The importance of carving out spaces of autonomous, local food production is not lost on Puerto Ricans who experienced food scarcity from import backlogs after Hurricane Maria. Estimates suggest that over eighty percent of Puerto Rico's food supply is imported—seventy percent from U.S. markets—a statistic that is both indicative of the colonial relation and well above import numbers for independent Caribbean nations like Jamaica, Dominican Republic, and Cuba (Suárez 2018).

The CAM's second phase of home meal delivery entailed both food sharing and accompaniment. Food thus became a “key to discovering people's needs,” as Adriana explained, or rather, discovering the long-standing needs that the hurricanes revealed. Visiting residents in their homes gave insight into how people lived, with whom they lived, how they were cared for,

and what their ongoing needs were. Two delivery routes that served approximately sixty individual residents three times per week were organized based on leaders' intimate knowledge of spatial inequality in the community and the new knowledge they acquired about residents' needs and conditions from their survey assessments. We might think about these lunch routes as central to the "geographies of self-reliance" and collectivized social reproductive labor that women enacted as part of their praxis of rescue and community repair. For example, the delivery routes included homes in marginalized sectors at a distance from the center of activity and services: homes on the steepest hills without water connection, homes across the bridge that flooded where residents remained "*incomunicado*" (out of reach) for some time after Hurricane Maria, residents in the marginalized section of *El Fanguito* who constantly experienced flooding and wastewater contamination, and elderly and/or disabled residents and their care givers for whom cooking was often a challenge. Food distribution routes also served as communication networks to share news about who was in the hospital or how a family member was recovering; to complain about local grievances such as the *guagua pública* (public van) never showing up; or to advertise local events such as Bingo and CAM fundraisers. Even the medium of food packaging relied upon understanding recipients' needs—Styrofoam containers were for those who were handicapped or otherwise would have trouble cleaning, and reusable Tupperware containers were used for recipients who would use, clean, and return them during food distribution in 2018. The driver memorized this packaging system and along the lunch route she would instruct the assistant (either myself or one of the other women leaders) to pull out a "bowl" or "Tupper" based on our stop.

The lunch routes were constant spaces of negotiation because they relied on a certain logic of mobility that was not guaranteed. For example, on any given day, only about two to

three of the women leaders brought their own cars to the CAM. Others did not drive or carpoled with neighbors to get to the school. As mothers, grandmothers, and wives, women had to negotiate diverse responsibilities with the lunch routes as best as possible, and this at times meant having to skip a day if the driver was caring for a sick child or had other personal commitments to attend to. To distribute the labor, a Las Carolinas resident in his sixties named Joaquín managed one of the driving routes. Joaquín has struggled with addiction, and he often affirmed that his commitment to drive the lunch route three times per week helped curb his addiction temporarily by giving a sense of purpose and routine. Every morning Joaquín arrived around 11am to fill up the heavy water cooler in the *comedor* and take his tray of about twenty lunches for delivery, plus extra for himself and his mother. Joaquín was both a distributor and recipient of care in this sense.

In these “geographies of self-reliance,” affective features such as accompaniment confront the collective experience of abandonment. As Adriana illuminates:

Through bringing food to these people, because thank God everyone has their things, but sometimes what they are given does not last for the week, so we help in this way. But the plate of food was also to know, find out, and to accompany. I remember that I went up there on a hill (pointing upwards), and the woman gave me a hug and did not want to let me go! And she lives alone. The daughter lives next door, but she did not want to let me go, she wanted us to stay. Because there are so many people, like we just said, older, who want company. Upon seeing us (the women delivering the lunches), there are people that wait for us Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, they wait for us!... If I arrive to a house and the person speaks to me, that is, they are alone. Well, then I cannot say ‘I’m leaving because I have to deliver another lunch.’ No. So I like to listen to them...Because people who are alone appreciate when someone accompanies them.

Here, care and accompaniment are brokered through food, intentional presence, and listening during home visits. I assisted with the lunch routes and residents and/or their caregivers would often want to talk, gossip, and request more visits. Understanding the interplay of food and care

practices through this lens defies conventional media representations of mutual aid as survivalism as discussed above and expands our understanding of food preparation, distribution, and consumption as a relational and affective process. Anthropologist Hanna Garth makes a similar point in her ethnography of Cubans' pursuit of a decent meal and the politics of food "adequacy," which encompasses an ethical and socio-cultural imperative rather than solely fulfilling nutritional needs. She contends that food is a locus of community and self-care, an "intimate performance" where "mealtime represents a space of consistency, a space where care for the self and loved ones is cultivated" (Garth 2020, 7). Rather than a means to fight local hunger or a charitable act, food distribution mobilizes a relational bridge that is central to the CAM's infrastructures of care.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, food serves as a means of exchange and relationship preservation. The CAM consistently prepares lunch for people who provided services such as solar panel or lawn maintenance, as well as for Caguas donor businesses such as the storage facility and supermarket.

### **Charitable Care**

A few days before the first anniversary of Hurricane Maria (2018), I listened to enthusiastic voice messages from Rosa in the CAM Las Carolinas WhatsApp chat. A Christian charitable 501(c)3 organization called Care Ministries based in the state of Virginia had selected

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<sup>20</sup> In many ways, food served as a relational bridge between me and the people I came to know. As a white, middle-class North American who maintains a vegan diet, meal preparation and sharing were simultaneously illuminating and challenging in a context where various structural forces shape why meat, starches, and high-sugar beverages are frequently consumed and why I have access to a vegan products. Meals were thus spaces of negotiation where I often found myself in situations of politely rejecting certain meals and feeling conflicted about that decision due to the social importance of and implicit power dynamics around accepting, rejecting, or sharing a meal. One of the ways I navigated this was by preparing foods to share and giving cooking workshops at the CAM. One workshop demonstrated the preparation of raw chocolate-chia seed-peanut butter balls, which were a particular favorite at the CAM. I am very grateful to them for making as many lunch adjustments as possible when I was there, including omitting chicken bouillon cubes in the rice and pork in the beans, and of course for our creative experimentations with soy products.

Las Carolinas as one of its two “adopted” communities in Puerto Rico.<sup>21</sup> According to communications with Care Ministries, the objective of the initiative was to “inject money” into the “adopted communities” and plan a visit to distribute material donations. Care Ministries selected Las Carolinas after reviewing a proposal and list of priority materials the CAM submitted to them to advance their goal of establishing a *refugio* (emergency shelter) in the occupied María Montañez Gómez School. The plan was to activate the *refugio* as a means of locally directed disaster preparation and mitigation. The list of requested supplies sent to Care Ministries included cots and bedding, sleeping bags, solar powered lamps, flashlights and fans, water purification tools, portable bathing devices, towels, and first aid supplies. Organizers’ vision was for a community-run shelter that would likely not be counted in government’s list of shelters, but the experience of Hurricane Maria taught residents that waiting for the state was not an option for matters of life and death. However, the hopeful expectations placed on external charitable organizations also fell short. Even though Las Carolinas was one of the Care Ministries’ “adopted communities,” most of the requested supplies never arrived.

Care Ministries was founded in 1997 as a gospel ministry and Christian charitable service organization. They organized a ministry project in Puerto Rico in the wake of Hurricane Maria to “adopt” two communities—Las Carolinas and a community in Naguabo, a municipality on the eastern coast. One of the CAM’s academic collaborators affiliated with medical brigades referred Care Ministries to the CAM Las Carolinas, under the impression that they were coming to do what they had stated—to bring donated materials, visit a few households to personally deliver donations, and leave the organization with significant gift certificates to Home Depot and Walmart. CAM organizers were excited about the upcoming visit. They saw it as part of the

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<sup>21</sup> Care Ministries is a pseudonym.

multiple “*bendiciones*” (blessings) for the CAM around the one-year anniversary of Hurricane Maria. For example, the *Red de Apoyo Mutuo* (Mutual Aid Network) had recently consolidated and created a webpage featuring all the CAMs around the archipelago.<sup>22</sup> A women’s organization in California learned about the CAM Las Carolinas from this website, contacted the organizers, and made a \$500 donation. Furthermore, Adriana was featured in two short *Telemundo* news clips about Hurricane Maria, and the CAM Las Carolinas was featured prominently in the acclaimed documentary *Después de María: Las Dos Orillas* (2018), which premiered on September 20, 2018. The new media attention, while at times frustrating, as with the case of the “*SWAT de hambre*” article, marked a milestone for the CAM Las Carolinas because its project and community were gaining a new visibility. Organizers expected the Care Ministries visit to be an opportunity to share their project, benefit from the material donations, and access a new U.S. stateside audience.

However, this was not an ordinary visit. The Care Ministries team requested that CAM organizers meet them at the San Juan airport on Wednesday, September 19, to pick up four suitcases filled with donations, even though the group was traveling to the CAM two days later. The CAM leaders organized two cars to meet Care Ministries at the airport, a minimum 45-minute drive without traffic. On Friday, September 21, I got to the CAM early because Care Ministries was scheduled to arrive at 8:30am and the women were preparing a special lunch for

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<sup>22</sup> The *Red de Apoyo Mutuo* (RAM) was officially launched on September 20, 2018 as a communication, organizing, and solidarity network for what at the time were fourteen *Centros de Apoyo Mutuo* and affiliated projects of *autogestión comunitaria* that shared similar principles of *apoyo mutuo*. The RAM website highlighted each project, and the network organized a few exchange retreats during 2018 and 2019. While the CAM Las Carolinas was part of the RAM, organizers had limited participation in the RAM activities, often because women focused on their other care obligations during the evenings and weekends when these events were scheduled, or had difficulties securing transportation to the retreats. The RAM cut back on their collective activities in 2019. In late 2020, a few of the CAMs created a separate initiative called the *Red Regional de Apoyo Mutuo* (RRAM-Regional Mutual Aid Network), which centers projects in rural Puerto Rico. I currently collaborate with the RRAM in an advisory capacity.



their guests. In the *Centro Nuevo Amanecer*, painted sculptures, ceramics, cardboard decorations, and paper flower arrangements were on display and participants were listening to a social worker's talk about embracing "*la tercera edad*"<sup>23</sup> (the third age, or "golden years" generally marked after age 65), a workshop series that the Residents' Association coordinated for the CAM through the municipality. In the *comedor*, all the volunteers had their new navy blue "CAM Las Carolinas Voluntariado" t-shirts on, which I was also asked to wear. The four suitcases the women had picked up at the airport were placed in the back of the *comedor* unopened. Each one had a tag that said, "Experience Imagine Ministry-CAGUAS." A special meal of chicken, bean salad, fruit salad, *majado* (mashed mixed root vegetables with butter or olive oil), and bread was being prepared. The usual pot of coffee was ready, and a jug of freshly prepared coconut horchata was being cooled. The *comedor* felt fuller with the new restaurant-style red chairs and long rectangular tables that a Caguas wholesale warehouse had donated the previous day. Rosa mentioned to me that some of the women stayed at the *comedor* until 6pm last night cleaning off the tables and chairs because they were filled with dirt and gum. By 11am everything was getting cold, so we ate lunch, still waiting for Care Ministries to arrive. I ate the *majado*, fruit, and bean salad on the new colorful paper dishware the CAM purchased for the guests. Everyone used metal utensils, which replaced the usual plastics for special occasions.

At 11:30am, three hours past the stated arrival time, eight Care Ministries volunteers arrived in three large SUVs. The ministry volunteers were African American adults who live in the Washington D.C.-Virginia area, and they were accompanied by a Puerto Rican interpreter. The CAM leaders had asked me to help with interpretation during the visit because they did not know Care Ministries was bringing an interpreter. The group had come from Naguabo, where

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<sup>23</sup> "The third age" refers to those seventy-five and older.

their second “adopted” community was located. One of the Care Ministries volunteers asked if I was on a “mission,” and I explained my role as an anthropologist who collaborates with the CAM. After brief introductions, the volunteers got right to unloading donated materials into the storage classroom. Jessica, the group’s leader and co-founder of Care Ministries, who was referred to as the “Apostle,” directed a very specific unpacking and placement of the donated materials to set up their photos without CAM leaders’ input. In the storage room, the Care Ministries team instructed us to pack about thirty yellow plastic bags that said “Experience Imagine. With God all things are possible.” Each bag was filled with individual personal hygiene products that Care Ministries brought in cardboard boxes, including cloth towels, toothpaste, dental floss, a pen, and a bookmark with a religious phrase written in English and the Care Ministries logo. Alongside the yellow donation bags, Care Ministries volunteers stacked boxes of pillows and household cleaning supplies, randomly taking out single bottles of Lysol, Clorox, or air fresheners to add to some of the yellow bags. These religious messages were not necessarily overbearing for CAM participants. Las Carolinas has two Catholic churches and one Baptist church. Older women regularly attended these church services, and most participants grew up with some religious affiliation. Whenever the topic of religious identity came up, I found that most women consider themselves a believer of some sorts, but that they did not strongly identify with religious dogma or practices.

After the storage room was set for the photo op, Care Ministries volunteers brought pillows, boxes of household cleaning products, and one green garden hose into the *comedor* and set them on the back table. Everyone took a break for lunch and Miguel, the President of the Residents’ Association, talked to Jessica about Las Carolinas, the school closure and the local impacts of the economic crisis. Miguel spoke a bit of English and I helped to interpret. After

lunch, Jessica pulled me aside and said she wanted to “unpack” the suitcases and place the contents next to the other donations on the back table. This request seemed unusual considering that the CAM would have to pack up the suitcases again by the end of the day and because it was almost 1:30pm. It did not seem to register with Care Ministries that the four home visits they wanted to do were also lunch deliveries and that the CAM organizers had other obligations to attend to. The suitcases contained bags of new clothes divided by size, individually wrapped Ziploc bags with tuna cans and other non-perishable food items, small first aid packets, and more cleaning supplies and pillows. Jessica explained to me that she wanted the CAM leaders to have the first selection of the donations and that the rest should be distributed. She was very direct about why she requested this unpacking ritual, explaining that the Care Ministries donors wanted to “see everything laid out, not in bags.”

The photo op began right after everything was laid out on display. Jessica requested photos of both groups behind the donations table, then another with the CAM leaders throwing their hands up “praising God,” incorporating CAM leaders into their staged propaganda. One of the Care Ministries volunteers began a Facebook Live (without permission) to capture the women “in action” with the donations. This spectacle highlights how charitable care may be negotiated through the subordination of care receivers via a performance of deference. He approached me to “ask a few questions” about the organization and introduced me incorrectly as “one of the leaders” in the video. I said a few words about the CAM Las Carolinas but was getting very uncomfortable at this point. By 2pm, Care Ministries was ready to visit the four households, and it became clear that these visits were not just to drop off lunch and the yellow bags, as we thought, but to “see the community and pray,” as Jessica clarified. Six Care

Ministries volunteers took two SUVs and I rode in Rosa's car with Miguel, Carina, and Carina's daughter. CAM leaders had selected four homes to visit with Care Ministries.

The first home was that of the sisters featured in the *El Nuevo Día* article I discuss at the beginning of this chapter. The younger sister, Maria was waiting for the visit. The Care Ministries volunteers were visibly disturbed by the deteriorating condition of the sisters' home, the pools of standing water in front of the house, and the stray cats in the driveway. They graciously introduced themselves and presented Maria with a few yellow donation bags, but it seemed Maria was most interested in the lunch delivery, which arrived much later than usual. When Jessica entered, a younger Care Ministries volunteer poured oil over her hands and we all gathered close to Maria. Jessica asked me to translate her words. She first asked if Maria believes in God, then knelt down on the concrete floor and began to pray over Maria, saying that the "demons had no place in Maria's body" and that they were there to "heal her." Jessica touched Maria's partial leg and repeated that "we have faith that Maria will walk again." Jessica began speaking in tongues, and another Care Ministries volunteer did the same with Maria's sister. At that point I had to step away from the translation. Even though Maria was participating in the prayer and seemed content to receive a visit, I did not want to translate the Care Ministry message that framed the sisters' physical and mental ailments as evidence of the demons living in their bodies that could be expelled through prayer. All the Care Ministries volunteers were dramatically crying by the end of the visit.

Since it was getting late, the CAM decided to bring Care Ministries to only one other home. I felt conflicted about my participation in these visits but a bit relieved when in the car, Rosa began to joke about how it is impossible to translate speaking in tongues and how uncomfortable the situation must have been for Miguel and me, since Rosa and Carina knew

neither of us identifies as religious. However, they all seemed more concerned about how late it was getting rather than discussing what had just taken place. The women joked about how silly the impractical large SUVs looked descending the steep, narrow, and uneven hills of Las Carolinas. A few times, Rosa's car had to wait at the bottom of a hill for the SUVs to make it down very slowly.

A similar situation ensued at the next stop, where Jessica poured oil over her hands and prayed over Ingrid's bedridden mother. We got back to the CAM around 3pm when the auriculotherapy clinic was wrapping up. The two Care Ministries volunteers who had remained at the school had received acupuncture and were chatting and laughing with the CAM organizers who stayed behind. The visit concluded with a large circle in the *comedor* where the group prayed and sang a couple of songs. By then, Rosa was late to pick up her son, whom she joked was "wandering around" Bairoa. Carina was getting multiple calls from her husband and needed to get home to prepare dinner. We had to figure out what to do with all the pillows, tuna cans, and clothing laid out on display. I helped organize the donations while CAM leaders took what they wanted, and residents came to the *comedor* after auriculotherapy to take donation bags. Before leaving, I took a pillow and a sports t-shirt. These materials were not what the CAM necessarily needed or expected from this visit.

I had trouble processing this whole experience, which on the one hand seemed to contradict the CAM's vision of *apoyo mutuo*, but on the other hand at first seemed relatively well-received among CAM leaders and participants. I felt unsettled by my own participation in the visit as an interpreter and considered my own complicity in what I understood as an incredibly problematic exchange that capitalized on a certain portrayal of suffering and religious redemption. The missionaries also undermined CAM leaders' time and decision making after

misleading them about what the visit entailed. I knew CAM organizers understood the visit distinctly in part due to their religious identities, their excitement about the CAM's new visibility, and their class experience that shaped why the community was "adopted" for this mission in the first place. Furthermore, Care Ministries challenged my own racial-colonial imaginary of who engages in the stereotypical "white savior" patterns all too common in post-disaster zones and more broadly across Latin America and the Caribbean.

The mission trip failed to meet even the CAM's most basic expectation of helping them to secure supplies for the *refugio*. Ultimately, Care Ministries did not follow up with the CAM Las Carolinas about the promised gift cards to Home Depot and Walmart. While some items such as the towels, pillows, and first aid kits were part of the requested items for the *refugio*, they were minor compared to the more expensive supplies needed. The other donated materials were disconnected from local reality and seemed instead to fit Care Ministries' conception of charitable care for a disaster zone—individually packaged personal hygiene products and non-perishable foods, cleaning supplies, and clothing.

The following Monday I arrived at the CAM before the vegetables for the soup lunch were placed in the pot—a sign that I was earlier than usual. The empty suitcases and piles of donated clothing had been left out over the weekend. Organizers decided that whatever clothing was not donated to residents would be added to the CAM bazaar. I wanted to have a conversation with the women about the Care Ministries visit to ask how they were feeling about it and to share with them some of my own discomfort with my role as interpreter. I joined Adriana, Rosa, and Carina at the table as they reviewed the week's menu and brainstormed for a Bingo event the CAM was organizing with the Residents' Association the following month. The Care Ministries visit came up in conversation and to my surprise, Rosa expressed frustration about their late

arrival and the volunteers' concern with “*orando pa' aquí y pa' allá*” (praying from here to there) rather than learning about the CAM project and its protagonists. The group joked that now they had to find people to take all the donated t-shirts, pillows, and tuna cans. The women expressed disillusion that Care Ministries did not mention anything about the more substantial Home Depot or Walmart gift cards they originally promised. It was contradictory, Adriana asserted, that Care Ministries verified before their visit that the CAM was not a religious or politically affiliated organization while they came with a clear religious mission.

Ultimately though, this manifestation of performative charitable care brought into relief the CAM's practice of mutual aid. Infrastructures of care do not rely on the spectacle of the photo-ready suffering subject and the individualization of aid represented by the Ziploc bags filled with single tuna cans and dental floss. Instead, the CAM expected Care Ministries to support their project for a community *refugio*. This reflection prompted CAM organizers to have a broader discussion of ways they could assert more direction and set limits for future external organization visits. The issue was not a total rejection of religious expression or all charitable forms of care in the future, but rather a recognition of the need to chart ways to assert more autonomy in the process by setting limits on photo or video documentation and preserving boundaries around their time.

## **Conclusion**

Anthropologists have shown how infrastructure mediates people's experience with the state, nation-building technologies, and racial-colonial difference (Bear 2007; Collier 2011; Harvey and Knox 2015; von Schnitzler 2016). What I call mutual aid infrastructures of care have emerged and persisted in Puerto Rico's milieu marked by the palpable collapse of social and

physical infrastructures leading up to and after the 2017 hurricanes. Infrastructure is thus a key political terrain and register for both Puerto Ricans' failed expectations of the state (territorial and federal) in the wake of disaster and the organization of their own survival and life-affirming practices that extended beyond the emergency. Public infrastructures from the highways, toll systems, airports, and utilities to public education, social security, healthcare, and the pension system are in a process of dismantling through debt capture. The abject infrastructural collapse and dehumanization of survivors after Hurricane Maria represented a pivotal moment in this process of decay where certain long-held expectations of Puerto Ricans' position as colonial subjects vis-à-vis the United States came into question (Ficek 2018).<sup>24</sup> What emerged through grassroots mutual aid organizing and mobilizations of care echoes what AbdouMaliq Simone calls "people as infrastructure." Simone extends the notion of infrastructure to people's activities in marginalized urban areas of Johannesburg, South Africa to show how "the combination of objects, spaces, persons, and practices" become an infrastructure, or "a platform providing for and reproducing life" in a context of public neglect (Simone 2004, 408). Survivors of Hurricane Maria used diverse strategies to satisfy basic needs, create provisional infrastructures, and longer-term visions and practices of recovery. My attention to how the CAM Las Carolinas mobilized these longer-term visions and practices expands notions of mutual aid as a temporary survival mechanism or good-will volunteerism. The extended temporality further helps to distinguish this mutual aid arrangement from performative charitable care.

Residents of Las Carolinas have become accustomed to living with infrastructural disruption, as evidenced by Ingrid's casual assertion that she had to shore up the household water

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<sup>24</sup> Ficek examines infrastructures as nation-building technologies and material expressions of colonial state power. She argues that U.S.-led modernizing infrastructures in Puerto Rico fostered a sense of U.S. national inclusion since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century that reached a breaking point after Hurricane Maria (2018,104).



supply in preparation for the upcoming outage.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, we are reminded that infrastructure often becomes most visible when it fails and maintains an invisibility during “normal operation” (Amin 2014; Larkin 2013). However, throughout much of Puerto Rico, infrastructure never becomes fully “invisible” because access and operation are not guaranteed, even after government officials marked widespread post-disaster service “restoration” in 2018. In my San Juan rental apartment, I kept gallons of water in the laundry room—one set for drinking and one for washing—or filled the bathtub if given notice to prepare for water and power outages that I experienced as frequent nuisances rather than potentially life-threatening situations. At times I was not able to shower when I wanted to, and I had to master flushing the toilet with fast-moving bucket water. Utility outages were common in San Juan, but for the most part did not last more than half a day once conditions stabilized in 2019. On the other hand, for Ingrid, a planned outage meant preparing for her mother’s care without running water, in a semi-rural area where the outage could last for an indefinite amount of time, sometimes a full day or more. It is in this context of collapse, uneven decay, and colonial difference that alternative infrastructures of care become all the more crucial and life sustaining.<sup>26</sup>

The task of caring for those in need after a tragedy produces multiple opportunities for capitalizing on a disaster, especially where governmental gaps left in the recovery landscape lend themselves to private actors. Examining specific arrangements of care throws into relief what distinguishes mutual aid infrastructures of care. As the Care Ministries example demonstrates, charitable care may rely on an economy of suffering and performance where volunteers and donors are motivated by their affective response to images and stories of survivors and racial-

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<sup>25</sup> On the complexity of personal resignation in the face of abandonment, see Torres Gotoy (2019).

<sup>26</sup> Importantly, Yarimar Bonilla (2020) argues that the “wait of disaster” manifest in infrastructural collapse is not an exceptional event, but rather part of the logics of racialized disposability at work.

colonial “others” in need circulating from Puerto Rico to the continental U.S. via staged fund-raising propaganda, such as the photo op described above.<sup>27</sup> Here I take inspiration from Vincanne Adams’s (2013) concept of “affective surplus of suffering,” which she argues fueled charity and faith-based organizations’ participation in Hurricane Katrina relief work and opened new spaces for capital investment. The construction of the suffering disaster subject circulates back through spectacular photo ops and Facebook Live videos to reproduce charitable modes of care, attract donations to the organization, and confer virtue on charitable donors and volunteers who, in the case of Care Ministries, saw their role in the “adopted” communities as a bridge to religious redemption.

Charitable care upholds a survivalist response to exceptional conditions, echoing the media trope described at the beginning of this chapter with the “*SWAT de hambre*” article. Similar to the satisfaction detached readers might experience from a news article of heroic women’s charitable acts, Care Ministries volunteers and their donors extract affective virtue and potential monetary value through photographs of suffering subjects and joyful donation recipients. The Care Ministries visit included an affective experience and exchange of material goods, but it departs from mutual aid infrastructures of care in its top-down approach that clearly delimits redemptive givers from suffering receivers of care. I have tried to show how the CAM Las Carolinas responds to locally determined material and immaterial needs by mobilizing infrastructures of care through reciprocity, spatial and socio-material elements (the rescued school as social hub, meal deliveries), accompaniment, exchange, and tools of assessment (surveys). These infrastructures point to a reimagining of disaster recovery through relations that

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<sup>27</sup> Ana Elena Puga (2016) writes about the “political economy of suffering” through fictional and non-fictional portrayals of migrant suffering across national borders. She argues that the commodification and circulation of “migrant melodrama” has become a necessary step for migrant inclusion and belonging among human rights organizations and policy makers alike.

go beyond survivalism and help to center questions of care in broader discussions about disaster recovery and repair.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Towards a Reckoning

*Brindo porque con lo chinde lo que se ha investigado  
un macabro complot ha vulcanizado  
entre pandilleros, inversionistas, intermediarios  
y granujas a granel  
que emitieron bonos barrigones imposibles de saldar  
embutiendo mano y mentira por debajo de la verdad  
y creando un monstruo peludo en esta Isla tropical  
una criatura que sofoca de deuda odiosa y abominable...  
Qué viva, viva y viva  
la auditoria del pueblo, ¡la Auditoria Ya!*  
-Excerpt from the poem “*Brindis Auditoría*” by Eric Landrón<sup>1</sup>

The lived effects of public debt and bankruptcy trace unevenly through people’s daily lives in conspicuous and discreet ways.<sup>2</sup> As I have shown throughout this study, systematic processes of degradation and dispossession reveal the coloniality of debt and the production of social vulnerability to climate disruption. These processes laid the groundwork for a social disaster, colonial-neoliberal disaster governance, and new forms of political and grassroots organizing following Hurricane Maria. Using the storm as a methodological lens of tracing, I have documented how the politics of debt manifest across scale from spheres of national governance and federal bankruptcy to collective organizing and lived experience—through fiscal discipline and austerity, the making of Hurricane Maria as an unnatural disaster, persistent infrastructural disruption, social reproduction, and assaults on public education (slow disinvestment, reform, and closure).

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<sup>1</sup> This poem was written and performed by artist and *Frente* activist Eric Landrón for a 2018 *Bohemia* event for the citizen debt audit. Translation: I toast because with the little bit of what has been investigated / a macabre plot has vulcanized / among gang members, investors, intermediaries / and rogues in bulk / that issued paunchy bonds impossible to pay off / sticking their hands and lies beneath the truth / and creating a hairy monster on this tropical Island / a creature that suffocates from odious and abominable debt... / Long live, live and live / the people’s audit, Audit Now!

<sup>2</sup> Portions of this chapter have been published in Molinari, Sarah. 2019. “Anti-Debt Futures after #RickyRenuncia.” *Society and Space*, The Decolonial Geographies of Puerto Rico’s 2019 Summer Protests: A Forum.

Integrating new people and sources around an event that ties together multiple threads of this study, this chapter turns back to the *Verano Boricua* and examines the coalition movement calling for a citizen audit of Puerto Rico's debt led by the *Frente Ciudadano por la Auditoría de la Deuda* (Citizen Front for the Debt Audit, or *Frente*). I discuss the emergence and key debates within Puerto Rico's citizen audit movement in relation to internationalist anti-debt vocabularies and demands. I then analyze how people engaged with new questions and understandings about debt in the prefigurative deliberation spaces that emerged after the summer mobilizations. I argue that the audit is a contested tactic and process that, according to some activist accounts, gestures towards a reckoning or radical accountability (*rendición de cuentas*).

### ***¿Qué hacemos con la deuda? (What do we do with the Debt?): #RickyRenuncia and the Mobilization of Debt Incredulity***

Walking on Calle Fortaleza in Old San Juan away from the barricades, crowds dispersed, and protest chants faded into group conversations shortly after 5pm on August 2, 2019, when Governor Rosselló officially resigned. I passed an improvised recycling wagon collecting plastics and cans and chefs cutting up a celebratory whole *lechón* (traditional roasted pig) for famished demonstrators on the sidewalk. A few blocks away, people lined up to write messages on three white wooden mobile panels that each contained a written provocation: “*¿Ahora qué? (What now?) ¿Y la Junta? (And the Fiscal Control Board?) and ¿Qué hacemos con la deuda?*” (What do we do with the debt?).<sup>3</sup> These panels represented a material archive unfolding in real time and demonstrated that the demands of the summer mobilizations calling

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<sup>3</sup> The panels were part of photographer José Jiménez-Tirado's project, “*La revolución más corta: El arte de protestar*” (The Shortest Revolution: The Art of Protest).



conventional morality of debt and its colonial-capitalist logics that position Puerto Ricans as debtors in a debt-addicted non-sovereign Caribbean archipelago.

The movement to audit the debt has played a central role in situating Puerto Rico's debt struggles within internationalist conversations about debt cancellation and reparations. The anticipatory potential of the audit is captured in a meme circulating during the summer mobilizations that says, "if this [forcing Rosselló's resignation] is with a chat, imagine if they audit the debt." In other words, just as the Telegram chat revealed a troubling story of the Rosselló administration and its crass disdain for Puerto Rican lives, the audit might reveal a story of indebtedness that the public has the right to know and act upon.



Figure 26 - Meme circulating on social media during the summer mobilizations. Source unknown.

Activists, led by the *Frente* coalition, had been mobilizing claims around public debt incredulity and calling for a citizen audit since Rosselló dismantled the public audit Commission in 2016. Puerto Rico's *Comisión para la Auditoría Integral del Crédito Público* (Commission for the Comprehensive Audit of the Public Credit) was formed through Law 97 of 2015 under Governor Alejandro García Padilla (PPD) and was comprised of seventeen members, including

elected officials, representatives of financial institutions and credit unions, academics, and organized labor. The law tasked the Commission with studying the debt, the mechanisms of debt issuances, and legalities. In two pre-audit survey reports on central government bond issuances since 2014 and Electric Power Authority bonds issued in 2014, the Commission found irregularities suggesting that over \$30 billion of the debt might be illegal or unconstitutional. These findings prompted the Rosselló administration to dismantle the Commission, first by withholding funding and access to information, and then by law. The administration argued that an audit would be too costly and that any uncertainty about the legality of debt would be resolved through the bankruptcy courts.

Doubts about the government's trustworthiness to conduct a comprehensive audit are central to the reasons that people took to the streets this summer. Rosselló's Telegram chat revealed the administration's blatant disregard for any genuine debt audit and an obsession among the governor and his confidants with shaping an *anti-audit* narrative.<sup>4</sup> For example, in mid-January 2019, the Oversight Board challenged the legality of some \$6 billion in general obligation debt, arguing that specific bond issuances violated constitutional debt limits.<sup>5</sup> In a stunning reality spin, the Telegram interlocutors constructed the administration's response to this news by reviving older propaganda to affirm that "we were right!" and that the public debt audit was unnecessary because, as this legal challenge proved, the courts would adjudicate any questions about the debt (Rosselló et al. 2019, 799). In response to a politician's tweet that denounced Rosselló's dismantling of the public audit Commission and affirmed that the public has "the right to know," Rosselló scorned, "Well...f\*\*\* you I did" (Rosselló et al. 2019, 812).

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<sup>4</sup> See pages 792-812 of the Telegram chat for the full discussion of this issue.

<sup>5</sup> The *Frente* helped to build public pressure that eventually led to the Oversight Board's legal challenge to certain bond issuances. However, the most recent 2021 debt adjustment plan drops all mention of this legal challenge and debt cancellation.



Debates about defining the investigative terms and limits of an audit suggest that revelations from certain types of audits (or certain types of investigators) may lead to damaging information for political and financial elites. For example, individuals with significant conflicts of interest have played a role in debt accumulation, restructuring, and federal oversight, not to mention that current PNP Governor Pierluisi's ex brother-in-law is José Carrión, the Oversight Board Chairman through 2020. Two former members of the Oversight Board—José Ramón González and Carlos García—participated in a “revolving door” between Santander Bank, one of the main debt underwriters, and Puerto Rico's Government Development Bank, which issued bonds (Hedge Clippers 2016). In effect, architects of the debt crisis who engineered and profited from questionable debt issuance and bank underwriting mechanisms are now determining the restructuring process and maintain connections to the entrenched political class.

Considering the uncertainties and power dynamics around Puerto Rico's public debt, a common vocabulary of debt repudiation shaped debates leading up to and after the *Verano Boricua*. These frameworks are based on principles of international law and repertoires mobilized by audit initiatives in Europe, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean, especially the Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt (CADTM)—an international debt repudiation network that supports audit processes—and a guidebook called *Let's Launch an Enquiry into the Debt: A Manual on How to Organize Audits on Third World Debts* (CETIM and CADTM 2006), published by debt resistance, anti-globalization, and popular education organizations based in Europe and the Americas.<sup>6</sup> The manual circulates as a popular education instrument for Global South anti-debt struggles and has been used to build Puerto Rico's audit movement framework. The authors define debt as an “entangled history” that participatory audits can help to “clarify,”

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<sup>6</sup> The Spanish edition of this book is titled *Investiguemos la Deuda: Manual para realizar auditorías de la deuda del Tercer Mundo* (2006).

which echoes Zambrana’s assertion that monetary debt *indexes* historical debts (Zambrana 2019).

“Illegitimate” debt refers to debt contracted under conditions that violate human rights standards or debt that was not used for the benefit of the population. “Illegal” debt is debt contracted in violation of domestic or international law. “Odious” debt is debt incurred under despotic or undemocratic regimes and has been used as a principle in transitional justice cases. Interestingly, this legal theory’s 19<sup>th</sup>-century precedent is the United States’ denial of Cuba’s liability for debts incurred during the Spanish colonial regime after the Spanish-American War. Finally, “unsustainable” debt cannot be serviced without impairing the borrower from fulfilling its obligations to public wellbeing.<sup>7</sup> Other debt repudiation frameworks such as climate debt and reparations (Sellinger 2015; Sheller 2020) and ecological debt (Godard 2012; Goeminne and Paredis 2010; Rice 2009) are also part of the vocabulary that I observed among anti-debt organizing in Puerto Rico most prominently in the wake of the *Verano Boricua*.

The *Frente* engaged with these critical frameworks through international exchange with other anti-debt activists and networks. For instance, the *Frente* hosted the Conference Against Illegitimate Debts in December 2018, bringing together Latin American and Caribbean delegates from CADTM in San Juan for their annual meeting. The *Frente* organized a series of public activities, including talks, a presentation of Eric Toussaint’s book *The Debt System: A History of Sovereign Debts and Their Repudiation* (2019), an artistic event, a people’s assembly, and a workshop about citizen debt auditing methods based on social movements’ experience in Brazil (Fattorelli 2013). This encounter helped to situate Puerto Rico’s debt politics and the audit

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion on the legal doctrine of odious debt and the possibilities of an odious debt analysis, see Bannan 2019; For a discussion on illegitimate debts in historical and contemporary contexts, see Toussaint 2019.

movement within internationalist frameworks around debt repudiation that laid a groundwork for the debates and political imaginaries that flourished after the *Verano Boricua*.

### **Deconstructing Public Debt and Contesting the Audit**

Supporters of a *citizen* debt audit in Puerto Rico have long mobilized around the audit as a process and tactic to ensure the end of harmful and unsustainable public indebtedness. Following the 2016 dismantling of the public audit Commission, the *Frente* coalesced as a popular coalition uniting established labor unions, human rights and feminist groups, and university students that had integrated the audit into their demands during the 2016 University of Puerto Rico strike. The *Frente* also brought together individual activists from different professions, including artists, lawyers, businesspeople, professors, and retirees. Parting from the premise that the public lacked confidence in a government-led audit, the *Frente's* primary mission has been to politicize the uncertainties around the public debt and advocate for a citizen audit that would likely shed light on debt irregularities. These findings could impact the bankruptcy process and possibly force debt cancellation. But beyond these possible outcomes, this initiative developed a political consciousness around Puerto Rico's public debt that demystifies the operation and effects of debt and subverts the undisputed obligation to pay. As the political arm of the audit movement, the *Frente* has mobilized tactics to build support for the audit and its campaign called ¡*Auditoría Ya!* (Audit Now!), including popular education efforts, street protests outside the federal bankruptcy court in San Juan, interventions in policy initiatives, exchanges with international anti-debt networks, and media campaigns contesting bankruptcy proceedings. Most of these efforts were concentrated in the San Juan metro area, which limited reach and participation to an extent.

The investigative arm of the audit movement consists of the *Comisión Ciudadana para la Auditoría Integral del Crédito Público* (Citizen Commission for Comprehensive Audit of Public Credit, or Citizen Commission), a registered nonprofit organization. This group is tasked with as much “audit work” as public information, financial resources, and volunteer labor permit, including analysis and investigations of debt issuances, publications that respond critically to ongoing debt settlements, and filing access to information lawsuits. The Citizen Commission is comprised of multisectoral representatives, including some members of the now dismantled public audit Commission and other individuals from feminist, environmental, housing, business, legal, and cultural sectors.

While “auditing” is conventionally understood as part of a liberal ethos of transparency, as a technical tool to confirm “best practices,” or as a “practice and performance” of accountability (Hetherington 2011; Strathern 2003), I argue that the politics of Puerto Rico’s debt render citizen auditing a political tool of accountability, reckoning, and resistance to finance capital, which is necessary to reimagining a disaster recovery process in which the people are placed before the debt. The independent, comprehensive citizen audit proposed by the *Frente* and the Citizen Commission offers an excavation—or an “x-ray” as one participant in a people’s assembly put it—not only of the debt issued, but of the power relations and specific power brokers that facilitated debt accumulation and their effects. In this sense, a citizen audit works both within and beyond legal frameworks and the terms of the bankruptcy process by mobilizing the language and tools of public debt and bankruptcy restructuring in ways that can articulate understandings of debt in terms of illegitimacy, illegality, and coloniality. As feminist lawyer Eva Prados, coordinator and spokesperson for the *Frente*, writes, “we wish to reclaim our right to

learn and tell our fiscal, economic, and political history” with regard to debt accumulation (Prados-Rodríguez 2019, 254).

Diverse audit experiences across the Global South have demonstrated that citizen or government/citizen debt auditing backed by social movements can become an “instrument of democratic control” that is profoundly political (CETIM and CADTM 2006, 63). A comprehensive audit includes investigative processes about the compliance of individuals and institutions involved with the bond issuance, how public funds contracted through debt were used, and what *should and should not* be paid based on the findings. Rejecting unitary understandings of debt as a contractual obligation between debtor/creditor, a comprehensive debt audit thus mobilizes the enigmatic nature of debt to open the possibility for deconstructing public debt beyond assumed frameworks.

However, there is no consensus around the audit. My findings suggest that the “audit” is best understood as a contested term and process that is currently being struggled over from distinct political locations—namely over who should do it and how. For example, renewed public pressure for a government and/or citizen audit in the wake of the *Verano Boricua* prompted the Oversight Board to claim that the audit has in fact already been conducted. In an opinion piece, Oversight Board chairman and law professor David Skeel defended the \$16 million investigative report prepared by the contracted firm Kobre and Kim as the genuine audit (Skeel 2019).<sup>8</sup> The report reviews the origins of Puerto Rico’s fiscal crisis but fails to identify institutions or individuals responsible for the debt accumulation, nor does it examine the responsibility of the U.S. federal government, name irregularities, or document how money from the bond issuance was used. The Kobre and Kim Report is therefore a neutral audit for the

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<sup>8</sup> In contrast, the *Frente*’s proposal for a comprehensive, citizen audit would cost \$5.6 million.

Oversight Board. The Citizen Commission immediately refuted Skeel, arguing that the audit must be in the hands of the people bearing the burdens of austerity and debt restructuring rather than the government or the Oversight Board (Torres Asencio 2019).

Perhaps the ambivalences around the audit facilitated the different ways people took up questions of debt during and after the *Verano Boricua*. New spaces of popular democracy and prefigurative politics emerged throughout the archipelago and global Puerto Rican diaspora in the form of *asambleas de pueblo* (people's assemblies)—autonomously convened (*auto-convocado*) constituencies that shaped the afterlives of #RickyRenuncia and modeled alternatives of self-governance and public deliberation about the future. Both the summer protests and the *asambleas* built upon the scaffolding of self-organizing that characterized mutual aid and *autogestión* after Hurricane Maria.

### **#Asamblea Auditoría and Counter-Moralities of Debt**

During the hot morning of August 31, 2019, over 200 people brought along folding chairs as they gathered in the Luis Muñoz Rivera Park in San Juan for the *Frente*'s first *asamblea de pueblo*. Attendance exceeded expectations for a Saturday morning, and organizers even ran out of name tags. A musical performance opened the assembly and attendees mingled near the refreshments table while children kept themselves busy in the play area. The hum of the electric generator powering the projector, mics, and coffee pots muffled in the background as people approached the mic. Organizers gave an introductory presentation about debt politics and the citizen audit campaign, followed by an open-mic, break-out sessions, and a full group plenary to summarize proposals.



Figure 27 - #AsambleaAudiotoría, August 31, 2019. Photo by author.

Some attendees were experienced debt activists, while others were approaching these topics for the first time, inspired to continue activating and organizing the summer's indignation. The *Frente* convened the #AsambleaAudiotoría in response to the debt audit repeatedly coming up as a point of deliberation and organization throughout the *asambleas de pueblo*. Some *asambleas* such as Placita Roosevelt in San Juan established an “audit committee” while the *asambleas* in the western municipality of Mayagüez and the San Juan neighborhood of Santurce invited representatives from the *Frente* to present on the topic. Occupying public spaces such as parks, plazas, and municipal government pavilions, the *asambleas* made collective claims to a participative democratic style in stark contrast to the closed-door secrecy of the government and the Oversight Board. The public geographies of the *asambleas* thus represent an open contestation and deliberation of “public secrets”—in this case, the widely suspected but seldom acknowledged workings of the state and the public debt. The summer mobilizations, along with the *asambleas* as political practice and the project of a citizen debt audit, all subvert the contradictions of the liberal democratic ethos of transparency and point towards a rejection of secrecy as a socially constitutive force of power (Jones 2014).

Assembly attendees divided into small groups to discuss what motivated them to attend, how they envision an audit, and any specific proposals. In the group I facilitated, people spoke openly about the impact of unpayable public debt and austerity in their daily lives, from utility bill hikes to pension insecurity, and working multiple jobs in retirement age. Many asserted the need for public debt cancellation as a moral imperative in the wake of Hurricane Maria. This call resonates with even mainstream economists who reversed their estimates after Hurricane Maria and argued that the only path to Puerto Rico's economic recovery is *full* debt cancellation (González 2017). After the small group discussion, the *asamblea* as a collective assumed its own voice during the plenary and proposed motions for action such as collectively demanding full access to information from the government in order to conduct the citizen debt audit, forming a sub-committee to fundraise for the audit, and scheduling a second #AsambleaAuditoría.

The *asamblea* opened a space for counterhegemonic frameworks of public debt to materialize and circulate. During the plenary open mic, Hilda, a member of the Jubileo Sur Network that works for debt cancellation and reparations across the Caribbean and Latin America, suggested that when we talk about debt, "I'd like us to see ourselves as *creditors*" and understand the importance of demanding reparations for a debt that is "historical, social, ecological, and environmental." I argue that Hilda offers a *counter-morality of debt* framework that centers historical colonial-capitalist relations of power to rethink what is owed and to whom. For instance, Hilda illustrates a counter-morality through her invocation of ecological debt, a justice framework that Ecuadorian environmental and indigenous movements popularized in the 1990s. Academics, legal practitioners, environmental justice and anti-globalization movements subsequently took up the concept to refer to the Global South's "accrued socio-ecological subsidy" of the Global North's industrial development, favorable trade relations, accumulation



patterns, and consumption (Warlenius 2018, 150). Even though values are incommensurate and difficult to quantify, a central claim of the framework relates ecological debt to external debt. Some suggest that the Global South's external debt should thus be cancelled because it perpetuates the "subsidy" and disproportionately impacts those with the least historical responsibility for the accrual of environmental harms (Martínez Alier 1997).

Hilda's comment did not refer directly to Puerto Rico's \$73 billion public debt under restructuring in the bankruptcy court. Rather, she situates the U.S. as indebted to Puerto Rico for the accumulation of ecological harms that, among other things, contribute to the archipelago's vulnerability to climate change. The *asamblea* thus became a vehicle for people to gather, articulate and re-articulate demands, share new vocabularies, and deliberate about what anti-debt futures might look like—from retirees with dignified pensions, an end to school closures, infrastructural improvements, and investment in structural climate resilience, to debt cancellation, and a broader conversation about counter-moralities of debt.

Much has been written on the morality of debt in various economic arrangements (Graeber 2011; Han 2012; Minn 2016). While Hilda's provocation subverts the commonsense debtor/creditor relation and the notion of debt as an obligation to be fulfilled, her framework starkly departs from how others take up the morality of debt. For example, notions of Puerto Rico as a culpable, reckless debtor circulated even before the bankruptcy proceedings began. One can look to the foundational commissioned report called "Puerto Rico—A Way Forward" (2015) directed by former International Monetary Fund and World Bank Economist Anne Krueger. The report reproduces colonialist orientations around debt culpability that directly place blame on Puerto Ricans. Krueger and her colleagues explain Puerto Rico's debt and economic crisis as a result of Puerto Rico's "weak fiscal discipline" (Krueger, Teja and Wolfe 2015, 16),

excessive public spending, and low labor participation rates due to overly “generous” welfare benefits. The authors argue that Puerto Ricans are “disinclined” to work due to these conditions (Krueger, Teja and Wolfe 2015, 6-7).

This framework not only informed the implementation of PROMESA, but also resonates with financial media tropes about Puerto Rico’s “addiction” to borrowing that underscore a specific morality of debt (Deibert and Fieser 2019). For instance, in a March 2021 *Wall Street Journal* commentary, Oversight Board chairman David Skeel frames restoring Puerto Rico’s fiscal responsibility as a “deeply Christian activity.” Referring to biblical principles of debt obligation and forgiveness, he argues that the Bible makes clear that “people must fulfill their promises.” Puerto Rico, he claims, fell to the “temptation” to “borrow money the island couldn’t repay rather than make the hard choices of cutting spending or raising taxes to make ends meet” (Skeel 2021). Skeel sees his role on the Oversight Board as helping Puerto Rico fulfill the moral obligation to pay and making “the lives of three million American citizens a little better after years of economic distress” (Ibid.). For Skeel, the morality of debt determines Puerto Rico’s natural, undisputed obligation to its creditors.<sup>9</sup>

A few weeks after the first #AsambleaAuditoría, the *Frente* and the Jubileo Sur Américas Network co-sponsored a gathering called “Haiti and Puerto Rico: Debt and Reparations” to build inter-Caribbean and international solidarity. This gathering was significant because it expanded upon the counter-moralities of debt publicly discussed during the first *asamblea* and inserted Puerto Rico into a wider Caribbean conversation. Linking reparatory demands between Haiti and Puerto Rico highlights common imperial histories and the colonality

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<sup>9</sup> Orientations based on Christian morality have also shaped frameworks of debt forgiveness, relief, and cancellation for Global South countries. The Jubilee 2000 international coalition movement and the Jubilee USA network provide examples of how this framework has been mobilized. Skeel, in contrast, uses Christian morality to argue that Puerto Rico is an irresponsible debtor and thus obligated to pay its debt.

of debt (Zambrana 2019). France imposed a 150-million-franc indemnity on Haiti two decades after Haitian independence for France's "losses" in slave labor and sugar production. In 2003, Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide affirmed that France was in fact the debtor that owed reparations and restitutions to Haiti (Duval 2017). While Haiti was central to Wall Street's international expansion in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century through U.S. intervention, by the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Puerto Rico had become a test case for Wall Street's distressed debt market and hedge funds that enjoyed the tax perks of its territorial status (Hudson 2017). For these reasons, Zambrana (2019) refers to the case of Haiti as central to thinking about the potential "reversibility" of debt (distinct from the cancellation of debt) and the time-space for a *rendición de cuentas* (accountability) as a "subversive interruption" of debt.

Caribbean regional dialogues around reparations have precedents. For example, CARICOM (the Caribbean Community—Haiti is a member state but not Puerto Rico) established a Reparations Commission in 2013 to prepare a case for reparatory justice for victims of "crimes against humanity in the forms of genocide, slavery, slave trading, and racial apartheid."<sup>10</sup> The Reparations Commission's ten-point action plan includes debt cancellation, arguing that the "debt cycle properly belongs to the imperial governments who have made no sustained attempt to deal with debilitating colonial legacies" (CARICOM 2020).

Political projects oriented toward a citizen audit, debt cancellation, internationalist reparations, and the formation of counter-moralities of debt all attempt to interrupt the operation of debt and its effects. While the citizen debt audit remains an unfolding and incomplete process of struggle, the movement laid the groundwork for new exchanges such as the dialogue between Puerto Rico and Haiti, as well as new campaigns and proposals. For instance, the audit coalition

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<sup>10</sup> CARICOM integrates twenty countries in the Caribbean, excluding Puerto Rico because of its colonial status.

has been central to advocating for the *Ley para un Retiro Digno* (Law for a Dignified Retirement), which would lead to partial debt cancellation and protect pensions against cuts that the Oversight Board has included in the 2021 debt readjustment plan. Furthermore, in the wake of the *Verano Boricua*, legislators have proposed three new projects to audit the debt. These proposals are viewed as positive steps forward after the 2020 election of a number of progressive candidates to Puerto Rico’s House of Representatives and Senate. The Citizen Commission has been involved with orienting elected officials around principles of auditing in an attempt to guide the legislation moving forward as much as possible (Comisión Ciudadana 2021).

The *Verano Boricua* was perhaps not the culmination, but rather a catalyst for a longer process of transformation and *rendición de cuentas* made possible by the kinds of self-organizing individuals and communities had been involved with in the wake of Hurricane Maria. The mobilizations coalesced public indignation around the intersections of debt and disaster, corruption, discrimination, and the colonial condition. Popular democratic spaces like the *asambleas de pueblo* developed as channels to articulate “multiple solidarities” and new political possibilities in dialogue with long-standing and emerging movement infrastructures (Santiago-Ortiz and Meléndez-Badillo 2019).

## CONCLUSION

This study has analyzed the invisible ways in which public debt manifests, how people struggle for life-affirming futures through practices that do not overtly invoke debt, and how disaster governance operates through discriminatory evaluation procedures and imperatives around privatized resilience. In my final ethnographic chapter, I shifted focus from the mobilization of a politics of daily life represented by the CAM to briefly explore how people make overt claims on public debt and reimagine recovery through what I call counter-moralities of debt. To do this, I returned to the streets of Old San Juan and the event that introduced this study. The *Verano Boricua* intertwined layers of public outrage over the debt crisis, austerity, and the botched hurricane recovery, thus serving as a point of convergence for new political subjects and emergent political projects and imaginaries oriented towards a public reckoning.

The summer 2019 mobilizations brought together people from diverse class, gender, racial, generational, ideological, and spatial identifications in a process of public reckoning around government corruption, disaster recovery mismanagement, and the necropolitical debt politics that shape daily life. Protagonists were both seasoned activists based in the San Juan metro area such as those involved with the movement to audit the debt and people with less experience in protest movements such as some of the CAM organizers from the urban periphery. Beyond the immediate outrage of the Telegram chat, the “three hurricanes” that Rosa often mentioned—the María Montañez Gómez School closure, Hurricane Irma, and Hurricane Maria—motivated CAM organizers to join the protests.

While Chapter Six shifted ethnographic focus and “rescales visions” (Susser 2020) of recovery in terms of debt, it also highlighted the major threads of this study. This Conclusion

thus builds upon Chapter Six to reiterate my arguments and point towards some open questions in light of processes that defy closure and resolution. I maintain that anti-debt movements, along with grassroots mutual aid mobilizations described in previous chapters, reimagine recovery from distinct political locations and represent intersecting processes of reckoning with past and present harms. For the CAM, this reckoning took shape through a process of spatial rescue/occupation that drew on previous struggles to defend community resources. Through mutual aid, residents reclaimed and repurposed public infrastructures for a locally determined disaster recovery process that simultaneously unsettled the logics of debt capture and addressed residents' longstanding needs in affective and material ways. Mutual aid in Puerto Rico is thus situated at the intersection of social reproduction, disaster recovery work, and debt resistance.

Debt auditing as *rendición de cuentas* took on a renewed significance in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria because of the interdependence between Puerto Rico's debt politics and the disaster recovery processes, as discussed in Chapter One. To many survivors and observers, it became unreasonable and immoral to move forward with debt readjustment plans that benefitted hedge fund creditors at the expense of Puerto Ricans trying to pick up the pieces after the storm. In fact, after Ricardo Rosselló resigned, financial markets sent mixed signals about how the new political conditions in the midst of ongoing disaster recovery could impact the bankruptcy. Market panic emerged in the *Wall Street Journal* about how "bondholders will be scalped" in upcoming debt restructuring (Editorial Board 2019). In contrast, the *Financial Times* celebrated that Puerto Rico's general obligations bonds rallied after Pedro Pierluisi's brief incoming term was announced, thus boding well for creditors in the bankruptcy process (Long, Sevastopulo and Smith 2019). It was clear that for political and financial elites, business as usual was the priority. However, as I have shown, the 2019 summer mobilizations that sent up to half a million

Puerto Ricans onto the streets catalyzed renewed public debate around the citizen's audit and expanded critical understandings of debt beyond financial obligation. The conversations that emerged fostered counter-moralities of debt.

### **Closing Remarks, Open Questions**

Crisis operates both to reveal underlying contradictions and to condition new possibilities. Puerto Rico's "unpayable debt" and Hurricane Maria have laid bare the contradictions of colonial capitalism, while setting the stage for new responses, negotiations, and subversions of the crisis. This study has examined Hurricane Maria as lens of tracing visible and not so visible manifestations of debt, how differently located people grapple with its effects compounded by climate disruption, and how disaster governance operates through discourses and practices that promote individualized resilience. I have shown that disaster recovery processes are sites of contestation where different visions, practices, and political imaginaries play out. Hurricane Maria catalyzed a social disaster that had long been in the making and revealed the toll of overlapping crises that are simultaneously economic, environmental, and colonial.

Those who bear the heaviest burdens of social vulnerability to climate disaster (women, poor and working-class people, disabled people, the elderly) are called upon to be resilient disaster subjects and to assume recovery as a privatized individual and domestic task. I have documented how post-Maria FEMA disaster aid distribution for housing repair discriminates based on U.S.-imposed evaluations about property and homeownership, leaving it up to survivors to contest the outcomes or conform to the push for formal titling as a catchall recovery solution. However, the people most impacted by these harms and discriminatory processes may

also be organizing the most creative interventions that subvert colonial-neoliberal disaster governance and help us reimagine what a recovery grounded in local needs, knowledges, and visions looks like. Grassroots projects such as the CAM Las Carolinas enact local solutions through a politics of spatial rescue/occupation and public infrastructures of care that repurpose abandonment and unsettle hegemonic forms of debt capture and top-down disaster governance. Infrastructures of care articulate social reproduction as a public rather than exclusively domestic task, opening pathways for disaster recovery as a collective rather than individual process.

Women and elderly people are at the forefront of the mutual aid activism that I analyze in this study, thus pushing the boundaries around how we think about vulnerability, age, gender, and agency especially among working class people and non-traditional political actors in times of crisis. Relatedly, I have highlighted the importance of generation as a key lens of intersectional analysis to consider the particular impacts of debt and climate disruption on the experiences and political lives of elderly people. Grassroots efforts of *autogestión* and mutual aid build upon long-standing struggles and have conjured new political subjectivities among unconventional actors, as documented in the long, intergenerational struggle over the María Montañez Gómez School and the various tactics the protagonists engaged in across time to respond to shifting political, economic, and environmental conditions. Catalyzed by the long processes of dispossession made tangible and more urgent by the 2017 hurricanes, working class people such as the CAM participants are enacting insurgent relationships to public space, property, and infrastructure. These actions represent a property politics that simultaneously *unsettles and works within* the formalities around abandoned public property by establishing ownership claims through a process of rescue that centers use values and by directly engaging the state with a lease application and legislative tactics.



Central to disaster anthropology are questions about temporality. The activist projects that I highlight in this study help to reveal the deeper temporalities of disaster in terms of coloniality and the production of social vulnerability, thus pushing beyond time-bound understandings of disaster as a singular event. Similarly, anti-debt activism grapples with the multiple temporalities of debt, refusing to be confined to the present and future temporality rendered by the bankruptcy process, but also calling upon the past as part of a reckoning in the present. It is significant that the denunciation of illegitimate, colonial, and ecological debts and accompanying calls for debt auditing and/or cancellation described above invoke a subversive property politics. As Étienne Balibar notes, property and debt (or ownership and credit) are mutual relations, such that “the cancellation of debts must appear as an encroachment on the right of property, considered an absolute right: it shows clearly that property (whether private or public) is always in fact a *relative* or *conditional* notion” (2013, 14).

Demands around citizen auditing and frameworks that invoke illegitimate, ecological, or colonial debt, for example, aim to reshape the terms of debt through a reckoning about historical harms in Puerto Rico and the Global South more broadly. People’s denunciation of the violence of debt, the shaping of counter-moralities of debt, and the demand to audit are not just about establishing more equitable terms in Puerto Rico’s bankruptcy process, but rather challenge the very assumptions of debt as obligation and the colonial power relations between debtor/creditor. These are urgent questions to reimagining recovery and thinking about climate justice.

Ultimately, this study offers a contemporary history that is still unfolding and uncertain. The hopeful alternatives emerging from mutual aid organizing and anti-debt activism work towards a broad sense of repair and reckoning but must not be understood as idealized resistance.

Rather, everyday people mobilize these initiatives as necessary responses to negotiate social reproduction and life-affirming futures amid overlapping crises brought by declining material conditions, climate change, bankruptcy, and a colonial reality outside of their control.

Nonetheless, they provide new and creative tools for confronting and building alternatives to the ongoing state of overlapping crises.

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