La Generación “Yo No Me Dejo”

Alternative Cuirness and Revolution in Puerto Rico

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Summary:

In 2019, the Puerto Rican LGBTQIA+ community engaged in peaceful direct actions such as marches, strikes, and drag performance to protest the Puerto Rican administration. While many subcultures participated in the movement that led to ex-governor Ricardo Roselló's resignation, the LGBTQIA+ community's leadership and involvement were particularly influential. By addressing the intersection of the Puerto Rican queer community and political activism, this monograph demonstrates how the Puerto Rican cuir community is following in the footsteps of revolutionary groups such as the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries by weaponizing performance for the purpose of political upheaval. This monograph delves into topics such as Puerto Rico/U.S. relations, disaster capitalism, subcultural style, and queer and performance theory with the goal of bringing attention to the queer Puerto Rican experience and arguing for the rights of queers of color as well as progressive change in Puerto Rico where the detrimental effects of colonialism are still heavily felt.

Introduction

On July 22nd, 2019, over a million Puerto Ricans marched demanding the resignation of ex-governor Roselló; this was the first protest of its kind and magnitude in recent Puerto Rican history. Late July 24th, 2019, Roselló commenced his resignation speech which ended exactly at the stroke of midnight amidst the "Perreo Combativo en la Fortaleza" movement where hundreds of Puerto Ricans gathered to bump and grind in protest of the deceitful administration. While many subcultures participated in this movement, the LGBTQIA+ community's leadership and involvement were particularly influential. This monograph looks at how the Puerto Rican LGBTQIA+ community— referred to as the cuir community, to

honor the term used by the LGTQIA+ community in Puerto Rico— because of its members' particular lived experiences and the trauma inflicted by Hurricane María, were predisposed to revolting and leading the charge against decades of unjust government.

On Political Protest

In 2019, the Puerto Rican LGBTQIA+ community engaged in peaceful direct actions such as marches, strikes, and drag performance to protest the Puerto Rican administration; this is the same type of non-violent protest used during the U.S. civil rights movement. According to T.V. Reed in *The Art of Protest*, "The core public strategy of the movement [civil rights movement in the U.S.] was based on nonviolent direct actions (civil disobedience, sit-ins . . . building of alternative institutions, strikes, and other actions)" (6). Like the theater of Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) which vehemently celebrated the new Black nationalism of Malcolm X (Reed 46), the performances of the LGBTQIA+ community in Puerto Rico celebrate cuirness as well as encourage equality, camaraderie, and purposeful political action on the island to not only to advance cuir rights but also to do away with the oppressive colonial treatment that led Puerto Rico to monstrous debt. Thus, I consider the performative nature of Puerto Rico's cuir community as aligned with previous Rights Movements' use of the performative as a method of political protest and change.

Puerto Rican cuir performance does much of the same work as Black Power theater in that it is a form of protesting the colonial oppressor that also works to combat the harmful psychological effects of colonialism. Theater historian Mance Williams argues that "the central task of black power theater was to use dramatic enactments to overcome internalized self-hatred in blacks 'who had been brainwashed and psychologically maimed by centuries of

physical and mental abuse' (a notion of therapeutic violence found in the immensely influential psychiatrist and theorist of decolonization, Frantz Fanon)" (qtd. in Reed 47). In his influential work *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon, a primary theorist of anti-colonialist thought, discusses how colonialism psychologically affects the colonizer and colonized. According to Fanon, through the process of colonialism, the colonizer cultivates a sense of superiority, while the colonized develops an inferiority complex; this occurs because the colonized defines the "self" through their relationship to the colonizer, who deems all things native as inferior. The colonized then adopts the ways of the colonizer (beliefs, language, practices, values) to alleviate the shame caused by the colonial inferiority complex. The Puerto Rican cuir community has the double task of fighting internalized self-hate caused by both colonialism and homophobia. As Black Power theater aimed to overcome self-hatred in Black people who lived in the "internal colony" of the U.S., so too, I argue, does the cuir community use performative modes to undo the colonial inferiority complex of the Puerto Rican people.

The performances of the Puerto Rican cuir community serve a similar purpose as Black Power theater as they combat the internalized hatred brought on by colonialism and Puerto Rico's heteropatriarchal, homophobic society. In fact, Puerto Rican cuir performances not only combat the self-hatred resultant from homophobia, but also that resultant from a history of colonial oppression: all Puerto Ricans, not just the cuir community, have had to deal with the inferiority complex colonialist rule causes, as the dominant outside entity, or colonizer, continuously takes advantage of the colonized territory.

One example of how Puerto Rican performance embodies modes of resistance and self-transformation is the immensely popular Puerto Rican improv/comedy group Teatro

Breve. Although the group itself is not specifically cuir, as Puerto Ricans, they have to cope with the colonial inferiority complex; all Puerto Rican performance, not just cuir performance, has the potential to combat the harmful psychological effects of colonialism. Their homepage states "Transformando en risas el badtrip cotidiano [Transforming the everyday blues into laughs]" (teatrobreve.com). In Puerto Rico, "el badtrip cotidiano" references a different range of experiences than in other territories: In Puerto Rico, the bad trip involves almost daily power outages, violent homophobia and transphobia, extremely high rates of domestic abuse, increasing numbers of non-Puerto Ricans in positions of power, and privatization efforts. Through their comedy, both the players and their Puerto Rican audience engage in the difficult task of recognizing their reality and criticizing the colonialist system that is largely to blame. In doing so, their comedy aligns with brown and black cultures in other national contexts. According to E. Patrick Johnson and Ramón H. Rivera-Servera,

> performance is a site at which brown and black queer cultures share what [Jafari Sinclaire] Allen . . . calls 'conjunctural moments.' According to Allen, 'conjunctural moments . . . index the temporal space in which the articulation . . . of sometimes related and other times opposing or unrelated discourses, practices, or trajectories reshape, reimagine, or alter our view of the present.' (qtd. in Johnson and Rivera-Servera 6)

I would argue that Puerto Rican drag performance, like brown and black queer performance, is a site where the Puerto Rican cuir community experiences conjectural moments. That is, Puerto Rican drag performance, like the theater of Amiri Baraka and Teatro Breve, reimagines reality as a way of confronting and dealing with the cuir, colonial experience.

These conjectural moments are important for marginalized communities because it is where they can confront and transform the heteronormative colonial discourse that is at the core of their shame. These conjectural moments allow Puerto Rican drag performance to celebrate and create space for the non-normative and countercultural.

Thus, the Puerto Rican cuir community uses performative strategies such as drag performance to resist and persevere in the face of oppressive power structures as well as criticize the colonization and subjugation that characterize the Puerto Rican cuir experience. In this way, they are not unlike the Young Lords, discussed here, and the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, discussed after. The Young Lords was a "group of poor and working-class Puerto Rican radicals . . . [who looked] to reclaim the dignity of the racially oppressed and elevate basic human needs—food, clothing, housing, health, work, and community—over the pursuit of profit" (Fernández 1). Like the Young Lords, the cuir community in Puerto Rico is working to reclaim the dignity of their community and to fight for basic human needs to be satisfied by the state, rather than through the social Darwinist market of private enterprise. By organizing post-hurricane relief efforts and throwing a drag ball, the Puerto Rican cuir community, like the Young Lords, challenges for-profit systems that benefit the few and exploit the majority.

The Young Lords, much like the Black Panthers, "believed that the fight against racism and colonial domination" was a priority (Fernández 6). Their "calls for Puerto Rican independence, and end to hunger and want . . . embodied the politics of the era's revolutions for independence from European colonial rule that swept through Africa, Asia, and Latin America after World War II" (Fernández 5). This call for Puerto Rican independence reverberates in the performance politics of cuir Puerto Ricans, whose vocal desire for

freedom from colonial subjugation demonstrates exactly how effectively the Young Lords "popularized the demand for Puerto Rican independence both in their own constituency and within broader movement circles" (Fernández 5). The resurging Puerto Rican independence movement, underway since Spain and then the United States colonized the island, has found great support in the Puerto Rican cuir community.

The only way the Puerto Rican people can hope to achieve any kind of change is through political protest precisely because of the corrupt administration that was instilled through colonialism; similarly, the Young Lords argued "that independence could not be attained through electoral means but only through revolution" (Fernández 6). Puerto Rico's colonial administration has continuously repressed efforts to further the cause of Puerto Rican independence and self-determination. This is exemplified in the 1948 Law 53 known as "the Gag Law." The Gag Law prohibited supporting Puerto Rican independence in any form; the law made it illegal to display the Puerto Rican flag as well as sing, play, write, or speak about anything concerning Puerto Rican patriotism and independence. It was a clear effort to suppress the Puerto Rican independence movement. The law was repealed in 1957, nine years later, on the grounds that it was unconstitutional.[1]

Protest has historically been used by weaker groups to take on the powerful. The Young Lords, the Black Panthers and the Black community during the civil rights movement, the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, the Women's Rights Movement, and the LGBTQ+ community during the first Christopher Street Liberation Day march are all

[1] Law 53 was repealed when it was declared unconstitutional as it violated American citizens' right to freedom of speech within Article II of the Constitution of Puerto Rico and the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States.

examples of minority groups who effectively confronted their oppressor through protest. The Puerto Rican people are also an example of a weaker group that has taken on their rulers. Prime examples of Puerto Rican political protest and independence efforts include El Grito de Lares (The Cry of Lares) in 1868, the Rio Piedras Massacre in 1935, and the Ponce Massacre in 1937, all protests turned tragedy by police brutality. There is also the more recent situation with Vieques, a smaller island that is part of Puerto Rico that used to house a U.S. naval base. While the Puerto Rican people were vehemently opposed to the presence of the base, the government did nothing about removing it until massive protests began in 1999.

Puerto Rico has been employing protest to object to imperialistic rule since before the United States took hold of the island in the Spanish American War of 1898. In 1868, what is arguably the most iconic revolt against Spanish rule occurred in Lares, Puerto Rico: El Grito de Lares, The Cry of Lares. Hundreds of rebels looted businesses and offices owned by Spanish-born men in an attempt to combat Spain's exploitative treatment of the Puerto Rico people. The rebels managed to take over the Lares city hall but were shut down the next day before they could take over the next town. While this insurrection was shut down swiftly, its efforts along with Cuba's concurrent struggle for independence, prompted Spain to grant reforms it had continuously denied the islands. Then, in 1935, the University of Puerto Rico became a battleground. Pro-nationalist students who supported Pedro Albizu Campos, the leader of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, and his argument that the Chancellor of the university, Carlos E. Chardón (selected by U.S.-appointed governor Theodore Roosevelt Jr), was trying to turn the university into an institution of American propaganda clashed with students who supported Chancellor Chardón. The Chancellor requested the governor send armed police officers; four supporters of the Nationalist party and one bystander were killed.

Police chief Colonel Elisha Francis Riggs, who was considered responsible for the massacre by Nationalists, was assassinated the following year; the men responsible were Nationalists Hiram Rosado and Elías Beauchamp. Rosado and Beauchamp were arrested and taken to police headquarters in San Juan where officers killed them without a trial. Puerto Rican Senator Luis Muñoz Marín was in D.C. at the time. When asked by the administrator of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration to denounce Riggs' assassination, Muñoz Marín refused unless he could also denounce the police that murdered members of the Nationalist party without giving them a fair trial. Two years later in 1937, the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party organized a peaceful march to commemorate the abolition of slavery by the Spanish government in Puerto Rico, which occurred in 1873, as well as protest the imprisonment of Pedro Albizu Campos, the party's leader. The march turned into a violent shooting that claimed the lives of nineteen civilians and two police officers. The United States Commission on Civil Rights investigated the incident and determined that the U.S.-appointed governor of Puerto Rico, Blanton Winship, was responsible for the massacre. Neither the governor nor the policemen who admitted to being involved in the shooting were castigated or prosecuted. However, an independent and collaborative investigation conducted by the United States Commission on Civil Rights (led by Arthur Garfield Hays of the American Civil Liberties Union) and Puerto Rican citizens concluded that the incident was indeed a massacre resulting from mob police brutality and that the governor was responsible for gross civil rights violations. As a result of the Ponce massacre, a chapter of ACLU opened in Puerto Rico: la Asociación Puertorriqueña de Libertades Civiles. It is clear that comparatively weak agents like the Puerto Rican people effectively use protest to confront powerful entities such as the United States; even when revolutionary efforts are violently stamped out, there is always

some kind of significant change, however minimal, that occurs be it the passing of beneficial reforms or the garnering of support and spreading of awareness.

It is thus necessary to discuss how weaker groups, like the Puerto Rican people, effectively take on stronger entities, like the United States. According to Ivan Arreguín-Toft in "How the Weak Win Wars," "If power implies victory in war, then weak actors should almost never win against stronger opponents, especially when the gap in relative power is very large. Yet history suggests otherwise: Weak actors sometimes do win" (94). But "how can a weak actor's strategy . . . make a strong actor's power irrelevant [?]" (93-94). Arreguín-Toft draws on Andrew Mack's answer to this question, arguing that "an actor's relative resolve or interest explains success or failure in asymmetric conflicts. In essence, the actor with the most resolve wins, regardless of material power resources . . . The greater the gap in relative power, the less resolute and hence more politically vulnerable strong actors are, and the more resolute and less politically vulnerable weak actors are" (94-95). When it comes to asymmetric conflict, resolve and vulnerability can be more effective than access to decision making and resources thus the Puerto Rican administration's failure. Roselló and his administration were careless in their arrogance and perceived power believing their influence and authority to be unshakable. Conversely, the Puerto Rican public already fed up with the difficulty of daily living in addition to the island's unstable sociopolitical situation had no lack of motivation to protest and nothing to lose.

The resolve of the people outweighed that of Roselló and his administration. However, the fight has not ended with the governor stepping down; there is still much to do if Puerto Rico wishes to rid itself of the type of rule that led the island to crippling debt. After all, Ricardo Roselló's administration is not solely to blame; the administrations that came

before have all had a hand in the mismanagement of Puerto Rico. Additionally, there is also the United States' role to consider.

On Puerto Rico/U.S. Relations

Puerto Rico has a history with Hurricanes. Hurricane Hugo, a category 5 hurricane, rocked the island in 1989, and Hurricane Georges, a category 4, in 1998. Hurricane Irma, another category 5, passed just north of Puerto Rico on September 6, 2017, fourteen days before María. Although Irma did not make landfall, the damage was still significant. Irma killed at least three people and left most of Puerto Rico's residents without power (Morales 200). Then came Hurricane María on September 20. It made landfall on the southeast coast of the island; my hometown of Humacao and the neighboring Naguabo were destroyed. Nowhere near recovered from Irma, the island was particularly vulnerable to Hurricane María.

The U.S. administration's sluggish response to Hurricane María was a blatant reminder of Puerto Rico's colonial status and second-class citizenship. Despite the island's history with hurricanes, the U.S. administration failed to deploy the appropriate assistance in a timely manner, which resulted in the people taking post-María recovery into their own hands. Fortunately for islanders, hurricanes and recovery are nothing new. After the hurricane passed, it was impossible to reach anyone on the island; the island's already outdated and faulty electrical grid was obliterated, and its cell phone towers were destroyed. The news footage during and after the storm was horrifying. It would be days, even weeks before many heard from loved ones. Additionally, islanders were without running water and power for months, and some places still, at the time of this writing, haven't fully recovered.

Waiting amidst the confusion and chaos like vultures, disaster capitalists entered the scene ready to profit off other people's lost lives, livelihoods, and communities. According to Jørgen Randers, "It is profitable to let the world go to hell" (qtd. in Loewenstein 1). Randers explains that "[c]apitalism is carefully designed to allocate capital to the most profitable project" (qtd. in Loewenstein 2). Loewenstein adds that Randers' "thesis strikes at the heart of why wealth is concentrated in so few hands in today's world: there is little incentive to advocate for a more equitable planet. The market system has guaranteed unfairness and rewards greed" (2). Lowenstein's argument that the market system rewards greed was exemplified in Puerto Rico: After Hurricane María, the minority of elites that composes the administration, who had control over federal funds meant to aid the Puerto Rican people, greedily misappropriated those funds.

As Naomi Klein argues, the market system rewards disasters brought by climate change, incentivizing the future for additional destruction. Natural disasters such as "[d]roughts and floods create all kinds of business opportunities . . . Finding new ways to privatize commons and profit from disaster is what our current system is built to do" (*This Changes Everything* 9). The speed with which U.S.-based private contracts for electrical reconstruction in Puerto Rico post-María were established is a perfect example of this. According to Klein, "'Now wars and disaster responses are so fully privatized . . . that they are themselves the new market: there is no need to wait until after the war for the boom . . ." (qtd. in Loewenstein 7). FEMA and the various contracts set with private corporations meant to reconstruct and provide relief for the island are prime examples of this.

With these endeavors overseen by a handful of elites, the opportunities for fraud and further divesting Puerto Rico of its wealth are widespread. FEMA officials including Ahsha

Tribble (FEMA's Regional Administrator) and Jovanda Patterson (Tribble's former deputy) as well as the former president of Cobra Acquisition's, the private company entrusted with the reconstruction of Puerto Rico's electrical grid, Donald Keith Ellison, "were arrested on fraud and conspiracy charges linked to recovery efforts from Hurricane Maria, according to federal prosecutors" (Deibert). The U.S. attorney for the District of Puerto Rico, Rosa Emilia Rodriguez-Velez, claims that instead of helping recovery efforts, these individuals "decided to take advantage of the precarious conditions of our electrical power grid" (qtd. in Deibert). This speaks directly to Randers' and Loewenstein's point that capitalism is meant to benefit profitable projects while completely bypassing more immediately expensive but ultimately more sustainable solutions such as wind and solar power (Loewenstein 2). Puerto Rico is just one of many countries that have "endured hardships because of the determination of particular factions to impose policies that enrich only a local elite and foreign entities" (Loewenstein 12).

Even though coloniality as an official system is technically gone, Puerto Rico's relationship to the United States is still one of coloniality where Puerto Ricans are treated as second-class citizens. The paradox is painfully evident. Puerto Ricans on the island are expected to abide by the laws, policies, and constitutional system of the U.S. federal government, but how can they when they are mistreated and not supported in return? According to journalist and race and ethnicity scholar Ed Morales, "After more than a hundred years since the United States granted Puerto Ricans US citizenship, that identity's value is being questioned and the fantasy of its promise is being exposed" (2). The struggle to recover after María made Puerto Ricans ' second class-citizen status undeniable. Morales continues, "The Trump administration's sluggish and neglectful deployment of FEMA and

military assistance, coupled with its brazen willingness to privatize any and all relief efforts, laid bare the racist colonialism with which the United States has often administered Puerto Rico, the largest of its five major inhabited 'unincorporated territories'" (3). For example, an investigation conducted by *Politico* in 2018 claims that Houston was afforded $141.8 million after Hurricane Harvey for individual assistance aid while Puerto Rico received $6.2 million (Morales 3). The fact that Puerto Rico is not afforded the same urgency as the mainland U.S. states in times of crisis demonstrates the racist colonialism with which the U.S. continues to treat Puerto Rico.

The post-María struggle exposed the corruption in both the Puerto Rican and United States administrations, which have oppressed the Puerto Rican people since the U.S. landed on the island in 1898. After colonization began the island's Americanization: English was made the official language of the courts and schools, nationalist efforts were continuously and violently suppressed, the Great Migration of Puerto Ricans to the continental U.S. began, the problematic Commonwealth status and the Constitution of 1952 were established, the military outposts were created on the island, free-trade policies were established, and Puerto Rican women were used for birth control experiments (Morales 8). This demonstrates a pattern of mistreatment involving labor value extraction, natural resources extraction, and the colonialist exploitation of gendered bodies.

When the U.S. took possession of the island, the colonial process began, and Puerto Rico began to be primed for decades of manipulation and abuse that would continuously benefit the U.S. empire and disadvantage islanders. In 1901, a major Supreme Court decision, *Downes v. Bidwell*, ruled that the U.S. Constitution does not necessarily extend its protections and provisions to U.S. territories such as Puerto Rico. *Downes* states that Puerto Rico is not

fit to become a state and should thus instead be an 'unincorporated territory' that is not a part of but belongs to the U.S: Puerto Rico is a U.S. possession. This decision made by the Supreme Court in *Downes v. Bidwell* still stands, which puts Puerto Rico in a bit of a quagmire: Even though residents are subject to U.S. rule, the U.S. constitution does not fully protect them, and they do not have Congressional representation. Additionally, the FOMB (Fiscal Oversight and Management Board) has made local Puerto Rican officials essentially powerless, making the possibility of economic self-determination very challenging (Morales 6).

Because the U.S. government has repeatedly disavowed any responsibility for Puerto Rico's precarious financial and political situation, Puerto Rico's debt crisis has been greatly misconstrued with many, including then-President Donald Trump, arguing that the fault lies on the island's corrupt and incompetent government. For example, on August 28, 2019, Trump tweeted the following: "Puerto Rico is one of the most corrupt places on earth. Their political system is broken and their politicians are either Incompetent or Corrupt. Congress approved billions of Dollars last time, more than any place has ever gotten, and it is sent to Crooked Pols. No good!.... And by the way, I'm the best thing that's ever happened to Puerto Rico!" (@realDonaldTrump qtd. in Bump). Trump clearly places the blame on the island's administration and in doing so fails to acknowledge the role the U.S. has played in Puerto Rico's debt crisis.

Trump also tweeted the following on April 2, 2019: "Puerto Rico got 91 Billion Dollars for the hurricane, more money than has ever been gotten for a hurricane before, & all their local politicians do is complain & ask for more money. The pols are grossly incompetent, spend the money foolishly or corruptly, & only take from USA...."

(@realDonaldTrump qtd. in Bump). Of course, Trump's statements are false and hyperbolic, as Phillip Bump explained in an article in the *Washington Post* debunking Trump's tweets. Trump's condescending and racist language is an example of how the ex-president contributed to mobilizing colonialist discourse.

The argument that the U.S. has no responsibility in Puerto Rico's debt crisis is based on the same colonialist and racist discourse used to justify the U.S.'s mistreatment and abuse of Puerto Rico and its people. The fact is exploitative industrialization efforts followed U.S. colonization and are thus at the root of Puerto Rico's current debt crisis (Morales 9-10). This industrialization was, rather condescendingly, called "Operation Bootstrap." Operation Bootstrap incentivized outside corporations to establish themselves on the island by making the process tax-free and allowing these corporations to employ Puerto Rican residents for less than the minimum wage. As the island industrialized, its natural resources and potential agricultural markets which could have made independence more feasible, continued to deplete, and while these corporations provided jobs, they were not secure, and the pay was inadequate. Refusing to accept U.S. responsibility in Puerto Rico's debt crisis demonstrates a clear ignorance of the effects of U.S. industrialization efforts on the island.

In 1996, the situation for American corporations on the island became less beneficial thanks to the rescinding of a provision of the IRS tax code that provided American corporations with tax breaks. Thus, from 1996-2006 corporations fled the island, leaving it in a recession (Morales 10). As a consequence, the Puerto Rican government exacerbated its existing debt, accrued trying to cover essential services, by getting involved with Wall Street municipal bond market speculators (Morales 10), thus initiating the current $72 billion debt crisis and the ludicrousness of arguing that the U.S. is not responsible for Puerto Rican debt.

Morales goes even further, suggesting that "imposing austerity on Puerto Rico is a way for the United States to externalize its own shaky financing and create its own 'exceptionalism' by asking its colony to pay for its own sins. With the Trump administration driving up the national debt to $22 trillion, it's hard to argue that the United States is a paragon of financial responsibility" (Morales 13). The hypocrisy is undeniable; the superior power and influence of the U.S. allow the nation to control both its and Puerto Rico's global images; despite the U.S. role in Puerto Rico's debt, its policies force Puerto Rico to take on the burden of financial irresponsibility alone, painting the island as the incapable child and themselves as the benevolent guardian that must discipline.

This paternalistic guardian/child trope has its roots in earlier legal developments. For example, the Merchant Marine Act of 1920, known as the Jones Act, was the law that granted U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans. It established a resident commissioner and a nonvoting representative of Congress, and it subjected the island to its shipping laws, which permanently raised the prices of goods shipped to the island" (Morales 28). Among other things, under the Jones Act, the U.S. could impose tariffs on Puerto Rican trade while its newly established free-trade-zone allowed the U.S. to avoid import duties (making all imports from Puerto Rico to the U.S. duty-free), only ships constructed in the U.S. flying an American flag could dock at Puerto Rico's ports, and the Act established a triple-tax exemption from the sale of government bonds (Morales 30). The Jones Act is an exploitative policy premised on the notion that Puerto Rico is not self-determining and must accept rules established by a benevolent guardian force.

Additionally, Puerto Rico is at the mercy of The FOMB [Financial Oversight and Management Board] established by ex-president Barak Obama in 2016. The FOMB, referred

to by the Puerto Rican people as La Junta, represents the Puerto Rican administration in bankruptcy court and makes all budgetary decisions; a bit ironic considering the FOMB, for the most part, contained conservative members connected to the financial sector, some of whom were associated with financial institutions responsible for accruing debt (Morales 149-150). Because the FOMB makes all major Puerto Rican financial decisions, it is evident Puerto Rican political agency is a fallacy with the island's administration being more of a face than a functioning body of influence that can enact serious and lasting sociopolitical and financial change.

Until Hurricane María in 2017, the increased contemporary attention paid to climate crises meant that the hurricane brought Puerto Rico increased attention from mainland media. The majority of the island's power lines were destroyed (80%) leaving residents powerless for months (Morales 202).

The lack of adequate aid and the sluggish response time from both the U.S. and Puerto Rican governments pushed the Puerto Rican people to step in and help themselves, for example, cleaning up debris blocking the streets on their own. The LGBTQIA+ community took hurricane recovery into their own hands by forming groups to clear roads, deliver emergency supplies, and cook communal meals. Had it not been for the work of locals, the death toll would have been greater.

While there is no shortage of disquieting things that occurred post-María, the worst was the Puerto Rican and U.S. administrations' unwillingness to acknowledge the number of people that lost their lives because of the hurricane. Studies conducted by *The New York Times*, Harvard University, and George Washington University, demonstrated that the actual death count was much larger than that stated by the administrations: the death toll was at least

4,645 (Kishore et al.). This is evidence of the Puerto Rican and U.S. administrations' colonialist mindset, one that prioritizes maintaining its position of power and false benevolent image over the well-being of the Puerto Rican people.

The combination of the Trump administration, a corrupt and cowardly Puerto Rican administration, and Hurricane María made Puerto Rico even more vulnerable to further exploitation from the U.S. (Morales 229). After the hurricane, Puerto Rico was every disaster capitalist's dream because U.S. laws imposed on the island already benefitted wealthy opportunists more than they did the Puerto Rican people (Morales 229-230). The destruction of Hurricane María combined with the establishment of the Puerto Rican Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA), which guaranteed the restructuring of Puerto Rican debt to benefit vulture and hedge fund investors, created the perfect conditions for disaster capitalism (Morales 229). This is evidenced by the $300 million contract that the Puerto Rican government awarded Whitefish Energy. The company is based in Secretary of Energy Ryan Zinke's hometown of Whitefish, Montana and only had two employees to speak of including CEO Andy Techmanski (Morales 230). The contract was absurd with supervisors and journey linemen set to receive hourly rates of $330 and $227.88 per hour and subcontractors set to receive hourly rates of $462 and $319.04 (Morales 231); the fact that these workers were set to receive unreasonably high salaries suggests Whitefish was pocketing hundreds of dollars per hour per worker (Morales 231). Even after this, the Puerto Rican government had the audacity to give another million-dollar contract ($200 million) to another inexperienced company, Cobra Acquisitions LLC (Morales 231). This second contract, similar to the first with Whitefish, stated that neither the governor of Puerto Rico, FEMA, the US comptroller general, nor the Puerto Rico Electric Power Company

(PREPA) would have the legal right to revise the financial portion of the contract related to labor rates (Morales 231). These two contracts with Whitefish and Cobra Acquisitions demonstrate that the scope of the destruction on the island, specifically to its infrastructure, made Puerto Rico the perfect target for disaster capitalists trying to profit through privatized reconstruction efforts.

Feminist historian of reproductive politics Laura Briggs also addresses the U.S.'s exploitation of Puerto Rico in her book *Reproducing Empire*. According to Briggs, "[i]n the late 1940s and early 1950s . . . Puerto Rico became . . . a political showcase for the prosperity and democracy promised by close alliance with the United States. Puerto Rico was a proof-text for assertions about the benevolent mission of the United States overseas" (2). Yet while the U.S. government used the island as the posterchild of U.S. altruism, it was simultaneously stripping its residents of their political agency. Puerto Rico's political status has been one of its residents' main concerns for a long time, with the debate questioning whether statehood, independence, or the current Commonwealth status is more beneficial. Nonetheless, when a plebiscite was conducted on December 13, 1998, giving Puerto Ricans the option to express whether they prefer statehood, independence, or the commonwealth status, the majority of Puerto Ricans chose "none of the above." Residents were clearly aware that the status question remained open for debate with no end in sight. This is supported by the fact that had statehood won the plebiscite there was no established process through which the island could have submitted Puerto Rico's statehood for consideration (Briggs 10). Additionally, nationalist and independence efforts have historically been violently stamped out, suggesting to Puerto Ricans that the U.S. government has never truly considered Puerto Rican

independence an option. Briggs argues that the 1998 plebiscite was meant to give residents the allusion of political agency; it never intended to grant it.

However, more than two decades later, the question of Puerto Rican statehood has come back in full force, evident in recent discussions, once again, about statehood. On November 3, 2020, another plebiscite took place, this one specifically asked Puerto Ricans to vote whether or not they prefer statehood. The majority of Puerto Ricans voted in favor of statehood, 52.52%-47.48% (Comisión Estatal de Elecciones, "Plebiscite"). Also, in 2020, Rep. Nydia Velasquez introduced H.R. 8113 – The Puerto Rico Self-Determination Act of 2020 (for herself and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez) which intends "[t]o recognize the right of the People of Puerto Rico to call a status convention through which the people would exercise their natural right to self-determination, and to establish a mechanism for congressional consideration of such decision, and for other purposes" ("H.R. 8113"). In other words, Congress would be forced to seriously consider the matter of Puerto Rican self-determination and the means by which it can be facilitated. A decision made on H.R. 8113 would reveal Congress' position on the matter of Puerto Rican self-determination and go a long way in resolving the issue of Puerto Ricans' second-class citizenship.

Subcultural Style and Performance as Resistance

Disidentification is a concept that names how minoritarian people – in this case, cuir of color – negotiate a majoritarian culture that rejects, even punishes, those who do not conform to its normative standards. Developed by queer of color performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz, disidentification is, perhaps, already gestured to in the colonial history I

summarized above, in the ways the Puerto Rican people generally have negotiated their status as second-class U.S. citizens. However, in Muñoz's definition, disidentification has a specific valence for queers of color.

Below, I will explain in more detail the meanings of both "subculture" and "disidentifications." Before I do so, I will summarize the situation of the cuir community, and I will contextualize the broader musical culture of Puerto Rico, embodied in popular performers such as Residente, Bad Bunny, and La iLe, as participating in the "freedom song" tradition that Reed identifies as characterizing the music culture of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. Then, I will discuss how Bad Bunny draws on cuir subcultural style in order to situate himself as pro-cuir, and the implications in a Puerto Rican pop star—with immense popularity globally, including in the mainland U.S.—doing so. This will lead into a longer discussion of disidentfication and subcultures.

The Puerto Rican cuir community has spent their lives resisting not only colonial but also sexual oppression. The Puerto Rican cuir community was politically active before María—they were engaged in the fight for equal rights and equal treatment. Thus, Roselló's corrupt and homophobic behavior was just another item to add to the list of wrongs that need to be righted. In other words, the Puerto Rican cuir community was already well-versed in political activism and protesting an oppressive administration.

The Puerto Rican cuir community is present everywhere on the island, but the individuals this project focuses on reside mostly in San Juan. Santurce and Rio Piedras particularly stand out, two neighborhoods of San Juan where the cuir and the revolutionary have made their presence undeniably known. Santurce and Rio Piedras are historically revolutionary neighborhoods, not only because of their history of economically

disadvantaged and cuir residents but also because of the presence of the University of Puerto Rico, a leader in Puerto Rican political activism and the location of the 1935 Rio Piedras Massacre. Santurce and Rio Piedras are also cuir meccas. Homophobic persecution and familial rejection have had a great economic impact on this community, and so, before being cuir was more openly, socially accepted on the island, cuirs fled persecution and flocked to neighborhoods like these because of their low rent and proximity to the island's urban center where there were more opportunities for work.

The cuir community in Puerto Rico is well-versed in all forms of migration. Many have moved off the island (helping form part of the Puerto Rican diaspora) or to different towns and neighborhoods in Puerto Rico not only because of persecution but also because of a lack of work and limited performance opportunities. Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes calls the phenomenon of cuirs relocating within Puerto Rico, from one area to another, "internal migration," and relocating to another country "international migration" (ix-x). This internal migration has contributed to the gentrification of Santurce and Rio Piedras. Once low-rent neighborhoods, they became sanctuaries of self-expression, attracting the trendy and youthful crowd that would transform Santurce and Rio Piedras into hipster hubs. Of course, this process of gentrification has displaced many people, much like NYU's gentrification process has slowly displaced those who used to populate the Lower East Side of New York City, Bushwick, and Brooklyn (Morales 225).

Santurce is the hot spot for the hip with new parties and festivals drawing in hordes of participants, all young, all trendy; for example, Calle Cerra has hosted a street-mural festival called Santurce es Ley since the 2010s, a version of "art-led gentrification" that continues today (Morales 255). I recall attending Santurce es Ley in 2016; there was everything from

live performance to massive sculptures and exhibition pieces, enjoyable only if you momentarily disregard the horrid reality of gentrification. The reality for Puerto Rican artists is that making a living solely off your craft is practically impossible unless you cater your work to tourists or participate in events such as Santurce es Ley set in motion by gentrification—many artists choose to find other means of support while creating their art, and this is where revolutionary art becomes a possibility (Morales 257-258). Therefore, the creative work of Puerto Rican artists can be considered pieces of resistance much like the drag performances of the cuir community, and the music of those musical artists who helped mobilize the coup against Roselló.

Musical Puerto Rican artists such as Residente, Bad Bunny, Ricky Martin, and La iLe as well as their politically active and aware fanbase—composed of everyone from seasoned academics to millennials and Puerto Rican youth—heavily participated in the protests of 2019. This demonstrates exactly how music functions as resistance and a mobilizing force. These artists took to social media to encourage the Puerto Rican people to show up and protest, which resulted in massive turnouts. These artists create music with fierce sociopolitical commentary that speaks to the Puerto Rican experience, and when the protests against the Puerto Rican administration erupted, they used their music to mobilize and fuel the populace.

Puerto Rican musical cultures can be productively compared to the "freedom songs" of the Civil Rights movements. Music and song have been an influential part of popular Western protest since the anti-slavery movement in the nineteenth century (Reed 2); it is a tactic historically available to the weak against the powerful. According to Reed, "the civil rights movement brought a new level of intensity of singing and left a legacy of 'freedom

songs' now sung all around the world" (2). With freedom songs, "[The] fear [inculcated through colonialism] is both indirectly acknowledged and directly challenged" (1). By engaging in protest through song, the Puerto Rican populace recognized how they have been continuously manipulated and, simultaneously, they opposed that manipulation. Residente, Bad Bunny, and La iLe's co-produced song "Afilando Cuchillos" follows in the tradition of these freedom songs. The artists wrote the song in response to Ricardo Roselló and the damning chat that the Center for Investigative Journalism released to the public, and it turned into an unofficial anthem for those invested in the cause. The artists accused the ex-governor of sexism, homophobia, corruption, idiocy, and more. For example, part of Residente's verse says,

Según este compadre, mi mai junto con todas las mujeres

Son igual de putas que su madre

. . .

Ninguno de nosotros los supuestos bandoleros

Está acusa'o de fraude, robo o lavado de dinero

In English,

According to this guy, my mother along with all women

are whores just like his mother

. . .

None of us, the supposed gangsters

Have been accused of fraud, theft, or money laundering

Bad Bunny picks up after Residente emphasizing the disappointment and rage of the Puerto Rican people:

El pueblo no aguanta más injusticias

Se cansó de tus mentiras y de que manipules las noticias

. . .

Y que se enteren to's los continentes

Que Ricardo Rosselló es un incompetente

Homofóbico, embustero, delincuente

A ti nadie te quiere, ni tu propia gente

In English,

The people won't tolerate more injustice

They're tired of your lies and manipulation of the news

. . .

Let all the continents know

That Ricardo Rosselló is incompetent

Homophobic, dishonest, a delinquent

No one loves you

Not even your own people

Just as Reed argues that music was key to the civil rights moment, music was key to the 2019 Puerto Rico protests—not only because of the participation and compositions of artists such as Bad Bunny, Residente, and La iLe, but also because of the use of music in physical manifestations such as the Perreo Combativo (Combative Dance protest), the Drag Ball, and the massive march on July 19th where the Puerto Rican people made ample use of instruments and chanting. Residente, Bad Bunny, and La iLe's song as well as the music and chanting employed by protesters were a mobilizing force with great dramatic and even

important short-term impact: the march of July 19th, 2019, was the largest in recent history with over a million people participating. After the march, then-governor Roselló finally succumbed to the people's demand and retired from his post. This was certainly a great accomplishment.

Unfortunately, after the governor stepped down, the spectacle of protest waned, and so the momentum for protest was lost. Transwoman and drag performer Natasha Alor says as much in her interview, where she argues that many were only participating in protests for "the fun of it," taking it as an opportunity to party and create chaos. This realization dawned on Alor when, during large-scale demonstrations, people drunkenly hooted and hollered at her, clearly amused by her cuirness and not the sociopolitical critique her drag performance was trying to convey.

Alor's fears were realized when the Puerto Rican people elected as governor a career politician from the same political party, the New Progressive Party, as Ricardo Roselló. While all the prominent political parties in Puerto Rico have engaged in some form of corruption at some point, the New Progressive Party was caught red-handed and still reelected. This speaks to a critique of the Puerto Rican people that Bad Bunny felt the need to highlight in "Afilando Los Cuchillos:"

To'as las paredes dicen "Ricky, vete", ey
Y no es vandalismo
Vandalismo es que nos tiremo' nosotros mismo'
Por defender a los que nos llevaron al abismo
Vandalismo es que siempre voten por los mismo'

Y se roben to's los chavos de educación

Mientras cierran escuelas y los niños no tienen salón

In English:

All the walls say “Ricky, get out,” ey

And it’s not vandalism

What’s vandalism is us falling

for those who led us to the abyss

Vandalism is the people always voting for the same thing

And money meant for education being stolen

While schools close and children lose their classrooms.

Bad Bunny’s lyrics express frustration at his people who continue to vote for the career politicians responsible for sinking the island into staggering financial debt.

Despite the Puerto Rican people “voting for the same thing” during the last election in 2020, a silver lining of the recent election was the increase in support for candidates outside of the two most powerful parties (the New Progressive Party [PNP] and the Popular Democratic Party [PPD]) which have historically maintained administrative power in Puerto Rico.[2] According to data from the Puerto Rico State Commission of Elections, 35.52% of voter support was for parties outside of the PNP and PPD in 2020, a significant increase from the 19.33% received in the 2016 elections. This suggests that the Puerto Rican people are starting to think differently; the younger generation, specifically, is turning to other parties

[2] According to the Puerto Rico State Commission of Elections, in the 2020 elections, the PNP and the PPD raked in 32.93% and 31.56% of the votes, while Alexandra Lúgaro (independent runner), the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP), and Proyecto Dignidad (a party founded in 2019) acquired 14.21%, 13.72%, and 6.90% of the votes (a final independent runner accrued .69%).

and candidates who agree there needs to be drastic administrative change in order for progress to occur.

This younger generation includes members of, and is more supportive of, the cuir community. In an interview, Alor illustrates the overlap between the cuir community and politics. Discussing the Puerto Rican electoral issue, she stated that,

> [I]n Puerto Rico, trans people face a lot of difficulties when they register to vote.[3] I think, and this is a really personal opinion, a lot of people think that this election is going to change everything, and I think it's the start but I don't think much will change yet.

Alor continues,

> And some things can be done in this election, but I'm not that hopeful yet . . . I think it's really important for people to vote and participate because even though we don't get rid of the two parties we want to get rid of [PNP and PPD], we send a message of "we're tired of this" and "we're aware," and "you need to do better if you want us to keep you in that position." Because we already don't want them so if they screw up again, they're not going to get another chance.

The most politically active of the people interviewed for this project, Alor managed to meet with the electoral candidates of 2020 to discuss trans rights. When she posted on social media an open invitation for the candidates to meet with her, Juan Dalmau of the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP) reached out, and she met as well with independent candidate

[3] The voting system is not trans-friendly. Even when trans individuals legally change their name, they face difficulties registering to vote. Often, those who control registration insist on using the trans individuals 'dead names (name given at birth) even when they have legally changed their name (Alor).

Alexandra Lúgaro. Alor says she is left-leaning, as her statement about getting rid of the two most powerful parties on the island (the New Progressive Party [PNP] and the Popular Democratic Party [PPD]) suggests.

Alor's engagement with island politics and the increase in support for other parties and independent candidates suggests that this alternative youth, of which the LGBTQIA+ community discussed in this project is a part of, is not just mobilizing, in the words of Baker, but also organizing. According to Reed, "the organizing tradition, as [Ella] Baker defined it, focused on the slower but deeper task of bringing out the leadership potential in all people, and on building group-centered, as opposed to individual, leadership in communities that would do the ongoing work of changing people and institutions" (13). Alor encourages all Puerto Ricans to speak up, become involved, and vote. In doing so, she is bringing out others' leadership potential as well as her own. This places Alor in the tradition of political organizing as defined by Baker, thus the intersection of the Puerto Rican cuir community and politics. Jhoni Jackson, a freelance reporter and bar owner, is another cuir organizer on the island. Her establishment, Loverbarbar, doubles as a space where the cuir community can enjoy themselves safely and also learn, discuss, and organize. This is an example of social justice efforts to create spaces for group organizing that are inclusive of and based in the cuir community and its practices. This is important because the Puerto Rican cuir community has been at the forefront of political activism since 2017 when María devastated the island. As multimedia specialists who engage with the arts, social media, and video, they have been able to use Puerto Rican cultural expression to both acknowledge and resist both heteronormativity and the power of coloniality.

Because the LGBTQIA+ community is no stranger to resisting oppression, it is no wonder they form such a great component of Puerto Rico's post-María activism. They are, and will be, integral to efforts to overthrow Puerto Rico's colonial status. Scholar and law professor Efraín Rivera Ramos believes "that the colonial problem wouldn't be solved in the courts and . . . somehow academics [such as myself], the media, and the forces in the streets must find a new synergy" (Morales 290). We saw the makings of this when artists, the people, the media, and an abundance of academics (most notably those from the UPR university system, with its history of political and social activism on the island) came together and forced the governor to step down.

Like the cuir community, celebrity artists have been pushing the Puerto Rican people to become more active and involved in the fight to oppose the corruption and elitism that drowned the island in debt. Residente has been politically outspoken and active since he started his first group, Calle 13. Before he was Residente, René Pérez Joglar was part of the musical duo Calle 13 with his stepbrother, Eduardo José Cabra Martínez. They quickly became recognized for the socio-politically conscious themes of their music, often commenting on the continued colonial status of Puerto Rico and other similarly oppressed nations. Residente became known for being quite involved in politics, and, in 2017, he released his first solo album, *Residente*. This album rages against the hierarchical power structures established by Eurocenteric colonialism that continue to keep the colonized in both a mental and social state of inferiority.

Residente's work advances musical socio-political commentary that unites the colonized with the exploited, in other words, joining the fight against capitalist power

structures to Puerto Ricans' subaltern status. His music creates a new community with a nationalism all its own: a nationalism of the colonially marked that celebrates the individual while articulating a support system of like-oppressed individuals. Consequently, Residente's music allows his performance venues to become a site of colonial difference where the colonially marked can come together without erasing their particularity. That is, Residente's music calls out to the colonized globally.

For the cuir community in Puerto Rico, drag performance does the same work. That is, drag performance not only creatively voices an argument against the unjust sociopolitical status and treatment of the island and its inhabitants, like Residente's music, but additionally creates a cuir-friendly space where like-minded and like-oppressed non-heteronormative Puerto Rican youth can congregate, exist, and organize. According to Adi Love,

> Drag performance is about inclusion, it's about celebrating differences, different bodies, different ways of thinking, different identities. My character is the queen of ratchet couture because it's something different. As a woman, people expect you to act and look a certain way; my character is a commentary on this expectation which is tough for cisgender women, but doubly so for transgender women who have to fight five, six times harder in the eyes of society to measure up.

At Love's performances, like Residente's concert venues, the colonially marked cuir can exist, heal, and celebrate their difference safely. Thus, these are spaces of cuir resistance.

Like Residente, Bad Bunny has been actively pushing the Puerto Rican people to become more active in the fight for lasting political change as well as social change. His music and persona challenge both the corrupt administration as well as the sexism, homophobia, and misogyny in Puerto Rican society and how it supports such corrupt

administrations. During the 2019 summer protest, Bad Bunny stood alongside Residente and crossover pop star Ricky Martin during the largest protest demanding that ex-governor Roselló step down. Even before the leaked chat that caused the entire island to turn on its corrupt administration, Bad Bunny had called for a massive overhaul of the conservative, majoritarian beliefs that have made Puerto Rico no stranger to violent homophobia and misogyny.

Puerto Rico has seen a steady increase in violence against women over the past few years. The difference in power and influence between Puerto Rican women and the Puerto Rican administration—women have little power within it—means that Puerto Rican feminism continues to gain momentum. According to Alexandra-Marie Figueroa Miranda in Nicole Acevedo's article for NBC News, there were "a series of women's rights setbacks that. . . [took] place in Puerto Rico" over the span of 2018-2019. She was one among many hundreds of women who protested gender-based violence at the 2019 "Paro de Mujeres" or "Women's Strike." According to Acevedo, "Figueroa Miranda is one of hundreds of women in Puerto Rico . . . [fighting] to defend their rights to access effective health services, increase public safety and eradicate gender-based violence — among other demands — has gained a new sense of urgency as a growing level of domestic violence has plagued the island. . ." This strike has included musical stars, evidence of the significance of musical culture for popular protest in Puerto Rico. The Grammy-award-winning artist iLe (also as Residente's sister) participated in the March 8th Paro de Mujeres and expressed that, "As long as the government continues to ignore our demands, our sense of urgency is just going to keep growing because we keep being ignored. We're in a precarious situation." La iLe continues, "I cannot believe that there is not an immediate reaction [to domestic violence incidents] from the police . . . It

makes me feel horrible . . . It gives me terror, seeing that people care less and less about violence." La iLe expresses her frustration toward the Puerto Rican police's lack of prioritization of domestic violence.

In addition to participating in protests and speaking out, La iLe has used her music to raise awareness of the domestic violence issue in Puerto Rico. According to Acevedo,

> Significant delays in the adjudication of protection orders, poor enforcement of such orders, inadequate staff to deal with domestic violence cases and inefficient evidence collection processes during investigations are some of the deficiencies the ACLU identified in how Puerto Rico deals with the issue. These have been prevalent since at least 2006.

In 2019, La iLe released the song and video for "Temes" in which she condemns misogyny and equates it with weakness—La iLe wrote the song after watching a story in the news about a woman who was stabbed to death by her ex-boyfriend on the island.

A year before La iLe, in 2018, Bad Bunny released the song and video for "Solo de Mi" which actively protests domestic violence by portraying a woman on stage lip-syncing Bad Bunny's lyrics:

> No me vuelvas a decir "Bebé" (¡No!)
>
> Yo no soy tuyo ni de nadie, yo soy sólo de mí
>
> . . .
>
> ¿Que me quisiste? Te lo agradezco, ey
>
> Pero no te pertenezco

In English,

> Don't call me "Baby" (No)

I don't belong to you or anyone, I belong only to me

. . .

You cared for me? I thank you, ey

But I don't belong to you

As she lip-syncs, the woman is repeatedly beaten by an invisible hand, presumably that of her abusive ex-boyfriend. Her battered face is eventually revealed to be healed and the video turns celebratory.

Bad Bunny has made the concentration of homophobic hate crimes, like domestic violence incidents, part of his public persona. Such crimes occur at an alarming rate on the island. On February 24, 2020, transgender woman Alexa Negrón Luciano was brutally murdered in Toa Baja, Puerto Rico. According to Harmeet Kaur and Rafy Rivera of CNN, "Alexa Negrón Luciano -- also known as Neulisa Luciano Ruiz -- a homeless, transgender woman . . . was brutally killed in the city of Toa Baja last Monday [February 24th, 2020]." Bad Bunny did not remain silent choosing to take advantage of his appearance on *Jimmy Fallon* to honor Alexa and bring awareness to gender-based violence not only in Puerto Rico but also on the U.S. mainland. During the appearance, he wore a t-shirt that read "Mataron a Alexa, no a un hombre con falda" or, in English, "They killed Alexa, not a man in a skirt." [4] Although he and Fallon did not discuss the Spanish words written on his shirt, wearing it during such a highly-prized media appearance made it clear that Bad Bunny wished to

[4] In his article for *The Independent*, Clèmence Michallon states "while performing is song 'Ignorantes' with Sech, Bad Bunny unveiled a T-shirt reading: 'Mataron a Alexa, no a un hombre en falda' – which means in English: 'They killed Alexa, not a man in a skirt.'"

communicate to Spanish-speaking audiences, including those in Puerto Rico who were surely watching, his pro-transgender position.

Bad Bunny has also released songs such as “Caro” in 2018 which condemn gender stereotypes and normative expectations that contribute to gender-based violence on the island. “Caro” is a perfect representation of Bad Bunny’s personal and artistic ideology. This ideology is in line with that of the Puerto Rican cuir community. The song says,

¿Qué carajo' te importa a ti? Ey

Cómo soy yo, ey

Qué digo yo, ey

Qué hago yo

¿Qué carajo' te importa a ti? Ey

Cómo soy yo, ey

Qué digo yo, ey

Qué hago yo

¿Qué carajo' te importa a ti?

Vive tu vida, yo vivo la mía

Criticar sin dar ejemplo, qué jodí'a manía

Por solo ser yo y no como se suponía

. . .

What the hell do you care? Ey

How I am, ey

What I say, ey

What I do, ey

What the hell do you care? Ey

How I am, ey

What I say, ey

What I do, ey

What the hell do you care?

Live your life, I'll live mine

Criticizing without teaching by example, what a fucking bad habit

Just for being me and not how I'm supposed to be

The song's lyrics encourage individual self-expression, and while they are not gender-specific, when read alongside the video, where Bad Bunny is represented by both himself and a female proxy, they can be interpreted as contesting gender norms. In performing this gender-swapping in his video, Bad Bunny has proved himself an LGBTQIA+ ally who works to break down gender stereotypes and heteronormative social restrictions. Additionally, he enjoys flamboyant clothes, even donning gems and rhinestones at the Super Bowl halftime show in 2020, thus performing a drag-adjacent persona to mainland U.S. and its major venue for mainstream and corporate-sponsored music.

Style is a big part of Bad Bunny's persona; style is also one of the ways the LGBTQIA+/cuir community in Puerto Rico has not only established their identity on the island but also participated in political protest. Similarly, style was a big part of who punk artists and individuals were. Considering punk is another subculture that has been quite

prominent in the urban Puerto Rican subcultural scene, understanding cuir subculture in relation to punk and its major theorist, Dick Hebdige, is beneficial.

In his book *Subculture*, media theorist and sociologist Dick Hebdige looks at how style can take on meaning. Hebdige, like this project, is "interested in subculture – in the expressive forms and rituals of those subordinate groups – the teddy boys and mods and rockers, the skinheads and the punks –who are alternately dismissed, denounced and canonized; treated at different times as threats to public order and as harmless buffoons" (2).

Hebdige makes a clear distinction between 'normal' styles and subcultural styles stating that subcultural styles have a more intentional communication than that of 'normal' styles. Subcultural style intends to overtly communicate difference whereas 'normal' styles express normality. That is, mainstream culture attempts to naturalize its conventions and styles while subcultural styles purposefully assert unnaturalness. Bad Bunny and the cuir community in Puerto Rico participate in a subcultural style that is intentionally abnormal; they wish to set themselves apart from the strictly binary majority that has consistently marginalized the cuir community and defined what is socially acceptable. Bad Bunny's glamorous nails exemplify a subcultural style that asserts difference and illustrates how subcultural style often reassigns the meaning of ordinary objects. Hebdige argues that in subcultural styles, "the most mundane objects – a safety pin, a pointed shoe, a motorcycle – which, none the less, like a tube of vaseline, take on a symbolic dimension, becoming a form of stigmata, tokens of a self-imposed exile" (2). In this way, Bad Bunny's nails and overtly cuir aesthetics too can be considered a form of "self-imposed exile," a way of superficially letting society know that they do not ascribe to heteronormativity.

According to Hebdige, the unnaturalness of subcultural styles reveals the wearers' subversive identity and its "forbidden meanings" making a point to emphasize the distance between the dominant culture and the subculture. For the Puerto Rican cuir community, this separation from the dominant culture is important because it is the dominant patriarchal and Catholic culture that has orchestrated their oppression. Cuir Puerto Rican style functions similarly to punk style in that its subcultural anti-fashion subverts traditional notions of beauty, gender, and taste. When one considers how "queer" punk is with its inclusion of androgynous styles and sexualities, the ability to draw parallels between punk subculture and LGBTQIA+ communities is not that surprising. According to Hebdige, other forms of expression that emerged in the punk subculture such as music, dancing, and publications also carry with them an "anti-quality" that distances them from the more traditional forms of expression embraced and seen as natural by the majority. Similarly, cuir performance and artistic expression in Puerto Rico has not only taken on an "anti-quality," but also a political dimension that asserts the cuir community's separation from the dominant culture.

Because subcultures are a disturbance of the status quo that break the unspoken rules of the dominant order which organize the social world and dictate how it is experienced, Hebdige claims the dominant order will attempt to pacify subcultures by a "process of recuperation." This process can take one of two forms: the commodification of the subculture's signs (style, music, etc.) or the "labeling" and redefinition of the perceived deviant behavior by dominant groups (this translates into the demonization, trivialization, naturalization, and thus domestication of the "other"); the latter has been used to pacify not only Puerto Rican subcultures such as the cuir community but also the artists that embody them such as Bad Bunny and Residente.

Taking into consideration how dominant culture has attempted to recuperate the LGBTQIA+ subculture in Puerto Rico, it is fair to assume the cuir community on the island can be labeled what Raymond Williams refers to as an emergent culture. Williams states that emergent cultures can either be alternative (non-threatening) or oppositional (threatening to the status quo). Alternative cultures are embraced while oppositional ones are attacked. The cuir emergent culture in Puerto Rico has clearly positioned itself as an oppositional one that will no longer be silenced.

As opposed to Puerto Rican drag and cuir culture, mainland U.S. drag and queer culture, in general, have been heavily commodified and thus recuperated by the dominant culture thanks to entertainment moguls such as Ellen DeGeneres and RuPaul Charles. That is, queer culture on the U.S. mainland was (and still is) aggressively commodified and subsumed by the masses. Therefore, mainland U.S. queer culture is an emergent culture that, by Williams' standards, was both oppositional and alternative but now is neither. Queer style was both trivialized and incorporated because where the dominant culture initially saw a nuisance and potential threat, it eventually saw a new market. Thus, U.S. dominant culture embraced the queer as it embraced punk, for the sake of commodification.

Disidentification and Cuir Controversies

Subcultures attempt to define the world in their own way. As they do so, they come into conflict with the dominant culture; this conflict is articulated through style in the cuir subculture of Puerto Rico. Because the cuir Puerto Rican community engages style that signifies its difference and plays an active role in their performance resistance practices,

Puerto Rican cuir performance can be considered a disidentificatory practice. In his work, queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz defines disidentification as a mode of dealing with dominant ideology that works to reform the social norm. Muñoz argues that "Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (4). He explores disidentification through the analysis of various drag and queer performers whose decision to disidentify has much to do with their sense of identity. According to Muñoz, "The fiction of identity is one that is accessed with relative ease by most majoritarian subjects. Minoritarian subjects need to interface with different subcultural fields to activate their own sense of self" (5). Muñoz brings Néstor García Canclini into the discussion because of his concept of "hybrid transformations." According to Canclini "hybridization can be helpful in accounting for particular forms of conflict generated in . . . cross-cultural contact . . ." (Canclini xxiv)—cross-cultural mixing can be positive and productive or can create conflict (Canclini xxx). The conflict generated from cross-cultural contact makes survival strategies like disidentification essential, as they allow minoritarian subjects such as cuir Puerto Rican drag performers to negotiate a majoritarian society that condemns deviations from its dictated norm. For example, cuir Puerto Rican drag performers of color such as Adi Love engage in "disidentificatory performances . . . [that] circulate in subcultural circuits and strive to envision and activate new social relations" (5), that do not punish but rather celebrate difference.

The theory of disidentification that Muñoz establishes "is meant to contribute to an understanding of the ways in which queers of color identify with ethnos or queerness despite

the phobic changes in both fields" (11). Taking Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's work as an example, Muñoz states that *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) "serves as a valuable example of disidentification as a political strategy" when one considers that feminism has historically been a rather whitewashed movement (22). In other words, in *This Bridge Called My Back* Moraga and Anzaldua practice disidentification in relation to white feminism.

Another significant component of Munoz's theory of disidentification lies in how he conceives performance as embodying practices of reception and production. Drawing on Stuart Hall, Munoz argues that there are three levels of decoding the third of which is the "oppositional" one: "This mode of reading resists, demystifies, and deconstructs the universalizing ruse of the dominant culture . . . Meanings are unpacked in an effort to dismantle dominant codes. As an approach to the dominant culture, disidentification is analogous to the paradigm of oppositional reception that Hall constructs within the essay" (26). In other words, the oppositional level of decoding simultaneously exposes and defies dominant culture's manipulative strategies by exploring and ultimately disqualifying the restrictive significations of dominant culture. Disidentification can therefore be considered an example of the oppositional level of decoding Hall establishes. Performers like Moraga and Anzaldua demonstrate how "[d]isidentification is a performative mode of tactical recognition that various minoritiarian subjects employ in an effort to resist oppressive and normalizing discourse of dominant ideology" (97).

Queer performer Vaginal Crème Davis also employs disidentificatory practices in her work. Using disidentificatory performance practices, Davis, a queer of color, managed to become part of the whitewashed LA punk scene (Muñoz 95). Davis disidentifies with

commercial drag as much as she disidentifies with the punk scene that rejects her. Instead of attempting to imitate femininity, Davis engages in a "*terrorist drag* [which] 'stirs up desires' and enables subjects to imagine a way of 'break[ing] away from the restraint of the social body'" (Muñoz 100). Davis' drag uses parody and humor to disrupt the social fabric and can thus be considered a disidentificatory strategy with sociopolitical implications (Muñoz 100).

The performances of cuir performer Adi Love approximate Davis' terrorist drag and embody Munoz's concept of "disidentificatory practices." Love has greatly helped popularize and expand drag culture in the San Juan metro area of Puerto Rico. Love has an affinity for the grotesque and disturbing, a commentary on the polished and supposed effeminate effect drag should aspire to. Love often employs a prosthetic penis in her performances as well as fake cocaine, blood, and personalized mixes tailored to the theme of her performances. She goes by the name of La Fashion Puelka, the Fashion Pig; Adi's aesthetic is gross, glam, ratchet parody. Drag is all at once Love's ultimate form of expression, self-authentication, and resistance against Puerto Rico's patriarchal, heteronormative society. As a cuir woman of color, Love is precisely the kind of subject Muñoz refers to when discussing his theory of disidentification.

Love's cuir, alien-themed performance in 2015 at Club 77 in Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico exemplifies Love's disidentificatory practices. In this performance, Love wraps sociocultural commentary in a filthy glam aesthetic thus criticizing and blatantly opposing the effeminate polished beauty mainstream drag has popularized. Love enters stage-right wearing a full-length coat she rips off revealing a black corset, pink crop top, pink thigh-high platform boots, and a silver mini skirt with Love's famed prosthetic penis prominently strapped to it.

The track for the performance is a remix of Lady Gaga's "Venus" which lyrically ties in with the cuir-alien theme and Love's sex-positive attitude.

The track is from Gaga's *Artpop* album (2013) which explores sex, promotes empowerment, and questions gender binaries and roles. When Gaga sings

Have an oyster, baby, it's Aphrod-isy

Act sleazy

Venus

Love grasps the mic, sensually slides her hands down its stand, and then takes hold of the prosthetic penis giving it a hard shake which culminates in an energetic hip thrust. Here, Love simultaneously celebrates androgyny and challenges the gender binary that Puerto Rico's heteronormative society and mainstream drag performers enforce.

Throughout the performance, Gaga's "Venus" is interrupted by multiple recorded clips of Love's voice. In one clip, Adi's voice mockingly sings: "llévame p'al punto, llévame pa' Disney, a coger por el culo, el culo, el culo" (in English: take me to the drug point, take me to Disney, to take it up the ass, the ass, the ass). Love uses exaggerated, comical movements to perform this section of the mix, as she marches in place with erect limbs resembling a Barbie doll thrusting her hips with every mention of "culo;" this references the drug consumption and promiscuity that are linked to cuir nightlife. This commentary continues as Love reveals a baggie of fake cocaine that she pretends to snort and then tosses into the cheering audience while another clip of her voice says: "La Barbosa[5], no te meta'esa cosa" (in English: La Barbosa, do put that in your body). Referencing cuir drug and sex

[5] La Barbosa is a well-known drug point in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

culture in such a blatant and crude manner is a way of acknowledging reality, which is not always positive, without demonizing it; it's celebration in acceptance. In this way, Love is performing counterpublic terrorism like Davis' in which the crude and grotesque challenge what Puerto Rico's heteronormative society deems acceptable.

Love's drag performances approximate Davis' in that they are a political form of disidentifying with communities which she is a part of (Puerto Rican and LGBTQIA+ communities) despite their rejection of her authentic self. Like Davis, Love has had issues with the mainstream drag scene. According to Love,

> most drag in the queer community, if not all of it, is political because even if you're not talking about a specific topic in politics or being overtly political, drag when done by queer people is political because our existence is political, it's a revolution . . . taking the time to talk about identity is a political statement, and a trans person hitting the stage is a political statement because it is not the norm; even in the LGBTQIA+ community trans identity is not as represented as it should be. Diversity needs to be represented; inclusivity needs to be represented. To me, honestly, all queer drag is political, but I have to make the distinction of 'queer.' I'm not saying that a cisgender gay person performing a ballad, or a Madonna song isn't revolutionary, it's drag, it's always meant to be a statement, I just think it's a different level of depth and of being vocally political when you're a queer individual with a different gender identity who's not cisgender or a person of color. I do have to make that distinction because even though I like to think we are all part of the same community; it feels like there's a separation between what's known as 'the gay community' and queer people.

The mainstream drag scene is dominated by cisgender gay drag queens, many of which stick to a pageant aesthetic (hence the term "pageant queen" in the drag world). The fact that Love is a trans woman has caused many of the island's more "traditional" cisgender drag performers to disregard her; according to Love, this is a common experience for non-binary and trans performers. Much like RuPaul, these cisgender performers invalidate alternative queerness believing there is no point to drag if it is not imitation. For the pageant queen, what's the point of a trans woman doing female drag?

In disidentifying with pageant queens and other forms of cisgender normative drag, Love is engaged in forms of performance that are what Muñoz calls "world-making." He writes that "minoritarian performance labors to make worlds—worlds of transformative politics and possibilities . . . The concept of worldmaking delineates the ways in which performances . . . have the ability to establish alternate views of the world" (Muñoz 195). The disidentificatory performances of Love and other non-binary and trans performers "do more than simply tear down the majoritarian public sphere. They disassemble that sphere of publicity and use its parts to build an alternative reality" (Muñoz 196). Just like Davis creates a space where queerness and punk can coexist through her performances, Love creates a space within Puerto Rico's fiercely heteronormative society where alternative cuirness is not only accepted but praised. Love does not reject the heteronormative but rather satirizes it to comment on its suffocating and restricting nature. Love's performances thus approximate the drag terrorism that Davis enacts, however in a Caribbean/Latin American context.

Love's performance can be understood as connected to broader, transnational traditions of drag as activism. Groups created post-Stonewall such as the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), formed by Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson in New

York City, and the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, started in San Francisco in the late 1970s and now a global organization, have been using drag performance to "fight for vulnerable LGBT groups, including homeless drag queens and queer runaways (including the transgender women they advocated for, though this was in an era that predates the language we now use for trans and gender-nonconforming people)" (Godfrey). The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, specifically, have managed to raise awareness and over $1 million for LGBT causes such as the fight against AIDS by using drag, engaging in protests, and employing controversial religious imagery (Godfrey). Going further than these other groups, in Puerto Rico, the "potent and confrontational art" of drag is being used not only to further the LGBTQIA+ cause but also to protest the sociopolitical and economic hellscape caused by both the Puerto Rican and U.S. administrations. Thus, drag performers on the island have taken up the revolutionary mantle for all people affected by the current economic and sociopolitical situation, not just the cuir community.

However, because whiteness, maleness, and cisgender occupy the valued position within pro-LGBTQIA+ nations, the risks performers like Love take are increased. When prominent drag queens such as Panti Bliss, "Ireland's accidental activist and gender discombobulist," argues that drag queen's voices are "'louder than other people's,'" because of what they do for a living, they encourage drag queens to use their platform to address their audience members and viewers for political use. Bliss further argues that

> activism enhances the entertainment. A good activist needs to be an entertainer in a way too, because people are more likely to listen to you if you're way entertaining. They don't need to be high-kicking and wearing funny outfits, but they need to have a stage presence in a sense, because that's why people listen to you. And drag queens

are used to that. Stagecraft helps. (qtd. in Godfrey)

Bliss's understanding of drag as a form of entertainment enhanced by activism arises from the privilege that Bliss, who is a white cisgender gay man, enjoys thanks in large part to *RuPaul's Drag Race*, which mainstreamed female impersonation. While Bliss may surely endure homophobia, trans drag performers of color have not acquired the same level of acceptance and are thus a more vulnerable and at-risk group, as the rampant transphobic crime in Puerto Rico proves.

This puts Love more on par with Asifa Lahore. According to Godfrey, Lahore, a British Muslim drag queen, is known nationally after she wore a rainbow burqa during a competition and is now a "figurehead" for the "gaysian" community. In 2017, Lahore came out as trans.[6] Thus while Godfrey asserts that Lahore's "performances and activism challenge what it is to be gay and Muslim," since coming out trans, those performances and activism now challenge what it is to be Muslim, trans, and a drag performer. This parallels how Love's performances and activism challenge what it means to be trans and Puerto Rican.

Davis, Love, and Lahore are marginalized not only by the surrounding heteronormative society but also by their queer/cuir community. They thus suffer a double rejection and stand to be controlled by both communities through one of Hebdige's processes of recuperation, the more likely being that which trivializes the subculture labeling it as deviant and thus harmful to society.

While queer culture in the U.S. has undergone both processes of recuperation mentioned by Hebdige, cuir culture in Puerto Rico has only gone through one – that which

[6] Meka Beresford, "Muslim Drag Queen Asifa Lahore Comes Out as Trans," *Pink News* May 27, 2017. Available online at https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2017/05/27/muslim-drag-queen-asifa-lahore-comes-out-as-trans/.

labels the subculture in question as deviant and thus harmful to society. Eventually, Puerto Rico's cuir culture will also be seen as a new niche market, commodified, and watered down for the masses. This is what happened with what is now called commercial drag in the U.S.; it has been recuperated and commodified to the point that it is now mainstream, and new, oppositional drag subcultures are emerging to provide a space for all the queer performers that have been told their drag performance style is invalid. RuPaul, once Mama Ru for all who identified as queer, has come under fire for what many have labeled transphobic comments.

March of 2018, RuPaul answered a question regarding transgender drag queens stating that drag performers who identify as women currently transitioning should not participate in his famed reality show *RuPaul's Drag Race*. RuPaul stated that "You can identify as a woman and say you're transitioning, but it changes once you start changing your body. It takes on a different thing; it changes the whole concept of what we're doing . . ." (qtd. in Kaplan). The host then went on to explain that the contestants that have been on *Drag Race* haven't transitioned.

RuPaul quickly apologized for the ill-received comments and even went on to cast trans performers like Gia Gunn on *Drag Race*, but the damage was done. Professional drag performer Amrou Al-Kadhi argues that the influence of *RuPaul's Drag Race* is undeniable; it has mainstreamed drag performance and cemented the popular conception of what drag is and its limitations. Al-Kadhi expresses frustration with many people's suggestion that she try out for *RuPaul's Drag Race* despite not having seen her perform, "[t]he truth is I really wouldn't want to, and nor do I think it would celebrate my take on drag . . . and whilst I enjoy tuning in, I'm not creatively or politically aligned with it. The show is not a ubiquitous

demonstration of what it means to be a drag queen, and does not represent the zenith of success for all aspiring drag performers." Adi Love has also expressed disappointment with RuPaul's transphobic behavior arguing that the retraction of his inconsiderate comments and later inclusion of trans contestants in the show are purely business moves meant to salvage his image. While she supports the queens that participate in the show, she no longer holds RuPaul in high regard.

Many cuir performers in Puerto Rico including Love and Alor (Tacha Rola) align with Al-Kadhi's perspective believing that cisgender gay men who focus on female impersonation do not have a monopoly on drag. Al-Kadhi, Love, and Alor are rightfully perplexed that a space that was a sanctuary for the rejected and trivialized, which was championed by a man and drag performer who historically preached inclusivity and acceptance, was all the sudden rejecting certain kinds of queer performers.

Twitter posts responding to RuPaul's comments point to the truly unfortunate phenomenon of discrimination within the queer community, "Rupaul's comments on trans contestants competing on Drag Race further reveals how gay men can be viciously exclusive and transphobic in a community that we share" (@YoooltsO). This discrimination is also rampant within the Puerto Rican cuir community where trans individuals are often treated as second-class cuirs.

Many cisgender, male drag performers often discriminate against trans drag performers on the island, a phenomenon Alor has personally experienced. Because the gay cisgender male version of drag performance, the point of which is hyperbolic feminine impersonation/illusion, is currently the predominant one, many queer-alternative drag performers experience discrimination and condescension at the hands of "traditional" queens

who, for the most part, like RuPaul believe there is no point to satirizing the female if you are in fact female. Alor explains that in Puerto Rico, bars, clubs, and queens that cater to the more "traditional" idea of drag, which revolves heavily around the concept of the picture-perfect crown-craving "pageant queen," tend to believe and act as if their form of drag is more elegant, elevated, and thus valuable than that of alternative drag performers such as Love and Alor. Alor argues that many Puerto Rican pageant queens are under the misguided impression that alternative drag performers are only alternative because they do not have the ability to achieve the "polished" look and aesthetic they themselves achieve; this is false. Alor adamantly states that if she wanted to look and perform like a pageant queen she could, she chooses not to.

Alor believes this disdain for alternative drag performers in Puerto Rico comes from their increasing recognition, attention, and attainment of paying gigs. One very successful drag performance event that Alor organized at Toxic, a cuir friendly club in San Juan caused quite the stir with other clubs and queens who belittled the club and the event for only including trans drag performance. The point of the event was to give trans drag performers more visibility and the opportunity to establish themselves in the cuir performance scene; many clubs and drag show organizers mostly book "traditional" drag performers hence the need for events that exclusively showcase alternative drag performers. Toxic agreed to hold the event, as they acknowledged the need for a safe space where trans drag artists could perform. Seeing the success of the event, Toxic approached Alor about scheduling similar events. This win for the trans community infuriated many "traditional" queens who saw it as a threat to their livelihood despite their domination of the performance drag scene. Both Love

and Alor are disheartened at the ruptures within their own cuir community and vehemently express the necessity for this cuir-on-cuir hate to stop.

In *Nation of Rebels*, Heath and Potter address how counterculture, which alternative drag performance like Love and Alor's can certainly be considered, interacts with dominant culture or "the system." Heath and Potter argue that counterculture is not a threat to the system, it has become it. Counterculture has become "a warmed-over version of the countercultural thinking that has dominated leftist politics since the 60s. And this type of countercultural politics, far from being a revolutionary doctrine, has been one of the primary forces driving consumer capitalism for the past forty years" (2). Thus, counterculture has opened up more spaces in which consumer capitalism can thrive, it has presented a market with new demographics, niches, and supposedly subversive texts and products upon which to capitalize. This is the other process of recuperation that Hebdige mentions in *Subculture* which the dominant culture uses to reconcile the emergence of new cultures: commodification. The success, fandoms, and world-renowned television shows of queer individuals such as RuPaul and Ellen DeGeneres demonstrate how dominant culture will accept an emergent culture once it can be monetized; these individuals, however groundbreaking they once were, have become the watered-down and amenable version of what was once considered a deviant subculture.

This process has already begun in Puerto Rico with cuir culture, but there is lag. On the island, the consensus is still that cuir culture is deviant culture. This is understandable when you consider that Puerto Rico does not have the same experience as the U.S. with queer culture including artists and musical genres that helped introduce gender fluidity and androgyny into the American popular culture imaginary (examples include David Bowie,

Prince, and Boy George). Bad Bunny is the first male Puerto Rican rapper that plays with gender fluidity and androgyny. Yes, before Bad Bunny came gay artists such as Ricky Martin that helped pave the way for "El Conejo Malo," but Ricky Martin has never been invested in gender performance; his sexuality and gender identity have nothing to do with his musical persona, whereas they are essential to Bad Bunny's.

Bad Bunny's gender-bending persona is aiding the normalization of Puerto Rican cuir culture. While this will eventually lead to cuir culture's commodification, this normalization is important for cuirs labeled and treated as deviant not only by heteronormative Puerto Rican society in general but also by their biological families. Love and Alor thus speak to the importance of chosen family. During a segment recorded for *PBS*' "American Portrait campaign," Love expresses that "chosen family is finding your tribe and community outside of your biological family that provides support, empathy, acceptance, and love. They don't discriminate based on gender identity, sexuality, race, or differences of opinion, and they are there to guide you and support you in who you want to be." She continues to explain that many cuir individuals do not receive this support at home and many end up homeless as a result of their family's rejection. The problem is that there is discrimination and marginalization within the already targeted Puerto Rican cuir community. Both Love and Alor argue that trans individuals on the island have a more difficult time finding this sense of community than cisgender queer individuals who have been more readily accepted by normative society—trans individuals are just now starting to get the recognition that cisgender individuals received when they began demanding the right to exist publicly and peacefully with the Gay Civil Rights Movement.

Conclusion

In 2020, Puerto Rico and its cuir community were faced with yet another challenge: COVID-19. Puerto Rico remains in recovery from a number of devastating events: the hurricane, the protests and the ex-governor stepping down, earthquakes, and now the COVID-19 pandemic. This was a blow to all cuir performers on the island, who, as COVID-19 forced the shut down on performance spaces, in the blink of an eye lost their entire source of revenue. Once again, these cuir individuals had to find a way to survive. Cuir Puerto Rican artists took to social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram creating live virtual events such as drag shows, DJ sets, make-up tutorials, interviews, and informational symposiums. Through the use of virtual tip jars and event tickets, performers like Adi Love and Natasha Alor were able to continue working and providing for themselves.

Both Love and Alor participated in virtual events dedicated to trans awareness and queer rights issues, demonstrating that the fight did not stop with the protests and eradication of ex-governor Roselló. The fight has just begun, especially for the trans community on the island which continues to face lethal transphobia on a daily basis. This is yet another example of the Puerto Rican cuir community's resilience and evidence of their continued efforts to gain acceptance and fair treatment and ameliorate the island's crippled sociopolitical and economic situation.

The Puerto Rican cuir community has been able to rise amid closures and the pandemic precisely for the same reason it was optimally prepared to lead the charge against ex-governor Ricardo Roselló during the protests of the summer of 2019: the cuir community was forged through a life of subjugation. I am a proud, cuir, Puerto Rican woman, and as such, my work, like the performances it celebrates, is an act of resistance that protests Puerto

Rico's continued colonial treatment, promotes LGBTQIA+ rights, and articulates the power of performative protest. Puerto Rico is part of an international struggle of resistance; it is just one of many countries under oppressive rule. Consequently, this is not just a Puerto Rican issue; it is a global issue of social justice and civil rights which should be of the utmost importance to anyone who believes that all people are indeed created equal.

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